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Table of Contents

Compassionate Futures for Collective Well-Being

Natalia Martini and Karin Hannes

Knitting a Care Network in the City: Social Actors in Grassroots Organizations and Local Governments

Agustina Frisch and María Mercedes Di Virgilio

Re-Imagining Inclusive and Compassionate Futures: Challenging the Bureaucracy of Disability Through Compassion

Stuart Read and Anne Parfitt

Reimagining Policing Through the Ethics of Care: Insights From Chinese Narratives and Practices

Xueying Mao, Rosila Bee Mohd Hussain, and Fonny Dameaty Hutagalung

Ecology of Abandonment: Non-Take-Up of Social Rights as a Capitalist Critique

Frédérique Leresche

Social Workers' Well-Being as a Foundation for Compassionate Futures in Vulnerability Contexts in Portugal

Helena Teles, Sónia Ribeiro, and Francisco Neto

Arts-Based Laboratories for Compassionate Futures With Adolescents in Colombian Public Education

Miryam Cristina Fernández Cediel

Who Cares About Fieldwork? A Person-Centred Framework for a Compassionate Early-Career Fieldwork Pedagogy

Sophie Standen and Andy Harrod

Living the Lab: Rethinking Collaborative Practices in Living Lab Contexts Amid Polycrisis

Antje Jacobs, Angela Hostetler, Koenraad Hinnekint, Yannis Perifanos, Juan Pablo Centeno, Rodrigo Cruz, Eylem Keskin, Louise Mazet, Giovana Navarro, Charlotte Parion, Amber Jenny Sels, Hanne Vrebos, and Karin Hannes

Transformative Research and Social Inclusion: An Educational Research-Policy Dialogue

Ian Hughes, Sarah Rochford, Maggie O'Neill, Brian Ó Gallachóir, Ariel Macaspac Hernandez, Gerard Mullally, and Edmond Byrne

Com-Passionate Composting: Excrement Management as Matter of Care

Natalia Picaroni-Sobrado

Inclusive Cities for All Beings: Urban Animal Governance From a "One Welfare" Perspective

Ciska De Ruyver, Christel P. H. Moons, Claire Diederich, and Karin Hannes

Compassionate Futures for Collective Well-Being

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Abstract

This introductory piece situates the contributions to the thematic issue “Compassionate Futures for Collective Well-Being” within contemporary debates on care and compassion. Against the neoliberal ideal of the autonomous, self-sufficient individual, the articles assembled here foreground vulnerability, interdependence, and mutual responsibility as constitutive features of social life and as foundations for imagining alternative futures. Across diverse geographical, institutional, and more-than-human contexts, the contributions examine how care and compassion are enacted through everyday practices, welfare institutions, educational initiatives, participatory research, grassroots networks, urban governance, and multispecies relations. Rather than presenting a celebratory account of compassion, the thematic issue highlights its ambivalent and contested character. Several contributions demonstrate how care can sustain life, foster inclusion, and enable collective agency, while others reveal how discourses of compassion may become entangled with surveillance, exclusion, paternalism, and governance. Together, the articles advance a rich conceptual vocabulary for understanding care and compassion as ethical commitments, political projects, institutional rationalities, and material practices through which social worlds are organized and reproduced. This introduction argues that these contributions collectively point toward the emergence of compassionism as a developing intellectual and political orientation. While not yet a fully stabilized paradigm, compassionism offers a relational alternative to dominant models grounded in competition, individualism, and instrumental rationality and invites an ethico-onto-epistemological reorientation of scholarship and social action. The thematic issue thus contributes to ongoing efforts to rethink the conditions of collective well-being and to explore the possibilities—and limits—of compassionate futures in an era marked by multiple social, ecological, and political crises.

Keywords

care research; compassionate futures; compassionism

Recent years have witnessed a growing mobilization of care ethics (Tronto, 1998) against the suffocating common sense of neoliberalism—a common sense that renders social life intelligible only through the language of self-interest, personal gain, and individual responsibility. Against this grammar, care scholars have insisted on something that neoliberal reason continually denies: that life is never self-sufficient (Tronto, 2017). The figure of the autonomous individual, tirelessly optimizing the self and accountable for both success and failure, obscures the dense webs of dependence through which existence is sustained. It also recasts inequality and exclusion as an individual shortcoming rather than a condition produced and maintained through social arrangements.

Care intervenes precisely at this point. Not as a moral supplement to an otherwise functioning system, but as a different way of apprehending the world and our place within it. It begins from the recognition that vulnerability is not an exception to human existence but one of its constitutive conditions; that dependence is not a deficit to be overcome but a fundamental feature of life itself. From this starting point emerge other possibilities for thinking and organizing collective existence—possibilities grounded in attentiveness, response-ability, and solidarity rather than accumulation and competition (Barukh Milstein, 2024; Chatzidakis et al., 2020). What comes into view is not a utopian horizon free of fragility, but a world willing to remain with it. A world built upon the acknowledgment that lives are always entangled with other lives—human and more-than-human—and that responsibility emerges from these entanglements rather than from abstract notions of individual choice.

Within such imaginaries, compassion and empathy cease to be private virtues and become sociopolitical principles for designing collective futures, carrying a potential for compassionism to become a paradigm shift. Over time, it might come with its own set of assumptions, values, concepts, and practices on how social reality is, should, or could be understood and acted upon. Rather than simply critiquing the neoliberal discourse for its focus on individual rather than collective flourishing, compassionism encourages researchers to actively replace the dominant mode of thinking driven by competition, detachment (from the world), and instrumental rationality with a relational perspective that transforms how we understand interdependence and mutual responsibility in knowledge production and societal change. To date, it may not live up to the standard of a fixed and fully stabilized paradigm shift (yet). However, its significance lies in the potential to catalyze an “ethico-onto-epistemological” turn, a being “of the world” (Barad, 2007) that connects scholarship as a knowledge-producing organism with the social, material, and natural world through a co-creative ethos. It is in this type of transdisciplinary engagement that the regenerative force of compassionism will be felt and acknowledged as a much-needed foundational shift that redesigns the functioning of our societal ecosystem with and as care.

Across diverse geographical and institutional settings, the articles gathered in this thematic issue explore what becomes possible when social life is approached through the recognition of vulnerability and mutual responsibility. Together, they trace the varied ways in which ethics of care materialize in practices that enable regeneration and contribute to collective well-being. At the same time, several contributions caution against an uncritical embrace of care, revealing how the language of compassion can be appropriated to reproduce existing hierarchies, exclusions, and forms of control. What emerges, therefore, is not a celebratory account of compassionate futures, but a more ambivalent and politically attentive exploration of their possibilities and limits.

In their article, Frisch and Di Virgilio (2026) map women-led grassroots care networks in San Martín, Greater Buenos Aires, that hold together the conditions of everyday survival where state-based welfare provision remains fragmented or absent. These networks function as forms of street-level bureaucracy, stitching together infrastructures of support in the spaces between state presence and state abandonment. Their analysis documents actually existing infrastructures of mutual responsibility while simultaneously exposing the gendered burdens and forms of extraction upon which such arrangements depend. In doing so, the authors challenge celebratory accounts of community care, arguing that compassionate futures require not only recognizing care but also confronting the material conditions through which it is made possible.

Read and Parfitt's (2026) piece questions some of the taken-for-granted societal capitalist bureaucratic narratives that tend to favor non-disabled bodies and devalue the embodiment of disability. Compassion is therefore reframed from the perspective of disabled people's embodied wisdom as essential knowledge for creating inclusive futures. The practical value of the authors' work lies in the novel "crippled compassion" framework they propose for the implementation of inclusive compassionate futures as an alternative to an ableist socio-cultural, economic, and political bureaucratization of life.

Mao et al. (2026) extend debates on compassionate futures beyond the domain of welfare provision. The authors document what they describe as a care turn within Chinese policing, tracing a shift from deterrence-oriented logics of *homo economicus* toward relational practices associated with *homo curans*: listening, mediation, explanation, and follow-up. At first glance, this may appear as evidence of care's transformative potential. Yet the article also reveals something more unsettling. Care does not arrive as an alternative to power. Rather, it becomes entangled with it as a form of governing rationality. The article raises a question that reverberates across the thematic issue: under what conditions does care support life, and under what conditions does it become a vehicle of governance?

This question sits at the center of Leresche's (2026) article. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among people in Switzerland who refuse social benefits, the author interrogates the underside of ostensibly compassionate welfare systems. The article demonstrates how discourses of compassion can obscure forms of conditionality, surveillance, and labor re-commodification, while simultaneously presenting welfare interventions as benevolent. Against these institutionalized forms of care, Leresche identifies alternative practices of mutual responsibility emerging within informal moral economies.

Malfunctioning institutional forms of care are also central to the argument advanced by Teles et al. (2026) in their mixed-methods study conducted in Portugal. The authors contend that social workers' diminished sense of well-being should not be understood as an individual problem. Rather, they frame it as an ethical misalignment between the aspiration to provide care that responds to people's unique and often complex life circumstances and the normative constraints imposed by institutions. These constraints are rooted in structural inequalities, resource scarcity, fragmented service systems, and limited professional recognition. To address this misalignment, the authors advocate for the development of compassionate institutional ecosystems that support professional resilience, strengthen recognition of social work, and encourage collective mobilization.

If Leresche's and Teles et al.'s contributions direct our attention toward the limits of institutional compassion, Fernández Cediél (2026) explores what might become possible when vulnerability is approached not as a

problem to be solved but as a condition from which collective transformation can begin. Reporting on a four-year arts-based and narrative research program embedded within a public school in Neiva, Huila, Colombia, the author examines educational practices developed with adolescents experiencing socioeconomic vulnerability and the enduring effects of armed conflict. In this account, compassion emerges not simply as an affective orientation but as a pedagogical and institutional practice capable of fostering collective agency.

In Standen and Harrod's (2026) contribution, the pedagogical condition from which transformation begins is investigated through a person-centered psychotherapeutic framework that supports early career researchers through intensive periods of fieldwork. Their proposed relational fieldwork pedagogy aims to create the conditions for safer and more equitable fieldwork experiences. The authors encourage institutional stakeholders to collectively develop university environments that nurture the emotional health of early career researchers by emphasizing the value of lived experiences, empathy, non-judgment, and authenticity in how to act upon challenging situations.

This notion of a collective responsibility is also put forward in Jacobs et al. (2026) in a participatory research event designed as a space for co-creation and a site of experimentation for developing creative responses to emerging crises and how to best involve a plurality of different voices herein. The lab was approached from a regenerative perspective, focusing mainly on the temporal, ethical, epistemic, and affective tensions identified in context. These insights were used to inform the concept attentive collaboration in living lab contexts to deal with both the complexity of the polycrisis as a research phenomenon and the complexity of absent voices in living labs due to circumstances such as political disruption and natural hazards.

The idea of careful and considerate ways of building and exchanging knowledge in the context of the current polycrisis is further endorsed in Hughes et al.'s (2026) article, in which they promote and emphasize the important role of multiple stakeholder dialogues. These dialogues are meant to help articulate the systemic pressures facing education and contemporary society in general. They serve as an invitation to revisit the current social template of implicit values rooted in status, power, financial reward, and wealth.

Picaroni-Sobrado (2026) reminds us that compassionate futures require more than reconfiguring social relations among humans; they also demand a rethinking of infrastructures, bodily practices, and material relations, including those surrounding sanitation and waste. Through the notion of com-*passion*—a practice of feeling-with—the article foregrounds multispecies interdependence and challenges anthropocentric understandings of care and compassion. The article invites readers to consider how everyday engagements with more-than-human worlds might become sites for cultivating alternative forms of coexistence and responsibility. De Ruyver et al. (2026) build on similar ideas: The One Welfare perspective the authors promote to reconceptualize urban animal governance recognizes the interdependence of humans, animals, and environments and foregrounds welfare and relationality across species. The article advances the concept of “multispecies cities” as part of a broader vision of compassionate urban futures grounded in care and coexistence between humans and animals.

While drawing on diverse literatures, philosophical traditions, and empirical contexts, the articles collectively contribute to the development of a conceptual vocabulary for studying care and compassion as social, political, and material forces. Across the thematic issue, compassion is conceptualized in multiple ways: as an

active, relational, and political praxis of being with others (Fernández Cediél, 2026, drawing on Nussbaum); as a “political emotion” shaping distinctions between those deemed deserving and undeserving of care (Leresche, 2026, drawing on Fassin); as com-passion (Picaroni-Sobrado, 2026, own formulation), a practice of feeling-with enacted through embodied and everyday relational encounters, and a co-existence with other-than-humans (De Ruyver et al., 2026, building on the concept One Welfare). Rather than converging on a single definition, these perspectives illuminate the conceptual richness of compassion and the multiple forms it can take in practice.

At the same time, the thematic issue offers a powerful vocabulary for examining the uneasy proximity between care and power. Leresche’s (2026) ecology of abandonment and Read and Parfitt’s (2026) bureaucracy of disability reveal how care and exclusion can be co-produced through the same welfare apparatuses. Meanwhile, Mao et al. (2026) advance the figure of homo curans not as a moral ideal but as a distinctive institutional rationality and mode of governance. Together, these conceptual contributions deepen our understanding of how care and compassion operate simultaneously as ethical commitments, political projects, governing technologies, and material-discursive practices through which social life is organized and sustained.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Knitting a Care Network in the City: Social Actors in Grassroots Organizations and Local Governments

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Abstract

This article examines the interaction between grassroots care organizations, street-level bureaucrats, and local public policy as a key interface in the construction and sustainability of local welfare infrastructures. The analysis focuses on the experiences and everyday practices of women leading community-based care organizations in a suburban district of Greater Buenos Aires, Argentina. These networks have emerged through local policies that link self-managed grassroots initiatives with municipal governments, mediated by the day-to-day practices of street-level bureaucrats. The resulting care infrastructure produces a spatialized network that is dense in some areas and sparser in others, due to variations in community needs and local concentrations of social vulnerability. Most organizations are led and sustained by women from lower-income groups who seek to address basic needs unmet by both the public care system and the labor market. This article centers the voices of these women, illuminating their role not only as care workers but also as political actors mediating between communities and the state. Drawing on one-on-one interviews conducted remotely during 2021, this research explores the tensions, capacities, and potential of these care networks as vehicles for building transformative forms of social organization and community-based welfare governance. The study also addresses how gender shapes differences in organizational leadership and management dynamics. Lastly, it reflects on current political and media debates in Argentina that call into question the autonomy of grassroots organizations and the future direction of state-society relations in care provision.

Keywords

Argentina; care; grassroots organizations; street-level bureaucrats; welfare; women

1. Introduction

In the context of what Nancy Fraser describes as a “crisis of social reproduction,” contemporary systems of social provision are increasingly marked by the erosion of care resources and the displacement of life-sustaining labor onto vulnerable sectors of society. In this context, care is no longer merely a private concern, but a central site of political contestation and urban governance. This article explores the role of grassroots women-led care organizations in constructing local welfare infrastructures in San Martín, a suburban district in Greater Buenos Aires, Argentina. In a context marked by structural inequality, state fragmentation, and persistent gendered hierarchies, this study asks how care practices—often unpaid and predominantly carried out by women—become spatially embedded in networks that articulate the provision of welfare on the urban periphery.

Drawing on Latin American feminist scholarship on welfare regimes (Araujo-Guimarães & Hirata, 2020; Arriagada, 2020; Blofield & Martínez Franzoni, 2015), this article examines care not only as a set of practices but as a form of governance. By conceptualizing these arrangements as “territories of care” (*territorios del cuidado*), we argue that care work constitutes a spatialized political act that produces a specific urban infrastructure where formal state presence is fragmented or nonexistent (Celiberti, 2022; Zibecchi, 2015). As Martínez Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea (2014) argue, care in the region remains largely hidden, sustained by unpaid and under-recognized labor. However, in San Martín, these practices have transitioned from the domestic sphere into the public-political arena.

In San Martín, these care-centered infrastructures take the form of organized care networks: an assemblage of cooperatives, soup kitchens, educational initiatives, and emotional support structures coordinated largely by women from low-income neighborhoods. These initiatives are rooted in survival strategies developed in response to cycles of economic crisis and state retrenchment. Over time, many of these grassroots organizations have become mediators between socially vulnerable communities and the state. A key tension explored here is the somewhat fuzzy boundary between formal state agents and grassroots leaders. We argue that the latter—the majority of whom are women—effectively function as street-level bureaucrats; while often lacking formal public office, these actors exercise discretionary power and perform the relational labor necessary to make public policies “land” on the ground.

Methodologically, this article is based on in-depth, semi-structured virtual interviews conducted in 2021 with women who coordinate key care organizations. These testimonies shed light on how these actors keep their organizations afloat amid overlapping crises. More importantly, they reveal the emotional, cognitive, relational, and material dimensions of care work (Aguirre, 2011; Batthyány, 2015), and how this labor reproduces value beyond the household, making urban life possible in contexts of deep inequality.

By foregrounding these women’s experiences, this article advances two main arguments. First, it demonstrates how care networks function not merely as sites of service provision but as agents of spatial governance, co-producing welfare through everyday negotiation with the state. Second, it explores how these networks challenge neoliberal assumptions that separate the provision of care from citizenship, framing care as a socially necessary, collective, and political endeavor. Considering current political debates in Argentina that seek to dismantle social policy “intermediaries,” this research highlights the democratic and compassionate potential of community-based initiatives (Prieto, 2025). We argue that a sustainable “care

future” depends not on bypassing these networks, but on recognizing them as a vital, professionalized infrastructure of a collaborative welfare state.

The following sections elaborate on the theoretical and empirical frameworks of care within the Latin American context, followed by the methodological approach used to triangulate qualitative interviews with spatial data. We then present a mapping of the “geography of care” in San Martín, identifying how residential segregation drives the formation of specific network typologies. Finally, the analysis moves to the narratives and everyday challenges of the women who lead these networks, concluding with a discussion of the implications for future care policies and state-society relations.

2. Literature Review: Care, Territory, and Local Governance

This research is situated within global debates on the “crisis of social reproduction” (Fraser, 2016), which posits that the current capitalist organization of the economy systematically undermines the very social processes on which it depends (caregiving, education, and emotional support). Feminist scholars in Latin America have argued that care is essential to the reproduction of life but remains undervalued, invisible, and largely extracted from women in precarious socio-economic positions (Arriagada, 2020; Blofield & Martínez Franzoni, 2015). Within this framework, *care* is defined not merely as a service, but as an ethical principle of interdependence (Pineda-Duque & Munévar, 2020) and a multidimensional labor comprising material, emotional, and cognitive efforts (Aguirre, 2011; Batthyány, 2015).

2.1. Distinguishing Between Care, Assistance, and Containment

To analyze how grassroots organizations navigate the tensions between meeting urgent social needs and fostering long-term well-being, it is necessary to theoretically differentiate three overlapping practices. While *care* focuses on the long-term reproduction of life and protection of rights, *assistance* refers to the immediate, often emergency-based provision of material goods (food, health supplies) to address situations of acute deprivation. In territories marked by uneven state intervention and structural violence (Auyero, 2007), these practices merge into what Latin American scholars term “social support” (*contención*). Social support is a form of socio-emotional stabilization; it is the “holding together” of a community through affective bonds and physical presence, preventing social fragmentation in the face of crisis (Falú, 2020).

2.2. Territories of Care and Spatial Governance

Drawing on debates on insurgent planning and urban informality, scholars such as Miraftab (2009) and Roy (2007) highlight how marginalized populations create alternative forms of urban governance that challenge dominant logics of neoliberal development. Contemporary “urbanizations of care” illustrate how these dynamics are being institutionalized in different contexts. In Bogotá, the urban care system materializes through a network of “care blocks” (*manzanas del cuidado*) that redistribute time, reduce gender inequalities, and integrate services territorially, recognizing care as both an infrastructure and a collective urban right (Ortiz & Duque Franco, 2026). Similarly, proximity-based care models in Barcelona seek to reorganize urban services around everyday life, embedding care within neighborhood infrastructures and redefining it as a territorial right. In Latin American “territories of care” (*territorios del cuidado*), grassroots actors (primarily women) provide essential services in spaces often marked by abandonment or punitive state intervention.

2.3. Care Networks as Hybrid Governance

We conceptualize “care networks” as hybrid socio-institutional formations. Unlike formal state bureaucracies, these networks connect diverse grassroots organizations (initially self-managed and informally structured) with local public institutions through everyday interactions. This articulation is mediated by street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2023). However, on the periphery of Greater Buenos Aires, this role is often shared with community leaders who act as unofficial street-level bureaucrats (as intermediaries between local actors and state institutions, fulfilling roles similar to those described by Lipsky). They occupy a liminal space; as political mediators they are not always formal state employees, yet they manage state resources and exercise the “discretionary power” necessary to distribute welfare (Auyero, 2012).

These networks are characterized by a permanent tension between autonomy and co-optation. While they provide the state with a “capillary” reach into marginalized neighborhoods, they also function as sites of political resistance, where women reclaim their labor not as a domestic duty, but as a professionalized form of urban governance.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted using a mixed-methods approach in two phases. The first phase sought to contextualize the field of intervention for care networks, while the second intended to characterize local care networks. The first phase involved collaboration with local authorities and stakeholders to gather statistical data and administrative records. The second phase, conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, focused on qualitative fieldwork. In total, the study lasted approximately three years, during which interviews with key informants were carried out, field visits were conducted, and informal conversations were held with residents and recipients of local government programs.

The first phase employed a quantitative approach to describe patterns of social-spatial division and living conditions using a comprehensive measure of housing deficit. The measure considers aspects related to the physical quality of housing, overcrowding, and demographic and economic determinants of housing conditions at the household level, as well as their distribution within urban space (see Di Virgilio & Serrati, 2022; Marcos et al., 2018). The measure distinguishes between two main types of housing deficit. On one hand, the quantitative housing deficit refers to the need for additional housing units, which can arise from three situations: (a) the household resides in a dwelling that requires replacement due to inadequate physical conditions; (b) more than two households occupy the same dwelling (external overcrowding); and/or (c) the household consists of two or more economically independent marital units (internal overcrowding), a situation that requires at least one new dwelling. On the other hand, the qualitative deficit refers to: (a) dwellings of insufficient but improvable quality; and/or (b) an inadequate number of rooms in relation to the number of non-independent members, creating the need for expansions (Figures 2 and 3). This analysis was based on secondary data sources, namely census and administrative data. Data from the 2010 census were used because microdata from the most recent census (held in 2022) were not yet available when fieldwork was conducted. Georeferenced administrative data were especially useful for understanding the location of social services and their capacity to reach those facing poor living conditions. All information was georeferenced using RStudio and the ggplot2 package.

The second phase included 28 in-depth interviews with key actors involved in the Municipality's care networks: people in charge of the main care organizations, street-level bureaucrats, and network coordinators. To characterize the Municipality's care networks, interviews gathered information on the history of each network, its origin (top-down or bottom-up), stakeholders, organizational structure, services provided, and levels of institutionalization (such as legal recognition, relationships with local government and other networks, and forms of spatial intervention). In this article, we focus on women leading grassroots organizations and those serving as municipal officials. All interviews were conducted remotely during 2020–2021 via video conferencing services due to pandemic-related restrictions. To protect participants' anonymity, no personal information will be included in the testimonies presented. Data from the interviews were coded and analyzed using thematic analysis.

The 28 interviewees were distributed as follows: 15 women leading grassroots care organizations (including community kitchens and early childhood centers), eight street-level bureaucrats working in municipal care departments, and five general coordinators of the care networks. This distribution allows for a multi-perspective analysis of the tensions between community-led forms of sustainability and state-led processes of institutionalization.

4. Contextualizing the Geographies of Care in San Martín

The Municipality of General San Martín is one of 24 municipalities that make up the Greater Buenos Aires urban area. Greater Buenos Aires is in turn part of a larger urban agglomeration—the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region—which comprises the City of Buenos Aires and 43 surrounding municipalities (*partidos*). This heterogeneous and complex territory is home to nearly 17 million inhabitants, representing approximately one-third of the country's total population. Three relatively autonomous levels of government converge in this metropolitan region: the national level, the provincial level (embodied both in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and the Province of Buenos Aires), and the local (municipal) level. As in many Latin American cities, urban inequalities are evident throughout the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region, although they manifest differently across areas and municipalities.

In this context, San Martín is located in the first ring of Greater Buenos Aires and borders San Isidro, Vicente López, and Tigre to the northeast, Avenida General Paz to the east, which separates it from the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA), Tres de Febrero to the southwest, and San Miguel to the northwest (see Figure 1).

At the time that fieldwork was carried out (2019–2021), approximately 428,000 people lived in the municipality, with around 22,000 families living in 43 *barrios populares* (informal settlements). Census data provide an overview of the district, making it possible to identify a pattern of large-scale socioeconomic residential segregation, characterized by relatively homogeneous areas that concentrate significant housing and service deficits (areas shown in dark red and blue in Figure 2). The quantitative deficit refers to the number of housing units required per 100 households, while the qualitative deficit refers to the number of dwellings requiring structural improvements or renovations per 100 households. These indicators make it possible to measure the magnitude of each type of deficit by specifying the number of interventions required relative to the total number of households (Marcos et al., 2018).

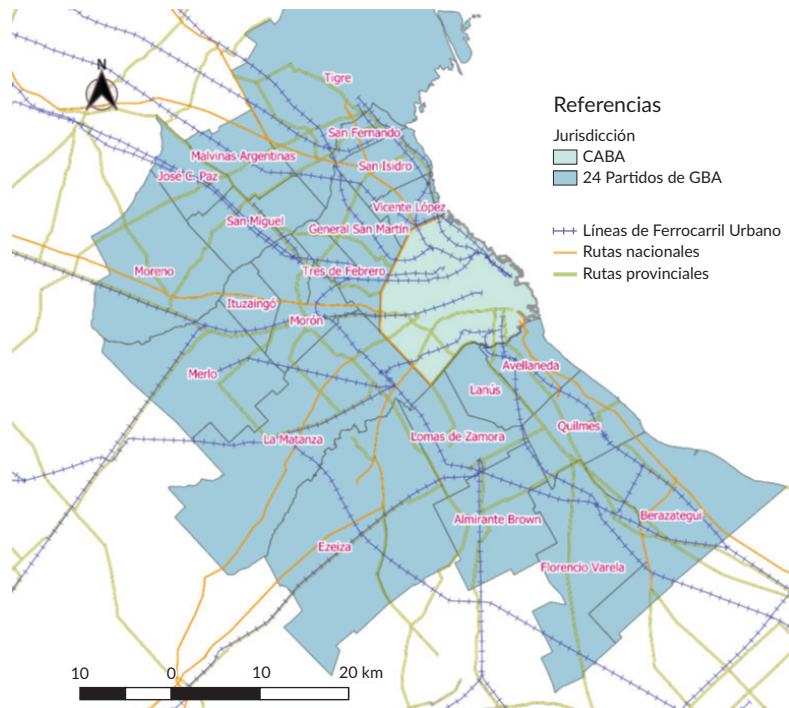


Figure 1. Map of Greater Buenos Aires showing main transportation routes. Note: The two jurisdictions (the City of Buenos Aires and the 24 municipalities of Greater Buenos Aires) and their municipal administrative divisions are identified.

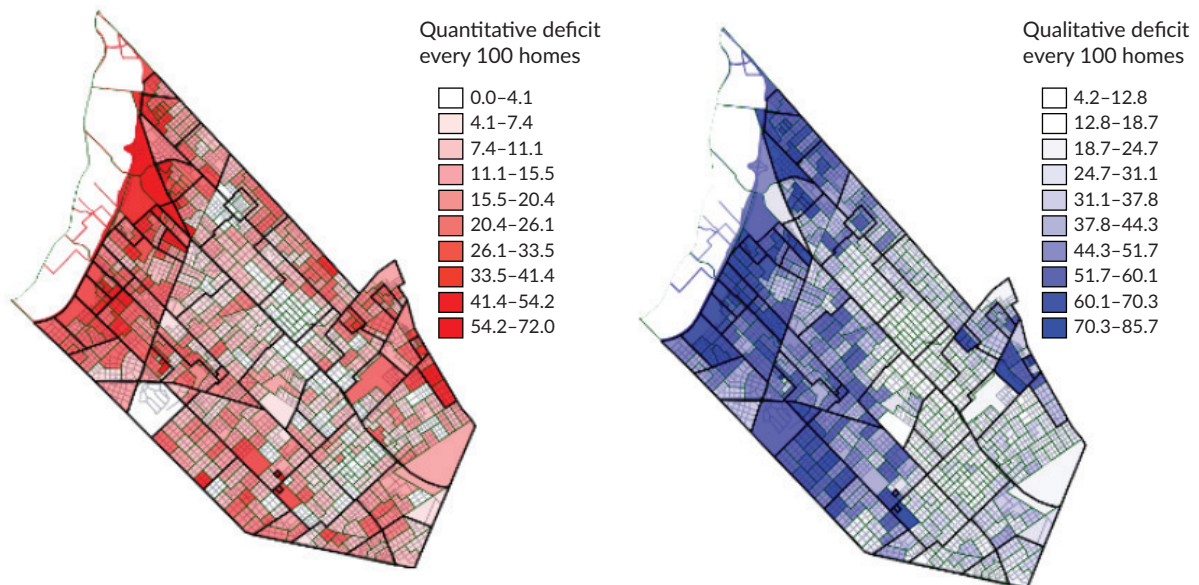


Figure 2. Percentage of households with quantitative deficit (left) and percentage of households with qualitative deficit according to critical conditions in access to basic services (right). Source: Prepared by Pablo Serrati, based on the 2010 Population and Housing Census.

The most vulnerable areas are those located between the Camino del Buen Ayre highway and Márquez Avenue (the deep purple and red area in Figure 3). Within this area, the most recently formed and socially vulnerable informal settlements are found near the Reconquista River, which forms the district's northern boundary.

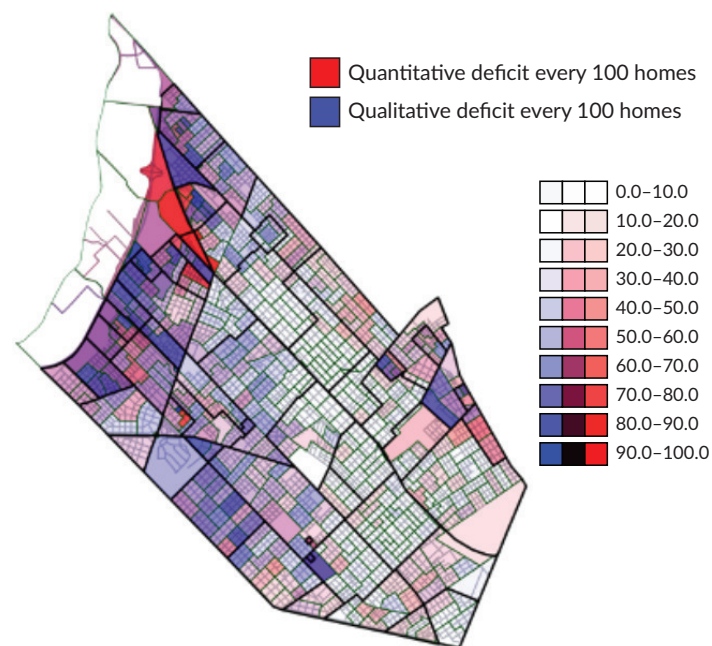


Figure 3. Percentage of households living under conditions of qualitative and quantitative deficit. Source: Prepared by Pablo Serrati, based on the 2010 Population and Housing Census.

The data show that areas with the highest concentration of quantitative deficit (representing people in need of new housing) are primarily located on the Municipality's northwest side, mirroring the spatial distribution of the qualitative deficit. This area corresponds to the Reconquista neighborhood, one of the district's most socially vulnerable and precarious áreas, as discussed below. Nevertheless, the color-coded map also reveals other critical zones within the Municipality, which will be examined later in the analysis.

To address the needs of the district's most vulnerable populations, the local government implements territorial interventions through public providers linked to various social services. These providers are associated with initiatives addressing situations of domestic and gender-based violence, programs for people with problematic substance use, child and youth centers, early childhood care, public advocacy services, primary health care centers, kindergartens, vocational training centers, food assistance programs, among others. As shown in Figure 4, the distribution of public care providers largely coincides with that of critical housing conditions. The Reconquista South area is the largest and has the highest level of municipal intervention. The Reconquista North area shows high levels of housing deprivation but a lower degree of state intervention, linked to fewer providers and a lower concentration of beneficiaries. Billingham and the East Zone are areas that are more mixed in terms of housing deficits (localized pockets of critical conditions) and that have more consolidated and recent municipal interventions.

Municipal service providers operate as street-level bureaucrats, responsible for coordinating amongst themselves and articulating their work with other state actions in public policy, social protection, and care. These actors primarily work in the Reconquista area in the northwestern part of the Municipality, where the most severe housing, social, and economic conditions are concentrated. A significant presence of service providers can also be observed in the Municipality's central area, particularly along its southern axis. Across many of these networks, women play a central role in sustaining daily operations, maintaining organizations,

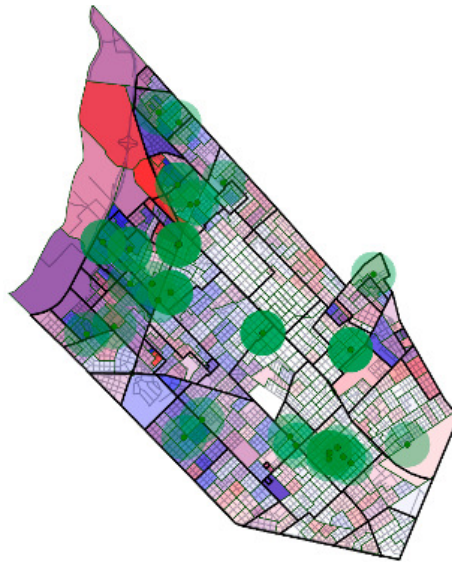


Figure 4. Distribution of public care providers and household living conditions, Municipality of San Martín. Source: Prepared by Pablo Serrati, based on the 2010 Population and Housing Census.

and ensuring continuity. These providers are usually integrated into a broader cluster of community organizations and institutions (neighborhood clubs, community-run libraries, soup kitchens, childcare centers, institutions for older adults, youth centers, etc.) that are deeply rooted in their local communities and that together form what we call territorial care networks. During our fieldwork, we were able to identify 20 of these networks, showing a great deal of diversity in terms of how they initially formed, their modes of organization, and the types of actors and institutions involved in providing and managing care. Municipal service providers form part of these care networks, coordinating with community-based organizations. Nevertheless, care networks extend beyond the scope of municipal service providers.

4.1. A Typology of Care Networks

At the time we conducted our fieldwork, there were 20 active care networks in San Martín, nine of which were led exclusively by women (and in several cases, founded by them as well). These organizations are diverse in terms of their area of focus, internal organizational structures, and approaches to municipal and civil society institutions. Despite these differences, they all share a commitment to continue collaborating and opening channels to help their communities by improving access to resources and living conditions.

A comparative reading of the networks reveals systematic differences in their roles and orientations that suggest a gendered division of labor. Male-led networks tend to be structured around functions of representation, coordination, and policy articulation. Organizations such as the Popular Economy Council, Human Rights Roundtable, Violence Observatory, and Recovered Enterprises Network are primarily oriented toward influencing public policy, organizing institutional relationships with the state, and coordinating actors across sectors. Similarly, networks like football associations or recovered enterprises emphasize organizational management, resource allocation, and representation of collective interests. These functions align with historically masculinized roles associated with the public, formal, and “productive” sphere, where visibility, leadership, and decision-making are central.

In contrast, women-led networks—based on what we observed in fieldwork but also evidence from previous studies—are more deeply embedded in day-to-day practices of care and social reproduction. Their activities center on sustaining everyday life under conditions of scarcity through food provision, childcare, neighborhood support, and relational labor grounded in proximity and affective ties. Even when male-led networks engage with vulnerable populations (e.g., Shelter Program, Council of Older Persons, Educational Roundtables), their role tends to focus on coordination, the structuring of interventions, and the articulation of institutional actors rather than providing continuous, hands-on care. This points to a broader distinction between “governing” or structuring networks and “sustaining” or caring networks. At the same time, this division is not clear-cut: Some male-led organizations do engage in care practices through coordination, while some women-led networks also participate in political articulation, often drawing on their experience in on-the-ground care practices.

Table 1 presents the names and descriptions of women- and male-led networks. We have kept the original names in Spanish, with English translations provided below each one.

Table 1. Names and descriptions of the care networks led by women and men.

Network name	Main objectives
Women-led networks	
Municipal Council for the Care of Persons With Disabilities <i>Consejo Municipal de Atención a las Personas con Discapacidad</i>	An advisory and coordinating body that supports the municipal government in designing and implementing public policies aimed at the inclusion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities, while fostering collaboration among public and civil society actors.
Habitat Organizations Roundtable <i>Mesa de Organizaciones de Hábitat</i>	A participatory (collective) space that brings together civil society organizations and the municipal government to discuss, plan, and legitimize urban infrastructure projects and policies related to the just access to land, housing, and urban services.
Mesa de Organizaciones del Área Geográfica Reconquista <i>Reconquista Area Organizations Roundtable (street-level network)</i>	A street-level network of community organizations that coordinates actions related to housing, education, environmental issues, and neighborhood upgrading, aiming to improve living conditions and promote dignity through collective action.
Mesa Intersectorial de Abordaje Integral de Consumos Problemáticos <i>Intersectoral Roundtable for the Comprehensive Approach to Problematic Substance Use</i>	A multi-actor coordination space led by the municipal health sector to strengthen prevention, assistance, and institutional response to problematic substance use and mental health issues at the local level.
San Martín Community Kitchens and Food Centers Network <i>Red de Comedores y Merenderos de San Martín</i>	A network of community-based food providers that coordinates assistance, training, and resource distribution to ensure access to nutrition, strengthen organizational autonomy, and support local food security policies.
Network of Community-Based Early Childhood Centers <i>Red de Espacios Comunitarios de Primera Infancia (ECPIs)</i>	A network of community-run early childhood centers that provide care, education, and food to children without access to formal childcare, while articulating with the Municipality to strengthen educational and care-related practices.

Table 1. (Cont.) Names and descriptions of the care networks led by women and men.

Network name	Main objectives
Women-led networks	
Network of Residential Care Homes <i>Red de Hogares Convivenciales</i>	A collaborative network of residential care homes for children and adolescents that seeks to improve care standards, reduce stigmatization, and strengthen rights-based approaches through shared learning and coordination with the Municipality.
Network of Evangelical Churches <i>Red de Iglesias Evangélicas</i>	A network of evangelical churches that collaborates with the Municipality to support vulnerable populations, particularly youth and women, by combining faith-based support with social assistance and access to public programs.
Cultural Networks <i>Redes de Cultura</i>	A network of independent cultural organizations that coordinates with the Municipality to support cultural spaces, formulate cultural policies, and promote access to artistic and cultural activities, particularly during and after periods of crisis.
Male-led networks	
Solidarity Economy Network <i>Consejo de la Economía Popular</i>	A network of social movements coordinated with the Municipality to formulate public policies, strengthen self-management and cooperatives, and achieve institutional recognition and improved living conditions for marginalized populations.
Children's Football Association <i>Asociación de Fútbol Infantil</i>	A civic association that brings together neighborhood clubs in coordination with the Municipality to promote youth football as a tool for social inclusion, community organization, and support for children and young people through sports, educational, and solidarity activities.
Social Youth Football League <i>Liga Social de Fútbol Infantil</i>	A network that strengthens neighborhood clubs through youth football as a tool for social inclusion, community organization, and support, articulating collective actions and links with the Municipality to address local needs and foster participation.
Council of Older Persons <i>Consejo de Personas Mayores</i>	An institutional space that articulates the Municipality and senior centers to debate, support, and strengthen public policies for older adults, promoting their inclusion, participation, social support, and access to rights through programs and community actions.
Shelter Program Council Network <i>Consejo del Programa Abrigo</i>	A network that articulates the state and civil society organizations to provide comprehensive support to people experiencing homelessness, offering food, shelter, and assistance, strengthening community ties and promoting coordinated responses to social needs.
Interinstitutional Human Rights Roundtable <i>Mesa Interinstitucional de Derechos Humanos</i>	A space that brings together state, academic, and civil society actors to promote, monitor, and strengthen human rights policies (especially related to memory, truth, and justice) through community-based, educational, and commemorative actions.
Institutional Violence Observatory <i>Observatorio de Violencia Institucional</i>	A network within the Local Human Rights Council that articulates state and civil society actors to prevent and address institutional violence through monitoring, victim support, training, and public policy development from a human rights approach.
Community-run Libraries Network <i>Red de Bibliotecas Populares</i>	A network that connects community-run libraries to support their activities, make shared demands visible, and strengthen ties with the Municipality, promoting access to culture, reading, and community engagement while respecting territorial diversity and autonomy.

Table 1. (Cont.) Names and descriptions of the care networks led by women and men.

Network name	Main objectives
Male-led networks	
Caritas Network <i>Red Cáritas</i>	A network of parish-based organizations that works with the Municipality to channel social demands, provide assistance and community support, strengthen trust-based territorial networks, and expand access to public programs and social services.
Recovered Enterprises Network <i>Red de Empresas Recuperadas</i>	A network of worker-run cooperatives that promotes self-managed work, strengthens productive development, influences public policies, and fosters the social economy, generating employment, labor inclusion, and links with the state and other economic actors.
Network of Educational Roundtables <i>Red de Mesas Educativas</i>	A network that articulates schools, organizations, and the Municipality to address education on the ground, promoting inclusion, academic support, and community work, strengthening relationships among actors, and generating collective proposals that inform public policies.

A first relevant distinction concerns the origins of the networks. Some were created through explicit state initiatives, such as the Municipal Council for the Care of Persons with Disabilities, the Intersectoral Roundtable for the Comprehensive Approach to Problematic Substance Use, the Network of Community Kitchens and Food Centers, the Network of Community-Based Early Childhood Centers, the Network of Residential Care Homes, the Network of Evangelical Churches, and the Cultural Networks. In these cases, the Municipality acted as a convening, facilitating, or legitimizing actor, often providing institutional recognition, coordination, and access to resources. Other networks, by contrast, emerged more autonomously from on-the-ground dynamics, such as the Reconquista Area Organizations Roundtable or—in its initial phase—the Habitat Organizations Roundtable, which later incorporated more formal mechanisms of articulation with the state.

Across the networks, this distinction overlaps with a second issue: More institutionalized, policy-oriented spaces are often led by men, whereas locally rooted, care-centered networks are predominantly led by women. While this division is not absolute, this pattern does suggest a gendered differentiation between networks primarily oriented toward governance and those oriented towards the reproduction of everyday life.

The role of the local government varies significantly across networks. In more institutionalized spaces—such as the Disability Council or the Substance Use Roundtable—the Municipality plays a central role in convening actors, coordinating actions, and translating demands into public policies, protocols, or interventions. In other cases, particularly in street-level networks like the Reconquista Roundtable, the state neither actively promotes the network nor regularly participates in its functioning, although it may engage through specific programs or institutional interlocutors. In these settings, women leaders frequently point out tensions surrounding the recognition of community-based work and the appropriation or reconfiguration of initiatives once they are incorporated into state frameworks.

By contrast, in networks oriented toward representation and policy articulation—such as the Solidarity Economy Network, Human Rights Roundtable, or Recovered Enterprises Network—the relationship with the state tends to be more direct, strategic, and institutionalized, reinforcing their role as mediating spaces between civil society and public policy.

Regarding their missions and objectives, the networks combine advisory and support functions, service provision, and rights advocacy. The Disability Council focuses on rights promotion and inclusion, acting as an advisory body for the formulation of public policy. Networks linked to housing and territory, such as the Habitat Roundtable and the Reconquista Roundtable, seek to democratize urban governance, legitimize public works, and improve living conditions through participatory processes. The Intersectoral Roundtable on Problematic Substance Use aims to strengthen network-based work to ensure comprehensive responses in prevention and care, while the Network of Community Kitchens and the Network of Early Childhood Centers play an important role in guaranteeing access to food and childcare, often filling in gaps left by the state. At the same time, a broader differentiation emerges between networks oriented toward “governing” functions (policy design, coordination, and representation) and those oriented toward “sustaining” functions (care provision, daily assistance, and the reproduction of social life). The former tends to operate at the level of institutional articulation, while the latter are embedded in everyday territorial practices.

Women not only occupy formal coordination roles but also sustain the everyday work of management, articulation, and care across these networks. In community kitchens, early childhood centers, and residential care homes, their involvement is closely linked to historically feminized tasks (such as food preparation and caregiving). However, these practices are re-signified through collective organization, rights-based discourses, and claims directed toward the state. Interviewees highlighted processes of institutional learning, the adoption of a rights-oriented vocabulary, and the strengthening of organizational capacities fostered through participation in these networks.

In contrast, in primarily male-led networks (such as those linked to the solidarity economy, football associations, or recovered enterprises), women’s presence is less visible, and the emphasis shifts toward leadership, resource management, and the representation of collective interests. This suggests a gendered division of labor across networks, where women are more strongly associated with the reproductive sphere of social life, while men tend to occupy positions linked to production, governance, and institutional mediation.

In general, members of these networks value their ability to legitimize actions, improve coordination, and generate more effective responses to complex problems. In many cases, their influence does not take the form of direct participation in policy design, but rather the capacity to build bridges between actors, endorse initiatives, channel demands, and improve policy implementation. State presence is rather ambivalent; while it provides legitimacy and resources, it may also generate dependency or dilute organizational autonomy. This ambivalence is particularly visible in care-oriented networks, where municipal support is essential for sustaining everyday activities. In contrast, policy-oriented networks tend to engage the state as a strategic interlocutor rather than as a primary source of support.

The capacity to influence public policy also varies across networks. In more institutionalized spaces, concrete forms of influence can be identified in the development of protocols, intervention strategies, and coordination mechanisms. In community-based networks, influence is perceived as more limited and conflictual, particularly when initiatives originating in grassroots organizations are absorbed by the Municipality without preserving local forms of organization or social ties. In these cases, women leaders articulate critiques of hierarchical and technocratic models of governance and call for planning processes grounded in experiential and locally situated knowledge. These tensions often reflect broader inequalities

regarding whose knowledge is recognized; experiential and care-based forms of knowledge—typically produced by women—are more likely to be subordinated to technical or bureaucratic expertise.

Across all networks, some degree of articulation with other territorial actors is evident, including universities, cooperatives, companies, churches, cultural organizations, and other networks. These links expand available resources, strengthen legitimacy, and enable comprehensive approaches to complex problems. Women play a central role in building and sustaining these connections, identifying opportunities and maintaining inter-organizational ties over time. This relational labor constitutes a crucial (though often invisible) infrastructure of governance that underpins both care provision and institutional coordination.

It is important to note that women occupy positions across multiple institutional contexts. They are present in both grassroots organizations and amidst the structures of public service provision. In some cases, they are responsible for the everyday operations of community-based services; in others, they coordinate the networks that bring organizations together; and in others, they hold leadership positions within municipal departments that interface with these networks. This variety of roles situates women as key intermediaries within what can be understood as localized welfare infrastructures, bridging the gap between the “sustaining” functions of care networks and the “structuring” functions of governance-oriented spaces.

4.2. Women as Agents of Street-Level Governance

Taken together, the analyzed networks constitute a complex fabric of social and territorial governance in San Martín. Their differences notwithstanding, they highlight both the central role of women in sustaining community organization and articulating with the state, and the broader differentiation between networks oriented toward governance and institutional articulation and those oriented toward the reproduction of everyday life. This distinction—between “governing” and “sustaining” networks—is to some degree gendered; while male-led spaces tend to focus on representation, coordination, and policy influence, women-led networks are primarily anchored in care, proximity, and the reproduction of social life.

Here, we look at the roles and daily practices of the women who lead major care networks in a suburban district of Greater Buenos Aires, focusing on their work as grassroots actors embedded in local welfare systems. Local welfare systems comprise policies, programs, strategies, practices, and patterns of interaction carried out by public and private agents to deliver welfare services (Huete García et al., 2015). Territorial interventions and articulations among actors that sustain local welfare systems make up an integral part of the welfare infrastructure, forming the territorial structure that supports and channels public interventions to secure welfare.

Across the networks analyzed, women occupy central positions not only within caregiving organizations but also as leaders of municipal service providers and as coordinators of entire care networks. At the same time, their concentration in care-oriented spaces contrasts with their more limited presence in networks primarily devoted to economic coordination, representation, or policy formulation, suggesting a gendered distribution of roles across the local governance landscape. Women hold positions at all levels of local welfare governance: leading grassroots community groups, managing inter-organizational networks, and directing or coordinating municipal departments. In doing so, they effectively function as street-level bureaucrats, mediating between state policies, institutional constraints, and the concrete needs of the population.

4.2.1. Gendered Roles and Collaborative Governance

The empirical material shows that collaborative governance in local care networks is deeply structured by gendered roles. Assistance, care, and containment are feminized practices that organize both the everyday functioning of networks and their modes of articulation with the state. At the same time, these networks function both as service providers and as a sort of affective infrastructure, where emotional bonds sustain both program beneficiaries and organizers. As Lucrecia, a leader from the Network of Community-Based Early Childhood Centers (ECPI), explains, “in monthly meetings, we share both our problems and our ‘joys’...because there are ties of affection among the members of the network. Sharing the joy of becoming a grandmother or a sister is a big part of our encounters.”

In networks such as the San Martín Community Kitchens and Food Network, the ECPI, the Residential Care Homes Network, and the Intersectorial Board on Problematic Drug Use, care-related activities (food preparation, childcare, emotional support, and health accompaniment) make up the foundation on which collaboration is built. In contrast, networks such as the Popular Economy Council, the Recovered Enterprises Network, or the Human Rights Roundtable are more strongly oriented toward coordination, representation, and policy articulation, functions historically associated with masculinized forms of leadership and public action.

Women’s leadership is legitimized through their sustained presence, emotional labor, and practical knowledge of local realities. This is particularly evident in state-promoted networks, where municipal coordinators—most of whom are women—play a key role in convening, sustaining, and legitimizing collective action. As María, a municipal representative, notes, “I fear that this network would stop functioning if we stopped convening it,” reflecting how the state itself relies on feminized relational labor to sustain governance arrangements. At the same time, women leaders from community organizations perceive municipal presence as a source of legitimacy and symbolic backing, illustrating a form of collaborative governance in which authority is exercised less through formal hierarchies and more through care-based relational practices.

4.2.2. Assistance as the Organizing Principle of Territorial Care Networks

Assistance emerges as the main organizing principle of territorial networks, structuring both their practices and their forms of articulation. However, assistance is not always a chosen function but often a response to structural constraints. As Lucrecia (from ECPI) explains: “We have soup kitchens because the circumstances demand it, because there is inequality and a lack of work...but we would like to simply devote ourselves to education.” This reveals a tension between care as a desired practice—linked to education and development—and assistance as an imposed necessity tied to conditions of crisis.

In territorially rooted networks such as the Reconquista Area Organizations Roundtable, assistance is inseparable from dignity, collective history, and political struggle. As Lía, a historic community leader, describes it, the network is “a space of support...we are messy, but we are connected.” Here, support refers not only to the provision of basic goods but to the collective capacity to sustain social ties and dignity in contexts of scarcity. At the same time, tensions emerge in relation to the state. She notes that “the Municipality takes ideas from the organizations and presents them as its own...but sometimes they distort them,” particularly when technocratic approaches displace territorial knowledge and reintroduce hierarchical

relations; for instance, in educational policies and practices where “mothers know nothing, and the ones who do know are the teachers.” These tensions reflect broader struggles over the recognition of experiential, care-based knowledge.

Participants speak of a “heavy burden” that is not just material but also profoundly affective in nature. One coordinator of a residential home described the exhaustion of being the permanent “shock absorber” for state absence:

There are nights I don't sleep thinking about the 15 kids, the leaky roof, and the municipal social worker who hasn't answered my calls in a week. You feel like the whole neighborhood is resting on your shoulders, and if you stumble, it all collapses. It's a weight that stays in your body. (Elena, Coordinator of a Residential Home)

This exhaustion highlights the “extractive” nature of current welfare arrangements, where state efficiency relies on the emotional depletion of community leaders.

In contrast, in state-promoted networks such as the Intersectoral Board on Problematic Drug Use, assistance is articulated through institutional coordination. The network's impact lies in its capacity to collectively respond to complex situations that individual actors could not address alone, improving access and intervention within existing institutional frameworks.

4.2.3. Networks, Organizations, and Everyday Governance

Two types of networks coexist: those with a long history of collective action prior to state involvement, and those promoted by municipal initiatives. The former tends to be more cohesive, territorially embedded, and politically contentious, while the latter provides resources and coordination, but often depends heavily on municipal leadership and is more oriented toward specific policy goals. These types also reflect the distinction between “sustaining” networks (more territorially grounded, care-oriented, and often led by women) and “governing” networks (more institutionalized and oriented toward policy articulation).

Organizations themselves operate as micro-networks; they provide food, care, training, and sometimes employment, functioning as spaces that support the livelihood of both beneficiaries and workers. Participation in these spaces also fosters processes of institutional learning. As Ana, a community kitchen coordinator, explains: “I learned that I have rights as an institution and that the Municipality must guarantee them....The kitchens sustain food policy, and the food policy sustains the Municipality.” This illustrates how women act as “civic street-level bureaucrats,” translating policies into practice while simultaneously articulating demands upward. By “civic street-level bureaucrats,” we mean members of civil society who, despite not being public officials, effectively act as such.

4.2.4. Gender, Care, and Welfare Infrastructure

Overall, our findings show that local welfare infrastructure in this suburban district is largely sustained by women's care work and leadership. While some networks operate as spaces of policy coordination and institutional mediation, the everyday functioning of welfare provision depends fundamentally on

care-oriented networks, where women's labor remains central. Their practices blur the boundaries between the state and the community, assistance and governance, and public policy and everyday survival.

Women's embeddedness in multiple networks allows them to act as articulators and liaisons across sectors, enabling the circulation of information, resources, and legitimacy. This relational capacity, rooted in gendered expectations surrounding care, has become a key resource for collaborative governance. At the same time, it entails a disproportionate burden placed on women; they are responsible for sustaining material provision while simultaneously maintaining the affective and relational infrastructure that enables governance to function.

In this sense, collaborative governance in San Martín relies on a gendered articulation between "governing" and "sustaining" networks. While some spaces focus on policy design, coordination, and representation, others—largely led by women—ensure the everyday reproduction of social life that makes those governance processes possible. Assistance thus operates as the backbone of territorial care networks, and women emerge as central street-level governance actors who hold together the fragmented infrastructure of local welfare.

5. Conclusion

This article sheds light on how care networks on urban peripheries function as an essential infrastructure for welfare and are sustained primarily by women. Using a mixed-methods approach, we have shown how local welfare infrastructures rely on the affective and relational work of women, who not only ensure the reproduction of everyday life but also play a key role in the governance of socially vulnerable environments. Therefore, we point to the need for understanding care organizations as local welfare infrastructures. This perspective allows us to see care as the material and social support that channels public interventions and ensures the reproduction of life in contexts of profound inequality.

Women articulate their care activities with state policies, acting as mediators between local communities and local government structures. This articulation occurs through a complex structure of on-the-ground spatial governance, which blurs the boundaries between the state and the community, forming a hybrid institutional framework. These women not only work to provide care but also act as political actors who mediate between the concrete needs of their communities and state structures. By functioning as mediators and liaising with local bureaucracies, these women manage resources and exercise power that represents the visible face of the state on urban peripheries. They translate public policies into local needs, adapting state programs to the specific needs of local communities. At the same time, they articulate demands "upwards," ensuring that the state guarantees rights and resources. In this way, care can be thought of not only as the concrete work of assistance that reproduces traditional gender roles, but also as a form of governance.

Local governments can promote care networks. That is, in organizations such as the Municipal Council for People with Disabilities or the Roundtable on Problematic Consumption, the state convenes organizations to coordinate actions and design protocols. Furthermore, collective responses can be societal in origin; for instance, some organizations emerged from community survival strategies—such as the Reconquista Area Organizations Roundtable—and then established mechanisms for dialogue with the local government to legitimize or institutionalize their infrastructures and services. In all cases, these care networks function as agents of spatial governance, co-producing well-being through everyday mediations between the population and the state.

The interaction between women, their organizations, and state policies fosters institutional learning. Women leaders adopt a rights-oriented vocabulary and acquire organizational skills through their participation in networks. They also contend that their community work is not charity, but as socially necessary work that the state must recognize and guarantee. This coordination is supported by feminized forms of networking; that is, by the sustained presence of women on the ground, their work of support, and their practical knowledge. In this way, practices such as food preparation, raising children, and providing emotional support are re-signified in the public sphere as political acts that enable the reproduction of urban life in contexts of inequality.

Women's relationship with local government structures is not free of conflict. There is a constant tension between the need for state funding and recognition and the preservation of organizations' autonomy. Likewise, some leaders criticize the state at times for appropriating the ideas of community organizations and disconnecting them from their local logics by integrating them into hierarchical or technocratic state frameworks.

Women leaders constitute the backbone of spatialized welfare infrastructures in which the state guarantees minimum standards, while community-based organizations and networks provide the support structures and situated knowledge that enable the implementation of community care policies and strategies. The future of welfare on the urban peripheries depends on moving beyond a model of "delegation by omission"—where the state relies on the unpaid labor of women and grassroots organizations to fill in gaps—toward a model of "co-responsibility." This would require transforming informal care networks into recognized components of a National Care System, ensuring that local knowledge is not only utilized but also economically compensated. A critical challenge for the future lies in the ongoing political debate regarding "intermediaries" in social policy. While some narratives advocate for the direct transfer of resources to individuals, this study suggests that bypassing grassroots organizations would dismantle the vital social and spatial infrastructure that sustains daily life on the urban periphery. The sustainability of these "territories of care" hinges on a shift in perception, from viewing community care as an extension of domestic, maternal duties to recognizing it as a professionalized form of urban governance. Finally, the "territories of care" identified in San Martín offer a blueprint for a more resilient urbanism. Looking ahead, the challenge is to scale up these localized, insurgent practices into broader urban planning strategies. This article proposes understanding care organizations as local welfare infrastructures, and more specifically, as "feminist assemblages"—contingent, spatialized configurations of bodies, material resources, and emotional labor that work together to repair the social fabric where the state has withdrawn. By centering care in the production of urban space, cities can move from fragmented emergency responses toward infrastructures of proximity that prioritize the reproduction of life over the imperatives of the market.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Re-Imagining Inclusive and Compassionate Futures: Challenging the Bureaucracy of Disability Through Compassion

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Abstract

Taken-for-granted societal capitalist bureaucracy whereby narrow definitions of human value are accepted without question or critique risks devaluing the embodiment of disability, and eroding attempts to build a caring and compassionate society. This article, written by two disabled academics, describes empirical data collected with eight disabled people and allies across two focus groups, in which we discussed how compassion, when viewed from a disability activist perspective, can allow for reimagined compassionate futures whereby collective humanities and well-being can be nurtured. Our inquiry-by-method critically explores what compassion is from a disability perspective and how this view of compassion disrupts ableist socio-cultural, economic, and political bureaucratisation of life. Further, we argue that compassion can provide disabled people and allies with agency to guard against the worst dehumanising impacts of bureaucracy, by caring for themselves and each other. To conclude our article, we share a novel crippled compassion framework for implementing inclusive compassionate futures, which can challenge ableist bureaucratisation.

Keywords

ableism; bureaucracy; caring; collective; compassion; disability; trust; well-being

1. Introduction

This article, written by two disabled academics, begins with a seemingly straightforward provocation, which is that disability exists, and in turn, disabled people have a right to exist. However, while this provocation may seem straightforward, the point or points at which people become disabled, as well as how people experience disability, are numerous, being shaped by myriad factors. Historical and contemporary accounts of crises, whether they be attributed to environmental disasters, climate change, pandemics, or economic depressions, reveal a consistent pattern of disabled people being particularly susceptible to the exigencies of

local, national, and international governance (e.g., Danylevich & Patsavas, 2021; Engelman et al., 2022). Extant research in this area demonstrates how disabled people are metaphorically or literally left behind (e.g., Grech & Weber, 2025; Hemingway & Priestly, 2014) or even treated as “less than human” (Read et al., 2023, p. 40). This relates to the application of bureaucracy, interpreted as ranging from everyday tasks such as form-filling to claim state entitlements by engaging with processes that arbitrarily define what disability ‘is’ and ‘is not,’ through to systemic pathologisation of corporeal differences as a means of determining apparent value in the shifting global economy (Johnson & McRuer, 2014). In this article, we elucidate this through working with the activist lens of disability bureaucracy (Titchkosky, 2020) and applying “crip” epistemologies (McRuer, 2006; Mills & Sanchez, 2023) to our focal topic of compassion (Parfitt et al., 2021).

We present disability bureaucracy against a broad backdrop of seeking compassionate futures, specifically, how taken-for-granted norms of bureaucracy, which exclude disabled people, can be redefined through compassion to work toward valuing a diversity of bodies (Titchkosky, 2020). Defining compassionate futures can be inherently uncertain. The focus of this thematic issue describes compassionate futures as recognising vulnerability, interdependency, and mutual responsibility as fundamental features of social relations, as well as emphasising care and empathy in designing socio-cultural, economic, and political systems, where the collective well-being of diverse actors can be the focal point of inquiry (Martini & Hannes, 2025). While such a focus is clearly needed, the challenge for imagining compassionate futures, when led from a majority perspective, risks perpetuating existing normative bureaucracy and ableist inequalities (Kafer, 2013). In our article, we bring forward disabled people’s and allies’ lived experiences of the everyday to propose a fundamental revision in which implementing truly compassionate futures requires a recognition of the continued violence perpetuated by non-disabled individuals against disabled people in the pursuit of an able-bodied normality (Rice et al., 2017). We will show how compassionate futures, when designed and shaped by disabled people’s embodied knowledges, can provide a means of embedding inclusion for all.

In making our arguments, we will first introduce the theoretical contributions that underpin our research, focused on drawing attention to the neoliberal bureaucratic world view which disadvantages disabled people, and challenging this world view through crip theory and compassion. We then introduce our empirical work with disabled people and non-disabled allies, in which we were exploring compassion and imagining compassionate futures. Finally, we showcase a novel compassion framework created using our research outcomes. This framework is underpinned by the embodied experiences and wisdom of disabled people and focuses on building truly compassionate futures that recognise and value diverse bodies and the different perspectives they contribute.

2. Theoretical Framework

To begin with bureaucracy in present-day neoliberal economies, the parameters regarding what constitutes its meaning remain contested. Definitions typically focus on how society is governed by pre-defined rules and social expectations that shape normative functioning. This, under one lens, is seen as the systemic management of human activities in ways that are calculated to be the most efficient and effective (Cockerham, 2015). The normative ideal subject, not only within neoliberal organisations but across wider society, emerges as conforming “with masculine (white, able-bodied, straight) stereotypes” (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024, p. 557). Feminist scholarship calls out the enduring persistence of heteronormative gender-based intersectional inequalities and rejects proposals that suggest that, were women to comply with

the rules of being masculine, specifically in the workplace and other areas of public life, such as politics, these inequalities would be resolved (Fox, 2017; Garland-Thomson, 2005; Perez, 2019). This heteronormative ideal is similarly challenged through queer activism and resistance, whereby taken-for-granted norms that value the normalcy of heterosexuality at the expense of other sexual identities and forms of sexual expression are rejected as acts of prejudice and oppression (e.g., Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006; Rich, 1980).

It is this legacy of resistance by women, queer people, and communities of colour that is cited by Johnson and McRuer (2014, p. 137) as a “foundation of cripistemology, a model and source for its attentiveness to bodies caught in new modes of exploitation.” The exploitation that neoliberal bureaucracy imposes on the disabled body is summarised by Titchkosky (2010, n.p.) as rendering it dependent and subject to arbitrary decisions concerning what is and is not acceptable: “The presence and participation of disability ‘depends’ on a host of [bureaucratic] procedures and is more or less unrelated to peoples’ rights and desire to be present and participate. In this way, some people are constituted in a relation of dependency.” Titchkosky (2020, p. 199) demonstrated how the terminology of disability “serves primarily as a category for naming those who do not keep the rules of regularised normative participation.” That is, disability is a category created through social hierarchisation that favours non-disabled bodies along with the purposeful exclusion of disabled bodies. For instance, disability is routinely defined as synonymous with a poor state of health and well-being; a strategy utilised for potentially defining disabled people as “less healthy” or “more vulnerable” than non-disabled people (Titchkosky, 2003, 2010). This notion of dependency is further exacerbated by disabled people being viewed as achieving greater value in society and contributing more when they endeavour to align themselves effectively with non-disabled norms of everyday life (e.g., in the workplace, in families, and when participating in public settings).

Crip theory and associated “cripistemology” (Johnson & McRuer, 2014; McRuer, 2006; Mills & Sanchez, 2023; Mitchell et al., 2014) provide a theoretical and methodological framing through which to address taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning disability arising from such bureaucratic norms. Crip theory asserts that society is shaped by a hegemony of “compulsory ablebodiedness” in which societal assumptions of normality actively endorse able-bodied and able-minded ideologies and practices (McRuer, 2006). This compulsory ablebodiedness devalues the worth and legitimacy of disabled people’s bodies (Campbell, 2009). Further, crip theory, as an activist framework, focuses on “cripping,” or resisting and rejecting from a disability perspective, these taken-for-granted narratives and norms of compulsory ablebodiedness and the subsequent inequalities that emerge from such ways of thinking and doing (McRuer, 2006). Specifically, the embodied experiences of disabled people and how they navigate social barriers when viewed through a “cripped” lens can form the antithesis of conventional forms of normative knowledge; taken-for-granted knowledge that marginalises or trivialises disability as a deficit (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). Rather than disabled people’s stories being something to be discounted, extant research reveals the significance of deploying embodied understanding for the purposes of promoting social inclusion and celebrating collective vulnerability (Browne et al., 2021; Kafai, 2023; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2024). Indeed, Bell et al. (2024) explained how taking a disability (cripped) perspective, particularised by Garland-Thomson (2005) as experiencing the world from a “sit point” rather than “stand point,” demands the reframing of taken-for-granted negative arguments about vulnerability. The focus re-centres on the importance of collective care and the benefits of placing disabled people’s embodied knowledges at the forefront of positive change.

In our inquiry-by-method, we problematise compassion by adopting a disability (crippled) perspective. Compassion is a well-documented, burgeoning academic field of inquiry, and is nuanced regarding what compassion constitutes. Scholars have contended that it differs from related constructs such as pity and empathy (Strauss et al., 2016). Within these academic debates, compassion is typically defined as being aware of the hardship, suffering, and vulnerability of others, and having a desire to implement strategies to alleviate this suffering (e.g., Gilbert, 2014; Mascaro et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2016; Whitebrook, 2002). In other words, researchers emphasise how compassion moves beyond general feelings of empathy for those around us to instead showing intent to oneself or another. For instance, Gilbert (2009, p. xiii) defines compassion as “a basic kindness with a deep awareness of the suffering of oneself and of other living things, coupled with the wish and effort to relieve it.” Strauss et al. (2016) have attempted to consolidate extant literature by proposing that for compassion to be evident, five connecting elements should prevail, including: (a) being able to recognise suffering within oneself or others; (b) understanding that suffering is a universal experience; (c) having a desire to feel some form of empathetic response to this suffering; (d) while also tolerating the discomfort that emerges from this suffering; and (e) expressing a motivation or intent to help alleviate or remove this suffering.

In our re-imagining of inclusive futures, we build on this approach to compassion, in that the elements set out above do not necessarily consider disability, and are based on norms that risk ignoring the embodied knowledges that potentially can be contributed by disabled people in conversation with allies. For example, extant compassion research on disability has commonly focused on the medicalisation and challenges associated with disability from the perspectives of practitioners and caregivers, invariably resulting in disabled people’s embodied knowledges being overlooked (e.g., Ahmed & Raj, 2023; Brennan et al., 2020; Davenport & Zolnikov, 2022). Further, research describing compassion and disability risks focusing on strategies to cope with disability, such as navigating feelings and frustrations to particular stressors (e.g., Brougham et al., 2020) or overcoming grief and loss when acquiring an impairment (e.g., Stuntzner, 2017; Stuntzner & Dalton, 2014). In such circumstances, we do not dispute the potential identity journeys people may have to navigate once they become disabled in a bureaucratic sense. However, in our inquiry-by-method, we make a novel contribution to key aspects of compassion when addressed through a lens that resonates with disability, which will be evidenced in our forthcoming empirical work. First, we probe how compassion must be claimed in ways that expressly value disabled people’s embodied knowledges and experiences (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006), that is, it is “crippled.” Second, that compassion is explored within the broader worldview that sustains a neoliberal bureaucracy, which devalues disabled people’s contributions to social issues. Third, that compassion potentially can be an act of resistance; a way of relating as humans that pushes back against unkind bureaucracy that seeks to devalue (disabled) people and their lived experiences.

3. Methodology

For our research, we ran two online focus group sessions (each between 60 and 90 minutes in length) with disabled people and non-disabled allies who expressed a strong interest in disability inclusion (e.g., being a carer of a disabled person), with the purpose of exploring compassion as a means of furthering disability inclusion within a disabling world (e.g., Parfitt et al., 2021). The total number of participants was eight, including the authors in dual roles as facilitators and participants (Parfitt et al., 2021; Read et al., 2023, 2025). Some participants attended both sessions, but this was not a requirement. While identifying as disabled or a non-disabled ally was a prerequisite, we deliberately chose not to collect additional data such

as gender, age, ethnicity, and nature of impairment, so that we could fully ensure anonymity of all participants. The decision to hold focus group sessions rather than individual interviews was based on our contention that participation, where one is fully heard and acknowledged, is fundamental to personhood. Moreover, the group settings offered the advantages of a context in which disabled people and allies could potentially be agentic, that is, be active individuals “engaging in civic life as well as in personal relationships and interactions” (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 3). Accordingly, this agency would allow for the shared understanding, creation, and holding of compassion (Parfitt et al., 2021). The School of Education Ethics Panel, Bath Spa University, provided ethical approval for this research.

The two focus group sessions were run collaboratively, creating safe spaces in which participants could share their own experiences relating to compassion: expressing it toward ourselves as well as to others. While the idea of the safe space occupies “contested and ambiguous discursive terrain” (Stengel & Weems, 2010, p. 105), taken at face value, it is “a protected place, facilitating a sense of security and recreating discourses of inclusion and diversity” (Hartal, 2018, p. 1056). In other words, the safe space allows marginalised individuals to be within their community. For, as Garland-Thomson (2005) explains, when a naïve non-disabled individual meets a disabled person, the encounter risks being problematic, due to stereotypical assumptions being brought by the former. Our discussions required an inclusive environment comprising disabled people and allies so that open sharing of stories regarding compassion, as well associated notions of empathy and pity, could generate “debate that can unsettle previously held views and generate learning and self development in community with others” (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 9).

In the focus group sessions, we discussed examples of accessing health and social care, navigating employment, and even simply managing routine pressures of life as a disabled person who may often find themselves functioning outside of taken-for-granted able-bodied norms of social contexts. The sessions required individuals to step out of their comfort zones and accept points that were potentially challenging to their own world views. To this end, ground rules and information about the aims of the sessions were shared with participants, and all provided their informed consent to take part. As facilitators, we encouraged participants and ourselves to be brave (Arao & Clemens, 2013) when engaging with accounts of exclusionary forms of compassion, such as misinformed or unkind commentaries about pity or incidents alleging the lack of worth of disabled people. Covering such challenging issues was integral to probing potential for social changes in relation to how compassion could help produce an inclusive and kind future for disabled and non-disabled people alike. Through the focus group conversations, underlying matters emerged regarding: defining compassion as a worthwhile inclusive practice; debates concerning how, in reality, compassion could be put in place at the grassroots level within bureaucratic organisational systems (such as hospitals); and, at a general level, whether compassion could be seen as a useful strategy for disability activism.

As two disabled researchers, we shifted at times from being facilitators aiming to give participants an opportunity to share their stories, to being drawn into the dialogues by sharing our own narratives, in effect asking the group members to be with and hold our experiences, in similar ways to how those of others were valued. Nevertheless, we recognised the need to minimise the potential impact that our views could have on influencing these conversations that we would be using as research data. Consequently, we focussed on expressing compassionate dialogues and support to the group (Trowell, 2025; Verduzco-Baker, 2018). Both sessions were audio-recorded and fully transcribed for the purposes of data analysis. In recognising our dual roles as participants and researchers, we are aware that we cannot take a stance of impartiality, nor would

we choose to, in accordance with the “cripping” approach that has shaped this research. However, it was important to ensure that all voices within the groups were considered, and our findings accurately reflected the stories of those present.

Given the attention we paid to the aspects of compassion described by Strauss et al. (2016), we recognised that each participant, and we, as researchers, could be experiencing compassion in different ways, and/or experiencing different aspects. Consequently, as authors, we independently inspected and coded the data, using informal written and oral notes, to capture our initial thoughts concerning these aspects. Afterward, we came together to complete a collaborative thematic analysis of the transcripts. To do this, we followed the six-step process described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Our decision to use thematic analysis was, in part, our deliberate activist stance of bringing disabled people’s voices to the fore (Clarke & Braun, 2026). For the second step of our thematic analysis, we opted to incorporate “action coding” or “process coding” (Saldaña, 2015), which allows for the “doing” of particular social constructs of interest, such as the acts of thinking, speaking, and feeling, to be made explicit. Our decision to use action coding aimed to elucidate the distinction between the elements of compassion and to evidence embodied experiences and knowledges (Johnson & McRuer, 2014). Notwithstanding, we recognised that coding is a subjective process; thus, our final themes emerged through collective discussion between us. Noting this potential limitation of our thematic analysis, we do not make claims regarding the generalisability nor representativeness of the findings presented below and the subsequent framework that we construct to encourage compassionate futures.

4. Findings

Following the thematic analysis explained above, three overarching themes emerged from our data. The first theme concerned our embodied knowledges (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006), contributing insights for defining what compassion comprises from the point of view of our disabled participants and allies, and how it can be expressed individually and collectively. The second theme generated examples regarding the barriers to demonstrating compassionate acts. These illuminated how pre-existing normative-based deficit views of disability operate against compassion and how vulnerabilities are invariably categorised as so-called weaknesses. The third concerned whether the mobilising of compassion, approached from a crippled perspective, could be a means through which to generate collective moves toward inclusive futures for all people.

4.1. *Defining and Claiming Compassion*

A central point raised by participants was that compassion should not be seen as synonymous with pity, as this came from external actors’ ignorant and misguided motivations to be “nice” and supportive to disabled people. This seemed consistent with aspects of Strauss et al.’s (2016) typology of compassion, possibly where there is a desire to give an empathetic response to suffering, but the response falls short of demonstrating understanding. Participants rejected this form of response as it denied mutual value and, as such, was placing disabled people in positions of powerlessness. One participant stated how:

One of the phrases that came to my mind was the term from the Disability Movement for many years: “piss pity.” Disabled people do not want the pity of the general population; they get more than enough of that. What they want is the general population, and government in particular, to get out of their way.

This sentiment was shared, with participants feeling that, should people wish to engage in what was described as crippled compassion, there needed to be less simply feeling and listening, and more emphasis put on the “very practical stuff.” One participant declared how “just listening, that’s not actually compassion; it has to take action...even if the action is non-action, it’s still making a decision.” We did not shy away from discussing the hard work involved in actioning compassion, which was explained by a participant below. We individually and collectively acknowledged our mutual vulnerabilities in bureaucratic systems, as well as our held biases around the shame of disability and in asking for help as weakness:

We obviously talk a lot about compassion, and it is really hard work to be compassionate; you don’t have to necessarily like other people, but you must respect them and respect their life force, and that’s very difficult because we have all these in-built...biases that we can’t help. So, I think people shy away from the idea of compassion because they think it’s weak or it’s something to do with pity, and actually what we learn the more we look at it, it seems to be an incredibly empowering thing. Strength in the kind of sharing and the kinds of kindness that come from it are actually not a weakness at all...[it] becomes this structure that can become very, very powerful and especially amongst groups of people, even though we all have to act individually to have a compassionate safe space where people are listened to and supported, it is extremely powerful. But I do think that the problem is that it feels initially like a weakness in the kind of [bureaucratic] systems that are in place at the moment, where any sign of weakness is feared; the idea of compassion is shied away from, and yet it was really obvious. I remember...that everyone who was in the [focus] group was already using compassion in their day to day lives; [referring to another focus group participant]: obviously almost all the time in all your interactions, you are having to do compassionate listening at the same time to get your argument across...so the kind of compassionate listening and the mirroring that one does to somebody else lends a respect which is then reflected back to you often, but it is hard work.

Our discussions moved to talking about the extent to which we had received compassionate acts from external actors, likely to be non-disabled individuals, working within bureaucratic systems. Repeated examples were given of how the desire to give an empathetic response was not fulfilled by these actors, perhaps because these individuals were unable to tolerate the discomfort that they themselves sensed when faced with another person’s suffering. Such responses, regardless of how well intentioned, were largely felt to be negative, emotionally destructive, and potentially harmful to the disabled person, as evidenced by the following participant:

It’s painfully slow. I’ve been working with the [medical professional] people now for 15 years, I’ve got one guy on board, the others, they think they’re being compassionate and they call you “dear,” and they stroke you on the arm, and they say, “never mind, my dear, you’ll be fine.” So, every time somebody tries to stroke me on the arm now, whether it’s in [the] hospital or at home or in the office, they’re likely to get punched in the face, but that’s my problem.

Self-compassion was also often difficult for participants to acknowledge. This notion received comparatively less attention than compassion relating to others. Discussions covered subjects like fatigue, illness, internalised ableism, as well as the need to perform tasks over and above those performed by non-disabled people. At the same time, there was collective acknowledgement that we should all be more considerate when concerning our self-care needs, perhaps needing to realise compassion for ourselves, and, as Strauss et al. (2016) put it,

believing that suffering is universal, even if for the majority of people, including some disabled people, this is not an acceptable truth. For instance, an exchange between two disabled people revealed the following:

Disabled person 1: We always think these things as disabled people, it's that sort of internalised ableism that we all still have to work with. You think, "oh, it's me, it's my fault, it's me, I've done something wrong." And so, it took me a while to realise that actually, no, it wasn't me at all.

Disabled person 2: It's a good job that we can look back on [these moments] and smile if rather ruefully, because at the time they're not like that, they're not funny, they are heart-breaking, and the personal stress is quite phenomenal because you have to live through it, and you have to deal with it there and then, and talk about speaking the truth to power, I mean, it kills you from the inside out doesn't it, it really does.

4.2. *Demonstrating Compassion Within a Disabling Bureaucratic Landscape*

The second theme explored demonstrating compassionate acts, when pre-existing normative views of disability and associated deficit notions of vulnerabilities, worked against this. Participants consistently spoke about the disability-related challenges they were facing and had previously faced. These challenges were experienced against a backdrop of what was deemed to be particularly uncaring bureaucratic systems that apparently consistently refused to recognise suffering, with one participant giving a poignant example of the administration of governmental support:

You hear this rhetoric from...government over and over again: "We want to get the money to those most in need." What they mean by that is: "We only want to get the money to those people who are literally going to drop dead this second if we don't get it to them. And please, we'd actually like you to drop, if possible, because then we can hand it onto the person who next most needs."

In light of the imposition of bureaucratic restrictions regarding disabled people's life freedoms, participants spoke of their fears of expressing their true thoughts as agentic selves, due to possible reprisals. That is, some participants spoke about their considerable fears over expressing vulnerability in terms of the felt emotional impacts on them, or sharing stories of exclusion in contexts where there was no space, literal or metaphorical, for empathetic responses. Considerable problems were faced when seeking out safe spaces where they could express their experiences fully. However, where disabled people were able to find trusting, non-judgemental respect, and could express what were generally deemed to be vulnerabilities (from a normative stance), this was valued because of its physical and psychological healing potential. One participant described this apparent vulnerability contradiction:

It's at the moment...divide and rule and we do it to ourselves; I come from a very ableist background and I'm struggling, [we] were talking, I'm ill at the moment, I'm tired and we're just like, "we've got to keep going," because we have to, we must. But actually, we've also got to give ourselves what we call *crip time* and be kind. The people who have gone for years and years, one step at a time....I think as well, you end up working five times harder than everybody else to try and prove something, and what exactly is it that you're trying to prove? It's a ridiculous situation. Somebody was saying when we try our very best to achieve no matter what, of course, that sustains pressure on other people and

everybody else—we normalise it in this way...and it's really difficult to say, "I'm not coping." Because you don't know if everybody else is going to...[say] they're not coping as well...you don't know if they're going to be able to say, "hey, I'm with you"....And we are all oppressed in these different ways are we not? I think the trouble is, you just don't realise you are, you just accept that's the status quo. We are all suffering. And the system certainly doesn't want us to wake up to that. I believe we can change it from the ground up if we can get enough staff now in [their] little world, [their] little bit of the jigsaw and come forward and say, "I'm going to give it a go." But it's a very scary thing.

Participants' stories related how they physically sensed the consequences of normative bureaucratic structures upon themselves as individuals. They showed a collective awareness of systemic approaches regarding vulnerability that deemed it an individual's deficit and subsequently left vulnerabilities as an unacknowledged aspect of the person, even though suffering is a universal human experience (Strauss et al., 2016). Reflecting on this situation pointed to an opportunity through which understanding could be built:

So I think it would be quite interesting to see if [compassion] models and things like that actually can span across from the one-to-one personal [experiences that we have heard about]...you know, a meeting had been booked, wrong [inaccessible] building, not even a consideration of what was going to happen, and that again is a system without any thinking...[this] seems to me that it's as upsetting [as it is] unacceptable.

4.3. Mobilising Compassion

Imagining the future, one participant looked for inclusion: "We want our community to be valued but also to be afforded its right place in wider society. It's not about being disabled or non-disabled, it's about being human." Participants spoke of creating this wider community through crippled compassion, which first required non-disabled people to recognise and then act to resolve the suffering that disabled people have faced. Specifically, a participant spoke of how discussions around disability inclusion are typically focused on finance and resource expenditure, rather than humanity and having a valued personhood. To change this audit-based outlook was found to be undoubtedly complex, as it would require professionals, such as those who disabled people often encounter, to question their established practices:

Most people, you have to lead them through that really carefully, and this is where the new skills of social workers [and other professionals] are being developed very slowly, because they've got to move away from being these horrible gatekeeper people to being people who encourage people to think deeply and compassionately about the lives that they want to live, and then to think about what are the barriers that are stopping [disabled people] actually getting on with living that life.

Participants spoke about how, in systems of bureaucracy, a practical challenge was bringing disabled people and external audiences together. Vast gaps in understandings between the two sides needed to be overcome, particularly when non-disabled actors came from a space of viewing disability as somehow "lesser," as the above quote exemplifies. One participant, referring to professionals working in such systems, recognised and had empathy towards the fact that "screaming at a body of people who are just terrified of us isn't going to work." Instead, the approach suggested was that "we've got to find a way to tickle them to get them to come across" to the side of disabled people. To put this into action, another participant described below how building

supportive spaces helped “fill that void.” However, it was stated that such spaces had to have a baseline. This was described as requiring that audiences wanted to be there to learn, as well as to recognise the value of disability by respecting the lived experiences reported on by disabled people. Being open to learning required having the willingness to recognise, tolerate, and alleviate instances of suffering:

One thing that has really struck me actually through our conversations...it's [that if] you're bringing two people or two groups of people that are [potentially] very disparate and have very polarising views to the table...if people do have really fractured histories, why would they ever want to come to the table? And actually, how would we actually bring them to the table if there's no reason for them to be there?...There's got to be this baseline...we as disabled activists, we cannot go below...because otherwise we're compromising our beliefs and our integrity as activists....[But] because that baseline is often so different from us as activists to what the system is saying, [that] there's this gap in the middle that I don't really know how we can fill....I'm wondering whether compassionate [spaces] can fill that void in some way.

Consequently, our discussions acknowledged that activism, that is, building such compassionate spaces, could be possible, but only when the understanding of systemic oppression towards disabled people was acknowledged by non-disabled audiences. Participants explored the importance of seeing how, once a mutual understanding and value regarding disability between individuals and/or groups had been established, collective and shared compassion in a crippled sense became possible. This state of compassion required a fundamental shift from “a disabled person only issue” to a situation in which mutuality and a sense of personhood for everyone prevailed. One participant described the pressing need to focus closely on recognising our collective humanity when disability-related barriers emerge:

It assumes that the disabled person is the problem and therefore they have to change to meet the neoliberalist agenda in play....[But when] two people [come] together, it's a problem shared, is a problem halved, isn't it? So actually [it] could be just if we're talking [now] about having a supportive group, [someone] could be doing and saying, “actually I feel your pain, let's hold it together for a moment, even if it's a short period.”...Just somebody that says, “I hear you, and I listen to you, and I'm going to help take away your pain, or at least we're going to solve your pain together.” And then obviously, the more allies you have, the bigger the voice is, and therefore the less problematised the disabled person becomes because it becomes a group issue rather than a disabled person only issue.

5. Discussion: Developing a Disability Crip-Led Framework for Inclusive Compassionate Futures

As presented above, crippling is a deliberate theoretical and methodological strategy that seeks to challenge directly problematic ableist perceptions of disability and ways of working. McRuer (2006) argued that crip theory has the potential to disrupt the very foundations of the taken-for-granted by adopting an inclusive stance that does not disregard embodied knowledges. Through adopting a crippled approach in our inquiry-by-method, in-depth discussions about compassion took place where disabled people and allies used their embodied knowledge and experiential wisdom to refresh definitions of various components of compassion, so that these become shaped by inclusivity and human value. Engaging with compassion by applying a crippled lens presents us with an opportunity to recognise shared humanity, which is a prerequisite for the inclusion of diverse groups in collective well-being (Johnson & McRuer, 2014).

At this point, we assemble our study outcomes in the form of a novel framework and propose our “cripping” compassion triangle (Figure 1). Our motivation for drawing this together is not to negate extant research, but rather, to contribute to scholarship the rich embodied knowledge of compassion that has been achieved through undertaking our crippled approach. Building on the seminal work of Strauss et al. (2016), this proposed framework seeks to offer embodied perspectives toward re-imagining compassionate and inclusive futures. We resist proposing a causal step-like link between claiming, demonstrating, and mobilising compassion, given our view that the cornerstone points overlap; they can inform and be informed by each other. Moreover, individuals can be engaging with more than one of the elements of compassion at any one time, and similarly, be travelling between the cornerstones illustrated below.

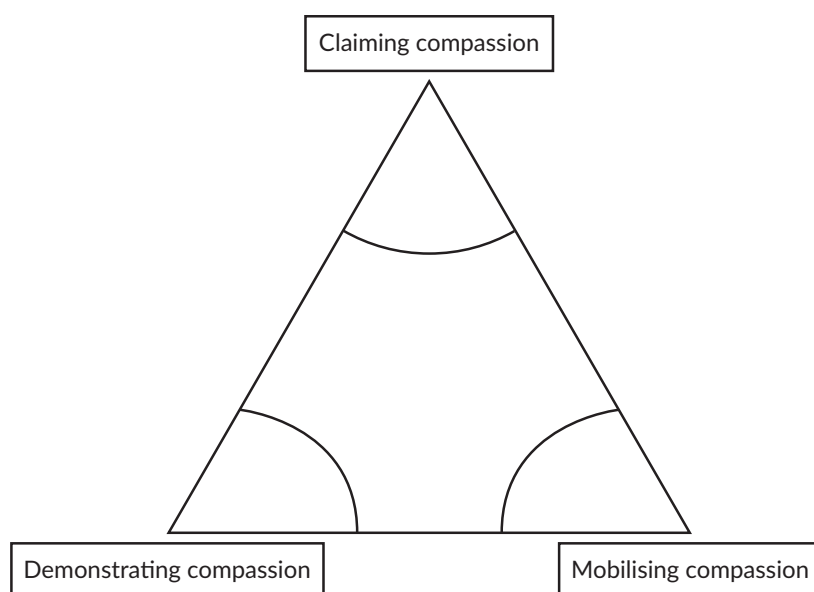


Figure 1. “Crippling” compassion triangle: A disability-led framework for inclusive compassionate futures.

Claiming a refreshed definition of compassion, one developed from a crippled “sit-point” (Garland-Thomson, 2005; Johnson & McRuer, 2014; Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006), started with participants in our focus group sessions offering up their stories of personal interactions with external actors. While actors responsible for implementing bureaucracy might argue that they are compassionate when carrying out their practices, this was disputed by those on the receiving end. The suggestion was that professionals should question the extent to which their behaviours, as experienced by disabled people, measured up as being compassionate. Through our discussions, it appeared that with some actors, their deeply held internalised beliefs and biases regarding disability inclusion could play a role in perpetuating norms that situated disabled people as pitiable. This was demonstrated in our above Findings, for example, the discomfort felt by one participant about being stroked on the arm and being called “dear” by a healthcare professional. This proposed self-questioning can allow actors to begin to see the true person in front of them (either themselves or others), and grasp how support can be provided in ways that recognise agency and authenticity (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2024). It was noted from our focus group discussions that the bureaucratic systems in which disabled people became entangled, such as those around finance, and health and social care, meant that participants felt that some professionals not only demonstrated negative personal biases, but that they delivered dehumanising organisational systems. For compassion to be meaningful, a level of introspection and willingness to be uncomfortable with the suffering that actors witnessed was required.

Regarding disabled people, attempts to claim compassion were judged to require their own introspection about the extent to which they themselves could be perpetuating bureaucracy, for example, the extract from one participant who underwent a personal journey to see that they were not a “problem” to be “fixed”: “It took me a while to realise that actually, no, it wasn’t me at all.” That is, disabled people needed to be ready to challenge the tendency to internalise negative experiences as flaws within themselves, and instead, recognise these as the impacts of systemic neoliberal bureaucratic injustices (Garland-Thomson, 2005; Perez, 2019; Rich, 1980). We contend that engaging in the awareness of the need to question bureaucratic norms, and starting this process of questioning regarding the nature and extent of engagement with all elements of compassion (Strauss et al., 2016), allows for the claiming of crippled compassion to emerge.

To implement compassion was said to be hard work, as it required respect, as reiterated by one participant: “It is really hard work to be compassionate; you don’t have to necessarily like other people, but you must respect them and respect their life force.” One step toward respect was proposed based on individuals being willing to own their vulnerabilities, accepting the need for care and support from others, and finding ways in which to do these. Giving and receiving acts of compassion in mutual reciprocity, based on fundamental principles of shared valuing of vulnerability, could start to address the critical “pathologization of difference and the displacement of those differences on to others positioned differentially” (Johnson & McRuer, 2014, p. 137). The displacement of differences, under compulsory able-bodiedness, opens disabled individuals, along with others who do not fit the ideal normative subject owing to their differences, to considerable risk when they discuss the challenges that they face (Butler-Rees & Power, 2025). To express vulnerability is deeply sensitive and personal, and to be open risks perpetuating disabling ideals that certain individuals are lesser or should be pitied (Parfitt et al., 2021). Notwithstanding, our focus group discussions emphasised that collective spaces where people reveal their vulnerabilities can emerge within bureaucratic systems, specifically when a climate of mutual respect is trusted (McRuer, 2004).

The cornerstone of mobilising compassion refers to the embedding of “crippled” principles in the pursuit of designing compassionate futures. This acknowledges how bureaucracy disables disabled and non-disabled people alike, and seeks to implement compassionate acts that recognise collective humanity and vulnerability as integral to all people. Further, mobilising compassion is about accepting and understanding how barriers faced by disabled people should, in the words of one participant, “become a group issue rather than a disabled person only issue.” By taking this collective stance, the constructed normative divide of disabled versus non-disabled bodies, as perpetuated by bureaucratic systems, can be rightly identified as invalid and artificial (McRuer, 2004). This mobilisation of compassion may be uncomfortable for disabled people and non-disabled people alike, as the building and rebuilding of relations is needed. As argued by our participants, actors responsible for perpetuating bureaucratic norms should be willingly learning about disability and disability activism. Engaging with compassion and exploring its key elements (Strauss et al., 2016) does not excuse individuals from respecting the “baseline” of disability equality and activism (participant). For, as advised when senses and emotions including compassion are the focus, disabled and non-disabled individuals need to be aware of the oppressive “histories and structures of power and representation” (Pedwell & Whitehead, 2012, p. 120) which act against disabled people, such as previous and ongoing systemic violence that may be knowingly or unknowingly inflicted toward this group (Capewell et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2017).

6. Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have presented ideas for “cripping” compassion and building compassionate futures, whereby we take the stance that disabled people’s embodied wisdoms are essential knowledge for creating inclusive futures. In doing so, we have presented the personal stories of disabled people and non-disabled allies regarding their hopes for claiming, demonstrating, and mobilising compassion, with each having the value of disability placed firmly at its centre. Our novel compassion framework provides opportunities for implementing “cripped” compassion, for without this, the inequitable status quo in favour of non-disabled people will inevitably continue to dominate scholarship.

Furthermore, we as authors contend that mobilising compassion from a crippled perspective is a deliberate and political act of defiance (e.g., Whitebrook, 2002). That is, disabled people and stakeholders responsible for upholding bureaucratic norms can reconsider, reevaluate, and challenge through applying “cripped” compassion, the taken-for-granted norms that favour non-disabled bodies while pathologising disabled bodies. It is at this moment that the act of building compassionate futures can begin, whereby collective value, mutuality, and collaboration can reframe societal inclusion from a disability activism perspective.

A potential limitation of our findings, and subsequently, the construction of the framework, is that reported experiences of compassion come from a narrow group of disabled people and non-disabled allies. Moreover, because we did not collect participant demographic information, such as gender or nature of impairment in order to ensure anonymity of all involved, we cannot make any claims regarding intersectional influences. It may be anticipated that compassion is viewed and expressed differently depending on the level or type of impairment, and similarly, how bureaucracy operates within this, for instance, those who live with a congenital impairment versus those who have acquired their impairment or become disabled (e.g., Parfitt et al., 2021; Stuntzner, 2017; Stuntzner & Dalton, 2014). While our “cripped” compassion framework provides a novel approach to discussions regarding disability and compassion, we stress the need for further research in this area to support our claims made in this article.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Reimagining Policing Through the Ethics of Care: Insights From Chinese Narratives and Practices

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Abstract

This article reexamines the foundations of policing by advancing *homo curans*—the caring human—not as a normative ideal, but as an emergent institutional rationality and governance disposition. Positioned as a counter-logic to the long-dominant *homo economicus* model of instrumental rationality, the study analyzes how security is increasingly reframed as a mechanism of collective care, structured by interdependence and responsiveness rather than coercion alone. Methodologically, the study combines critical discourse analysis of 300 Chinese media reports on policing (2014–2024) with 28 semi-structured interviews involving frontline officers, experts, and citizens. This design traces how *homo curans* functions as both a discursive legitimation frame and an operational logic across institutional texts and frontline practices. Findings reveal a gradual but uneven “care turn” in Chinese policing narratives. While early coverage emphasized deterrence, performance, and procedural control, post-2019 discourse increasingly featured relational and preventive vocabularies such as “linkage,” “home visits,” and “warm enforcement.” Pandemic-era reversals briefly restored coercive frames, yet post-2022 governance reforms consolidated care-centered narratives. Interview data corroborate this shift, identifying a routinized de-escalation → explanation → referral → follow-up pathway and a dual foundation of legitimacy: procedural correctness and relational recognition. The article contributes to policing studies by demonstrating that *homo curans* represents a substantive shift in governance logic, moving beyond the binary of coercion versus service to reveal care as an empirically institutionalized dimension of contemporary statecraft.

Keywords

China; critical discourse analysis; ethics of care; *homo curans*; institutional rationality; policing

1. Introduction

Historically, policing has rested on the premise of the *homo economicus*, prioritizing efficiency, control, and deterrence through surveillance and coercive force (Holmqvist, 2016). However, this model's failure to account for social vulnerability has severely strained public trust and institutional credibility (Bloom, 2025, pp. 158–174). Challenging this view, recent scholarship highlights the affective dimensions of law enforcement, conceptualizing policing as an ongoing negotiation between force and feeling (Fassin, 2015) and care as both an ethical practice and a regulatory mechanism (Ticktin, 2011). This shift aligns with broader scholarly inquiries into what specific services the police should fundamentally provide to the public beyond conventional crime control (Bradford et al., 2025). Yet, these debates remain largely confined to Western liberal contexts.

To bridge this gap, this article examines how care is operationalized within a non-Western, high-capacity security state. The Chinese case is uniquely instructive; here, an emerging “care turn” is refracted through contemporary “people-centered” governance and indigenous traditions of *ren* (仁, benevolence)—manifested in tailored enforcement for elderly, vulnerable populations, and caregivers—and *he* (和, harmony), expressed via mediation-oriented conflict resolution over immediate punitive intervention. These principles directly underpin contemporary community policing initiatives that emphasize explanation, negotiation, and social coordination—a communicative approach that proves particularly crucial when tailored to the varying expectations, life experiences, and media-driven values of different generations (Mao et al., 2025).

Methodologically, we combine a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 300 media reports with 28 semi-structured interviews spanning 2014–2024—a transformative decade in Chinese governance. Shifting from the earlier Harmonious Society agenda centered on stability and social integration, this period formalized “people-centered governance” and “social governance modernization.” These reforms mandated public agencies to complement enforcement-heavy metrics with service provision, dispute resolution, and preventative intervention. Policing thus became a primary arena for these objectives, tasking public security agencies to cultivate trust and maintain social cohesion alongside regular enforcement. This dual design offers a longitudinal, multi-layered analysis of how care-based and coercive rationalities articulate across official narratives and lived realities.

Empirically, we identify a growing emphasis on explanation, mediation, responsiveness, and follow-up. Rather than replacing coercive authority, these relational practices coexist with and reshape traditional enforcement. Utilizing *homo curans* as an analytical lens, this study offers a situated account of how legitimacy is co-produced through relational responsiveness and procedural control, thereby contributing to broader debates on the shifting moral foundations of contemporary governance.

2. Literature Review

The scaffolding of Western political economy and public policy has historically rested upon the figure of *homo economicus*—an atomized, self-interested agent driven primarily by utility maximization. This abstract ideal has drawn sustained fire for its inherent moral and relational sterility (Davis, 2018; Herfeld, 2022; Urbina & Ruiz-Villaverde, 2019). Critics of *homo economicus* argue that its instrumental logic reduces complex social and ecological relationships to market-like transactions (Sobel & Postel, 2016). Drawing on this critique, scholars

of care ethics and relational ontology advocate a shift from the “monadic self” to the “relational self” (Donati & Archer, 2015; Gergen, 2009; Yang, 2007).

Within this literature, individuals are viewed not as atomized utility-maximizers, but as relational beings embedded in networks of interdependence. Applied to public administration, this perspective implies that institutional legitimacy and image-building strategies cannot rely on top-down directives alone; rather, they must be grounded in the public’s genuine community perceptions (Mao et al., 2025), generating trust through responsiveness rather than mere deterrence. This framework underpins *homo curans*—the caring human—reimagining care not as a private sentiment, but as a foundational social and political practice (Brugère, 2020; Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993). Nonetheless, this paradigm faces an inherent tension: asserting its moral uniqueness risks subjectivity, while over-aligning with traditional principle ethics may dilute its normative power (Harbour, 2025).

Feminist scholarship has increasingly moved care beyond its traditional association with gendered labor, repositioning it as a broader principle of governance and social organization. Within this debate, different strands of literature highlight how care challenges dominant logics of neoliberalism and individualism. For instance, Odih (2014) critiques the marketization of social relations by showing how care exposes the limits of commodified moral frameworks, while Nissen et al. (2023) demonstrate how care practices can be institutionalized within welfare systems as alternatives to efficiency-driven governance. Relatedly, Vuolajärvi (2019) highlights the ambiguity of this shift, illustrating how care can be mobilized as a governance strategy that blurs the lines between social support and state control.

Recent contributions further extend this shift by emphasizing the collective and relational dimensions of care. Chamberlain (2020) traces the movement from self-care to collective care, underscoring how care becomes a shared social responsibility rather than an individual coping strategy. Similarly, Bali and Zamora (2022) propose the equity–care matrix, illustrating how care must be embedded within broader structures of social justice and institutional design. Together, these perspectives highlight that care is not merely an ethical disposition but an organizing logic that reshapes how responsibility, legitimacy, and social relations are structured in the public sphere (Trnka et al., 2021). In public administration, Tronto (2013) advocates a “politics of care,” proposing that care be institutionalized as a public principle capable of rehumanizing Weberian bureaucratic rationality and grounding governance in relational responsibility. Engster (2020) further developed the “ethics of public care,” contending that frontline bureaucrats (e.g., police, social workers, teachers) effectively “do policy through care” in their daily discretionary routines.

When care enters bureaucratic systems, responsibility is redefined: It is no longer mere compliance but a “moral attentiveness” to social impact (Dubnick, 2017). This operationalizes *homo curans* within administrative routines—transforming care from a private virtue into a public duty enacted through professional discretion and explanation (O’Leary, 2019).

This paradigmatic shift has extended even into the traditionally coercive fields of conservation and security. Lunstrum et al. (2025) advocate for care-full conservation, reframing conservation not as militarized protection but as an empathetic relational process, including care for those who transgress. Likewise, Johnson (2025) explores “coercive care” in medico-legal interfaces, showing how police and health actors navigate moral tensions in contexts of “significant physical intrusion.” Jovičić (2018) further illuminates this

dilemma in the policing of asylum seekers, revealing how “care” is often structurally sidelined in neoliberal border regimes.

These developments mark a cross-disciplinary consensus: Security can be reimagined as the collective engineering of trust, interdependence, and social resilience, elevating care into an embedded governance logic. Kruse et al. (2020) illustrate this by showing how frontline professionals actively reconcile care, bureaucracy, and professionalism—adapting standardized rules to individual needs so that discretion and relational judgment can coexist with formal structures. Conversely, Hughes et al. (2020) highlight that the ultimate integration of such care frameworks is heavily shaped by institutional inertia and inter-agency dynamics.

In China, this tension is filtered through indigenous traditions of *ren* (仁, benevolence) and *he* (和, harmony). Chinese *homo curans* represents a modern synthesis of traditional relational ethics and “people-centered” governance (Fan & Zhang, 2025). This echoes the broader “lived” institutionalization of care identified by Trnka et al. (2021), yet remains distinct in its authoritarian context. Indeed, as East Asian digital governance studies show, techno-rational models often prioritize standardization over the relational safety and emotional reassurance the public expects (Kanbara & Shaw, 2021).

Despite these advances, two gaps remain: First, most “ethics of care” research in policing remains theoretical or focused on Western welfare-policing models; second, there is a lack of longitudinal empirical evidence showing how “care” as a discursive frame actually translates into institutionalized pathways in a non-Western security apparatus. This study addresses this gap by interrogating the “care–coercion assemblage” in Chinese policing. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. At the textual level, how did Chinese media (2014–2024) rhetorically construct the shift from *homo economicus* to *homo curans*?
2. In discursive practice, through what institutional routines and intertextual chains were these “care” frames mobilized to build legitimacy?
3. In social practice, how is care enacted on the frontline, and how do marginalized groups and practitioners perceive these efforts?

3. Theoretical Framework

This study conceptualizes *homo curans* as an institutional rationality through which care is operationalized in governance—not as a utopian moral ideal, but as a patterned mode of organizing authority through relational responsiveness. Although *homo economicus* and *homo curans* originate in Western political economy and care ethics, they are deployed here as Weberian ideal-types rather than culturally bounded descriptions. Rather than imposing Western essentialisms onto the Chinese case, these heuristic devices serve to analyze how divergent governance rationalities intersect and reconfigure within specific state structures. The contemporary Chinese policing field—characterized by an institutional pivot toward “social governance modernization,” dispute mediation, and “people-centered” administration—provides a compelling empirical site to examine this hybridization without assuming cultural convergence.

Our framework contrasts these two ideal-typical rationalities. *Homo economicus* denotes a calculative subject driven by managerial efficiency, risk minimization, and metricized accountability. Conversely, *homo curans* posits a relational subject embedded in networks of interdependence, where legitimacy is co-produced through attentiveness, moral responsiveness, and the endurance of social ties. Crucially, these rationalities are not mutually exclusive binaries but coexisting logics in perpetual tension; *homo curans* reconfigures rather than replaces coercive authority, rearticulating how state power is justified and experienced.

This formulation refines the analytical scope of *homo curans*, distinguishing it from both the localized spontaneity of street-level discretion and the transaction-bound limits of procedural justice. By examining how institutions systematically leverage relational ties to secure compliance, *homo curans* operates as a mid-range framework that captures the structural co-articulation of care and coercion within contemporary statecraft.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design Overview

To trace the emergent shift from *homo economicus* to *homo curans* in Chinese policing, this study employs a convergent mixed-methods design. We integrate CDA of institutional media texts with semi-structured interviews to capture both macro-level governance agendas and micro-level lived meanings. Methodological rigor is maintained through data triangulation and independent double-coding, ensuring interpretive validity within a constructivist paradigm. The specific data corpora and analytical procedures are detailed in the following subsections.

4.2. Data Sources

4.2.1. Media Corpus

The corpus comprises 300 news reports on policing published between January 2014 and December 2024, drawn from major national and regional outlets including *People's Daily Online*, *Southern Weekly*, *The Paper*, *Xinhua News Agency*, and official provincial police bureau websites. While this limits the diversity of independent voices, it is precisely this top-down, institutionalized nature that makes these reports a valuable proxy for tracing official discursive shifts and the state's intentionality in projecting a *homo curans* image. Articles were retrieved using core Chinese keywords such as “公安” (“public security”), “警察” (“police”), “警务” (“policing”), and “社区警务” (“community policing”) through both outlet-specific searches and general web queries.

Substantive reports (≥ 500 characters) on policing and governance were included, while brief notices and duplicates were excluded. The selection prioritized prominent, widely shared reports to capture the dominant discursive formations shaping public narratives. This approach mirrors the mainstreaming of policing discourse (2014–2024) more effectively than topic stratification. The resulting corpus balances central and regional media, averaging 25–30 reports per year. Keyword frequency checks against larger databases confirmed its representativeness, providing a robust foundation for a longitudinal CDA of the shift from efficiency-centered to care-oriented narratives.

4.2.2. Interviews

Complementing the CDA, semi-structured interviews ($N = 28$) were conducted with five stakeholder groups: seven police personnel (frontline and administrative), four scholars (sociology, ethics, and policing), four marginalized citizens (laborers and caregivers), one community liaison, and twelve general citizens representing diverse socio-economic backgrounds (see Table 1). The inclusion of caregivers and laborers was theoretically motivated by their structurally vulnerable positions, which make them particularly sensitive to the presence or absence of care in policing encounters. We employed purposive, maximum-variation sampling, supplemented by snowball referrals for hard-to-reach participants.

Table 1. Basic information of respondents.

PID	Functional role (study)	Gender
I-01	Frontline police (community)	Male
I-02	Frontline police (patrol)	Male
I-03	Frontline police (former)	Female
I-04	Frontline police (former)	Male
I-05	Police administration/station ops	Male
I-06	Police administration/case filing	Male
I-07	Police administration/office clerk	Female
I-08	Community safety liaison	Female
I-09	Scholar/sociology	Female
I-10	Scholar/public administration	Male
I-11	Scholar/policing studies	Male
I-12	Scholar/ethics & policy	Female
I-13	Citizen/marginalized	Male
I-14	Citizen/marginalized	Male
I-15	Citizen/marginalized (caregiver)	Female
I-16	Citizen/marginalized (caregiver)	Female
I-17	Citizen/freelancer	Female
I-18	Citizen/no job	Female
I-19	Citizen/no job	Male
I-20	Citizen/real estate sales	Female
I-21	Citizen/farmer	Male
I-22	Citizen/teacher	Female
I-23	Citizen/nurse	Female
I-24	Citizen/laborer	Male
I-25	Citizen/government staff	Female
I-26	Citizen/maintenance worker	Male
I-27	Citizen/student	Female
I-28	Citizen/student	Male

Interviews of 60 to 90 minutes, in Mandarin, were audio-recorded, anonymized, and analyzed through a constructivist lens. An iterative codebook, centered on the care–coercion tension, was refined through 20% inter-coder adjudication to ensure consistency. The interview guide prioritized perceptions of “good policing” and lived experiences of empathy versus control in security encounters. All procedures adhered to institutional ethical guidelines, with informed consent obtained from all participants.

4.3. Analytical Framework

4.3.1. CDA

We employ CDA to examine how policing texts constitute care versus coercion to shape social realities (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). To minimize cherry-picking, a corpus-assisted procedure (keyword/collocate profiling → human validation) structured the sampling. Following Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework, analysis proceeded in three moments. First, textual analysis traced recurrent lexical, syntactic, and metaphorical realizations of care/coercion within the 300 reports. Second, discursive-practice analysis mapped intertextual chains and legitimation strategies across central–provincial–municipal outlets over time. Third, social-practice interpretation linked these shifts to broader governance agendas, specifically considering the legacy of the Harmonious Society and recent social governance modernization reforms (e.g., community-based prevention, inter-agency coordination, and people-centered delivery). Coding began deductively and was refined inductively through memoing. To ensure consistency, two researchers cross-checked a 20% subsample to stabilize the codebook. All items were analyzed in the original Chinese, with translations used only for presentation.

4.3.2. Dual Coding Framework

This study utilizes a care/economic rationality CDA framework (Table 2). Grounded in Tronto’s (1993, 2013) moral elements (“caring-with”) and Held’s (2005) relational ontology, the care pillar encodes responsiveness to vulnerability, connectivity, shared responsibility, and preventive support. Conversely, the economic–rational pillar reflects the institutionalized drive for efficiency and procedural control rather than

Table 2. Theoretical foundation of the dual-pillar coding framework.

Dimension	Care pillar (<i>homo curans</i>)	Economic-rational pillar (<i>homo economicus</i>)
Ontological foundation	Relational ontology (Held, 2005); care as interdependence and moral responsiveness (Tronto, 1993, 2013)	Instrumental rationality (Foucault, 1977/1995; Weber, 1978); efficiency-centered subjectivity (Foucault, 1977/1995)
Moral orientation	Responsiveness, empathy, attentiveness, and shared responsibility	Calculation, self-interest, and performance orientation
Institutional logic	Governance as relational engagement; emphasis on inclusion and preventive support	Governance as control and optimization; emphasis on output and procedural standardization
Discursive indicators	Responsiveness to vulnerability; connectivity; shared responsibility; preventive support	Efficiency; deterrence; individual attribution; procedural standardization

mere punitive coercion. Drawing on Foucault's (1977/1995) disciplinary power and neoliberal subjectivity, it encodes efficiency, deterrence, individual attribution, and procedural standardization. Ultimately, these poles contrast *homo economicus* as the rationalizing subject of performance against *homo curans* as the relational subject of responsiveness.

Table 3 operationalizes the theoretical framework into specific lexical, phrasal, and narrative indicators used in the CDA corpus analysis. This framework functions both as a deductive structure (derived from theory) and an inductive tool (allowing emergent sub-themes).

Table 3. Operational coding scheme for care and economic rationality in Chinese policing discourse.

Framework	Main code	Sub-code	Operational definition	Example (translated from Chinese media)
Ethics of care	Responsiveness to vulnerability	Sensitivity to victims, emotional presence	Police respond empathetically to citizen grievances	"The police calmed the old man and helped him find his lost wife."
	Connectedness	Community participation, relational governance	Collaborative or dialogical interactions between police and citizens	"The police station and community volunteers jointly carry out the 'neighborhood watch' activity."
	Shared responsibility	Collective security, partnership model	Co-production of safety, shared prevention efforts	"Police and people build and govern together to share peace."
	Preventive support	Early intervention, psychosocial assistance	Police actions addressing causes rather than symptoms	"Police visit the homes of troubled teenagers to prevent them from breaking the law again."
Economic rationality	Efficiency	Quantitative performance, time-saving logic	Focus on clearance rates, response speed, or technological control	"The time to respond to a crime is reduced by 30 percent, and the rate of solving crimes is increased."
	Deterrence	Punitive or disciplinary emphasis	Emphasis on strict punishment or threat of force	"Strict punishment in accordance with the law to deter."
	Individual accountability	Blame and moral isolation	Crime framed as individual moral failure	"The suspect will bear full legal responsibility."
	Procedural standardization	Bureaucratic or technocratic legitimacy	Reliance on codified rules, professionalism, or automation	"Strictly implement the standard operating procedures for law enforcement."

Beyond CDA, we ran a lightweight, dictionary-based pass on news titles and leads. Tokens and bigrams were mapped to our two-pillar scheme (care vs. coercive, with efficiency/procedural sub-dimensions). Annual rates are reported as illustrative shares; bigram collocations (± 5 tokens) profile lexical ecologies. This pass is indicative, not dispositive; final interpretations rest on CDA and interviews.

4.4. Coding and Reliability Procedures

Following a 50-article pilot that refined operational definitions through open coding, we applied the finalized dual codebook deductively to all 300 reports in NVivo 14. A secondary coder—an independent researcher specialized in care ethics who was not part of the primary project team—blindly coded a 15% random subset of the data, yielding Cohen's $\kappa = .86$. We then mapped code frequencies across 2014–2024 to visualize longitudinal shifts, and finally integrated the discourse patterns with interview themes to build a multi-level narrative of care–coercion dynamics.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent in accordance with institutional ethics approval. Identities and affiliations were anonymized; quotations were edited only for clarity. Given the study's sensitivity—analyzing policing and public discourse—extra care was taken to protect participants' confidentiality and to represent differing voices equitably.

Reflexive notes were maintained throughout analysis to account for the researcher's interpretive position and sociocultural proximity to the field. Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee under reference number UMREC_2650.

4.6. Reflexivity

The authors acknowledge that “care discourse” in state media may function as a strategic legitimation tool or a response to internal performance evaluation pressures (e.g., “warm enforcement” quotas). Our analysis does not assume uniform behavioral change; rather, it captures the discursive institutionalization of care. Rather than treating the 28 semi-structured interviews as a statistically representative baseline, this design deploys them as an indispensable micro-narrative counter-weight to complement, contextualize, and at times critically deconstruct how top-down official discourses align with, or diverge from, the lived realities on the ground.

4.7. Analytical Synthesis

The analytical synthesis stage integrated findings from the three CDA levels to address the research questions. Specifically, the textual level focused on lexical and rhetorical patterns that articulate care or coercion orientations in media discourse. The discursive practice level examined how these linguistic features were embedded within intertextual chains and how they were recontextualized across institutional communication routines. The social practice level triangulated these insights with interview data to interpret how care-oriented policing was enacted, constrained, or negotiated in practice (see Table 4).

This synthesis enabled a multi-scalar reading of care–coercion dynamics, revealing how textual discourse, institutional mediation, and everyday practice co-produce the evolving moral economy of policing in China.

Table 4. Alignment between research questions and CDA analytical levels.

CDA Level	Analytical focus	Data source	Corresponding RQ
Textual	Lexical, rhetorical construction of care/coercion	Media corpus (2014–2024)	How were <i>homo economicus</i> and <i>homo curans</i> discursively constructed?
Discursive practice	Intertextual production and circulation of frames	Media-policy intertexts	Through which routines and intertexts were frames produced and mobilized?
Social practice	Translation of care frames into practice; legitimacy perceptions	Interviews with officers & citizens	How are care-oriented practices enacted and perceived?

5. Findings

5.1. Media CDA results

5.1.1. Overview of Discursive Trends (2014–2024)

Between 2014 and 2024, Chinese media discourse exhibits a structural rebalancing from economic rationality to care-oriented vocabulary. As visualized in Figure 1 and detailed in Table 5, this decade-long macro-trajectory is non-linear, characterized by three distinct phases: an initial dominance of efficiency and deterrence-driven frames (2014–2018), a temporary pandemic-era resurgence of control-oriented rhetoric (2020–2021), and a decisive post-2022 reversal. Driven by institutional shifts toward “people-centered governance,” care ethics have since normalized as the dominant rationality in contemporary policing narratives, relegating instrumental control to a secondary position by 2024.

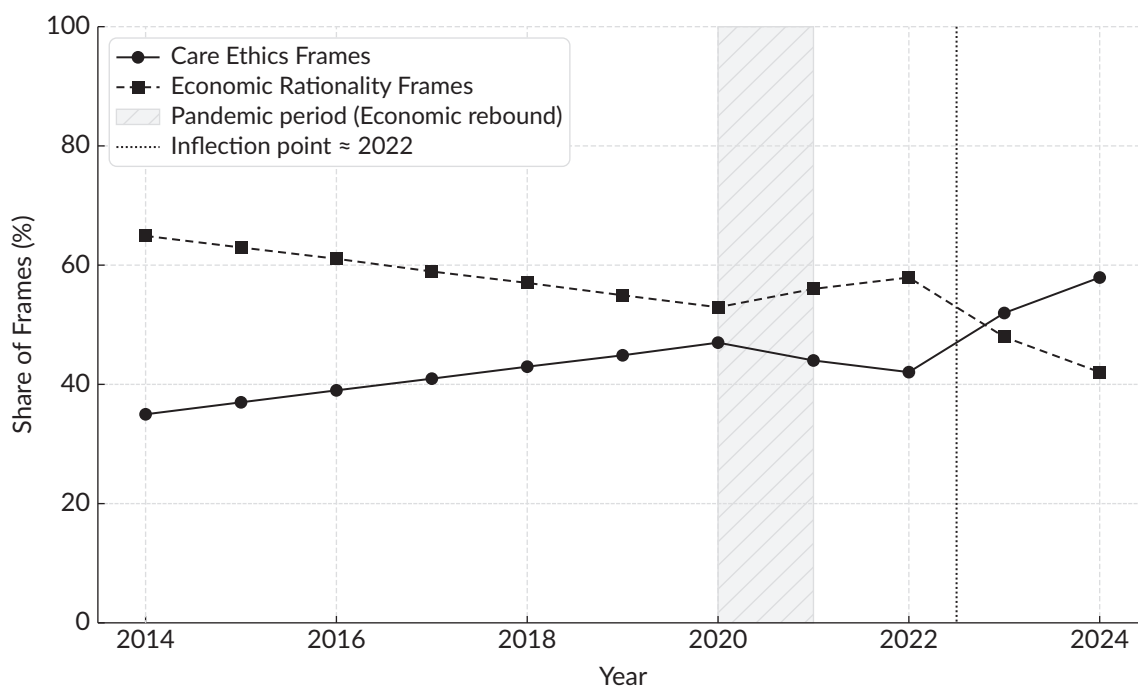


Figure 1. Illustrative frequency mapping.

This linguistic transformation suggests the emergence of an evolving moral economy of policing—where responsiveness, empathy, and social inclusion increasingly supplement deterrence and control.

Table 5. Analytic overview table.

Period	Dominant discursive orientation	Policy/institutional context	Representative lexical frames	Interpretive note
2014–2018	Coercion-centered (efficiency, deterrence)	Early “performance policing” era; focus on output indicators	“Strike hard,” “standardized enforcement,” “result reporting”	Reflects <i>homo economicus</i> logic—rationalized and metric-driven policing.
2019–2020	Transitional (mixed rationality)	Reform rhetoric (“people-centered governance”) begins	“Home visits,” “linkage,” “education with warmth” co-exist with “discipline”	Hybrid discourse—emergent <i>homo curans</i> frames within bureaucratic structure.
2020–2022	Procedural resurgence (control phase)	Pandemic control, lockdown enforcement	“Grid management,” “strict standard,” “command execution”	Temporary reversal toward coercion; care subordinated to procedural control.
2022–2024	Relational turn (care-centered governance)	Post-pandemic re-legitimation, community service focus	“Warm enforcement,” “relational service,” “follow-up care”	Consolidation of <i>homo curans</i> legitimacy through relational framing.

Table 5 provides an interpretive summary of the shifting care–coercion balance across four temporal phases. Each phase is characterized by distinct institutional logics, rhetorical repertoires, and policy discourses.

5.1.2. Analysis of Critical Discourse in Media Reports

A CDA of 300 media texts from 2014 to 2024 reveals a long-term competition and reconfiguration between the care and coercion semantic domains in Chinese police narratives. In the early years (2014–2018), corresponding to the implementation of periodic “strike-hard rectification campaigns” (intensive, state-led crackdowns on crime) and the nationwide Police Reform Outline (2015–2020; a blueprint for professionalizing procedures and performance metrics), reports largely adhered to a law-enforcement–efficiency logic. National authority and order were constructed through high-intensity terms such as “crackdown,” “rectification,” and “deterrence.” Quantitative rhetoric—“higher case-solving rates,” “standardized procedures,” “faster response time”—portrayed the police as a technocratic machine where efficiency was seen as a source of legitimacy. Metaphorically, policing was often framed through warfare and disease metaphors—“sword-unsheathing operations,” “social tumors”—depicting deviance as a threat to be eradicated:

Since the beginning of this year, Beijing police have maintained a *zero-tolerance* policy and *high-pressure crackdown* on drug-related crimes, solving over 1,800 drug-related criminal cases. (“Beijing jingfang,” 2014)

Public security organs can use the intelligent application for video alarms on citizens' mobile phones to obtain audio and video information from the crime scene in real time, perceive the situation at the crime scene, and secure evidence *in advance*, making command and response more *efficient and enforcement* more *timely*. ("Liaoning Fuxin," 2017)

We will *rigorously prevent* and *resolutely combat* all forms of....We will *deepen special campaigns* such as the *crackdown* on gun and explosives trafficking and the *severe punishment* of telecommunications and online fraud, *resolutely punish* frequently occurring property crimes, and promote the construction of a security risk prevention and control system in key areas such as primary and secondary schools, kindergartens, and hospitals. ("Gonganbu," 2018)

Since 2019, Chinese policing narratives have undergone a distinct semantic shift, coinciding with public administration reforms prioritizing "people-centered governance." The revitalization of the historical "Fengqiao experience" (a grassroots model of resolving disputes locally through public involvement) into "social governance modernization" (a reform agenda promoting community-based prevention and multi-agency coordination) institutionalized community-based prevention and multi-agency coordination. This policy environment established structural incentives—including citizen-satisfaction and social stability metrics—for police and state media to foreground care-oriented narratives. Consequently, official discourse transitioned from command-driven to support-oriented, adopting relational verbs ("coordinate," "connect") and framing devices ("compassionate law enforcement") that position police as community collaborators rather than mere enforcers. Word frequency analysis confirms this structural reorientation toward empathy: By 2024, "care" vocabulary rose from 35% to 58%, while "coercive" terminology declined from 65% to 42%. See the examples below:

An elderly resident in a neighborhood was approached late at night by a drunkard banging on his door, and police officers stood guard outside his door for the night....In Zhangzhou, Fujian, the saying "*A distant relative is not as good as a close neighbor, and a close neighbor is not as good as Zhangzhou 110*" is deeply ingrained and passed down by word of mouth. ("Danfuqi huhang xin shidai," 2019)

On December 19, 2014, the Fanshui Bridge officially opened to traffic, ending the lives of residents in the Fanguanghu area who relied on ferries to enter the town. Before that, Li Shugan would come to the ferry almost every morning to push carts, *help the elderly, and assist with unloading goods*....He took *care of* everything, both his own and others, because he was the only policeman there. ("Shequ minjing Li Shugan," 2019)

A banner hangs on the wall of the Tieshu Xiejie Community Police Station, which reads "*Serving the People and Caring for the Masses*." ("Shequ minjing de 'xin shenfen,'" 2019)

A notable "rebound" in coercive discourse appeared during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2021), aligning with the state's Law-Based Pandemic Control Guidelines and the Public Security Covid Response Protocols. During this period, media coverage prominently featured terms such as "maintaining order," "strict control," and "lawful handling," which reasserted the logic of command and compliance. These reports often followed an intertextual sequence of authoritative directive → standardized enforcement → achievement reporting, reproducing the bureaucratic rhythm of legitimacy.

Linguistically, this phase witnessed a resurgence of institutional metaphors such as frontline defense, fortress, and battle, casting police as soldiers in a moralized war against the virus. The repetition of these metaphors across outlets reactivated the disciplinary register of the pre-2018 era, temporarily re-centering efficiency, control, and obedience. Yet, even within this coercive resurgence, subtle traces of relational language—"protecting communities," "caring for the vulnerable," "assisting quarantined citizens"—persisted, suggesting that the ethic of care, though overshadowed, continued to circulate beneath the surface of China's pandemic policing discourse:

We must *resolutely treat* epidemic prevention and *control* as the top priority, making full and *effective* use of legal provisions to *punish* all kinds of illegal and criminal activities that hinder epidemic prevention and *control* in a timely and severe manner, providing *strong legal guarantees* for winning the *battle against* the epidemic. ("Gongan zhan 'yi," 2020)

Those who harm medical personnel, disrupt medical order, or maliciously spread the epidemic must be *dealt with swiftly and resolutely*, and typical cases should be *promptly exposed* to create an *effective deterrent*. ("Zhan yiqing," 2020)

In the post-pandemic era (2022–2024), media narratives increasingly reflected China's governance modernization reforms, emphasizing "prevention first," "co-construction and co-governance," and "people-centered security." Aligned with the evaluation systems for Building a Peaceful China (2021 onward) and the national drive for social governance modernization outlined in the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), reports portrayed police less as enforcers and more as mediators and caregivers. Terms like "psychological counseling," "community coordination," and "trust-building" became frequent collocates of "care" and "cooperation." The earlier "war" metaphors gave way to "family" and "neighbor" imagery—"the police are the guardians next door"—signaling a discursive normalization of empathy, prevention, and shared responsibility in post-pandemic Chinese policing:

In recent years, the police station has assembled a "*Harmony Mediation Team*" comprised of community security officers, lawyers, and enthusiastic Party members to promptly mediate disputes[:]. "*Diversified mediation of conflicts and disputes is a beneficial exploration in our police station's community-based crime prevention and control work. Through proactive investigation and diversified mediation, we have achieved early detection, early intervention, and early resolution of conflicts and disputes, which is conducive to neighborhood harmony and social harmony.*" ("Gongan paichusuoyu tuixing yufang jingwu," 2023)

To address the urgent needs and *concerns* of the people by providing better *safety and security*, and to realize a higher level of safe China in a way that is visible, tangible, and perceptible to the people. ("Liaowang," 2022)

Sitting side by side is the only way to *bridge the gap between hearts*. Huizhou police, through Party building *partnerships*, have repeatedly *listened to the voices of the people* and *sought their advice*....Deploying police forces promptly installed safety netting along the river in front of the Wenfeng Kindergarten in Daxincheng, completely eliminating safety hazards. ("Yongxin fuwu qunzhong," 2024)

Further placing these linguistic features within the context of social governance reveals a close correspondence between discourse shifts and policy logic: 2014–2018 was a mandatory phase centered on “prevention, control, and standardization”; 2020–2022 saw a renewed strengthening of “proceduralization and deterrence” due to the public health emergency; after 2022, institutional mechanisms such as “primary prevention,” “two teams and one office,” “one police officer per village,” and “police grid + community grid” were implemented, while co-governance vocabulary such as “civilian-auxiliary cooperation and government-society collaboration” rapidly emerged, driving the care framework to continuously strengthen in the dimensions of “prevention, support, connection, and shared responsibility.”

Overall, the changes in media discourse exhibit three key characteristics:

1. Semantic rearrangement: from high-intensity deterrence and quantifiable efficiency to relational support and preventative governance.
2. Metaphorical substitution: from “enforcers of crime fighting” to “collaborators in community care.”
3. Reconstruction of legitimacy sources: from “control capacity” to “accessibility, emotional response, and relational trust.”

5.2. Interview Results Analysis

The interview data indicate a transition in grassroots policing from a logic of “control and efficiency” toward one of “prevention and care.” At the same time, they both corroborate and complicate official narratives: While many participants confirmed an increased emphasis on explanation and responsiveness, marginalized groups pointed to persistent inconsistencies and the risk of care becoming superficial in the absence of sustained follow-up. Frontline respondents described a refined handling sequence of de-escalation, explanation, lawful processing, referral, and follow-up. As I-01 emphasized: “We must first stabilize emotions...then clearly explain the procedures so the process can proceed smoothly.” Patrol officers echoed this view, noting that without explaining “why we are doing this and what comes next,” enforcement is “easily perceived as coercion” (I-02). This relationship-oriented approach was also reflected in citizens’ experiences. Recalling a police intervention in a family caregiving dispute, I-24 noted that “the police patiently listened to me explain my mother’s situation...which made me less resistant.” Similarly, discussing a neighborhood conflict, I-17 observed: “Before, I felt the police came to take charge, but now they ask if we need help first.”

This shift does not negate procedure but recontextualizes it. As I-03 recalled: “A gentle approach does not mean disregarding procedures, but rather explaining them clearly and thoroughly.” To sustain this “care,” practitioners rely on inter-departmental collaboration involving police officers, schools, neighborhood committees, and social workers. Such arrangements reflect recent social governance reforms that encourage public agencies to share responsibility for prevention and dispute resolution rather than relying solely on punitive intervention. I-12 suggested: “Try to avoid punishment if possible; first, make referrals and follow-ups to reduce risk,” supported by I-09’s view on collective problem-solving through media and organizational contact. From the community perspective, this forms a “care chain” of accessibility and sustainability. I-13 argued that “a single visit has limited effect; follow-up phone calls and home visits are necessary,” while I-11 warned that without subsequent social work, reassurance “easily becomes a one-off and superficial act.”

Academic interviewees clarified that care is a professional, institutionalized task. I-04 noted: “Procedures make law enforcement stand the test, and care makes it more acceptable” (similar to I-12 and I-22). Regarding the tension between due process and humane enforcement, I-05 proposed a compromise of “giving choices, giving time, and informing consequences,” emphasizing evidence preservation. Public responses were positive: “If there are two options and the impact is explained, I feel respected” (I-25), “video recordings and receipts make me feel more at ease” (I-15). This “dual-foundation legitimacy” fosters cooperation and trust (I-10).

The pandemic briefly disrupted this logic, imposing “rigid targets” where officers were “afraid of being held responsible if we didn’t do enough” (I-04, I-03). The public understood the control but sought “more explanation, as we still have elderly and children at home” (I-16). I-19 emphasized compensatory care: “If coercive measures are unavoidable, visiting people afterward to explain...and providing psychological support can repair relationships.” While practice has largely returned to a service track, constraints persist. I-06 summarized the need for “manpower, training, and a coordinating unit,” as insufficient time (I-01, I-04) and a lack of emotional intervention training (I-03) remain barriers.

To balance performance with relational work, I-07 suggested “including visits and follow-ups in workload statistics,” warning that valuing only case-solving rates encourages “quick results” (I-05). Public expectations are pragmatic: “It’s not about achieving zero disputes, but about having someone willing to listen...and telling you what to do next” (I-28). In high-uncertainty scenarios, coercion remains prioritized—“the scene must be controlled first” (I-01)—but post-incident reassurance is vital. Without follow-up explanations, “people will only remember ‘coercion,’ not ‘protection’” (I-10, I-06). Ultimately, care embeds authority within relationships, turning it from a private virtue into a public duty.

6. Discussion

6.1. *The Discursive Construction of Care and Legitimacy in Chinese Policing*

Addressing the textual level, the analysis shows that Chinese media discourse reconstructs policing legitimacy through an increasing reliance on relational and care-oriented language. Beyond documenting changes in vocabulary and rhetorical emphasis, the key issue is how this shift redefines the moral basis of authority. The findings suggest a reorientation from a model grounded primarily in deterrence and procedural compliance toward one increasingly anchored in responsiveness, accessibility, and communicative engagement. In this sense, care operates not as an alternative to authority, but as a modality through which authority is justified and experienced, echoing Fassin’s (2015) notion of a “moral economy of policing.”

Importantly, this transformation remains conditional. During periods of heightened uncertainty, coercive rationalities regain prominence, indicating that procedural control continues to serve as the pragmatic foundation of governance. The “care turn,” therefore, is best understood as a reconfiguration of legitimacy rather than a linear transformation.

Building on this perspective, media discourse is treated not merely as a reflection of social reality, but as a site where governance is actively constructed. At the same time, such discourse is structurally driven by

concrete institutional incentives within the security apparatus. These include alignment with top-down policy mandates—such as “social governance modernization” and “Peaceful China” evaluations—as well as internal performance evaluation systems that increasingly tie bureaucratic recognition to metricized citizen-satisfaction targets and grassroots dispute-resolution quotas. Accordingly, the observed shift toward care is interpreted as a form of discursive institutionalization, which may reflect both evolving practices and strategic efforts at legitimation.

6.2. Institutional Mediation and the Operationalization of Care

At the level of discursive practice, relational governance is negotiated and institutionalized through everyday frontline routines. Interview narratives demonstrate that “people-centered governance” is operationalized via a concrete street-level workflow: pre-enforcement explanation, dispute mediation, and structured follow-up. Frontline officers actively navigate the structural tension between rigid legal mandates and situational responsiveness, utilizing interdepartmental social service referrals to manage complex citizen vulnerabilities. This aligns with street-level bureaucracy frameworks emphasizing the interpretive and ethical agency of frontline actors (Rowe, 2024).

This process reflects what Engster (2020) terms the institutionalization of care, whereby care becomes an administrative expectation rather than merely an ethical disposition. Its implementation, however, remains contingent. Time pressures, performance metrics, and risk-accountability structures often favor efficiency over relational engagement. Consequently, care-oriented practices tend to flourish in low-risk community settings but recede under crisis conditions or hierarchical pressure.

A critical reading suggests that the “care turn” may represent not only substantive change but also strategic adaptation. Consistent with Ticktin’s (2011) critique of the “politics of care,” practices of “warm enforcement” may enhance compliance while extending governance capacity—a form of “carceral care.” Care therefore coexists with, rather than replaces, existing logics of performance and control. Sustaining relational responsiveness requires institutional redesign, particularly evaluation systems that recognize prevention, explanation, and emotional communication alongside outcome-based measures.

From a cultural perspective, this relational orientation resonates with Confucian ethics of *ren* (仁, benevolence) and *he* (和, harmony), as well as socialist traditions of collective responsibility (Van der Wal & Yang, 2015). Yet, as Wang and Zhang (2025) note, these moral ideals are often translated into managerial practices of “virtue crafting,” highlighting the enduring tension between ethical responsiveness and bureaucratic rationality.

6.3. Enacting Care: Frontline Practice and the Limits of Relational Governance

At the level of social practice, our findings clarify how care is enacted as a structured institutional process rather than a random act of kindness. The identified pathway—de-escalation → explanation → referral → follow-up—demonstrates that care is operationalized as an endogenous governance rationality embedded within administrative routines (Trnka et al., 2021). In this context, practitioners perceive care not as a distraction from “real” police work, but as a strategic necessity to manage uncertainty and secure cooperation as policing increasingly extends beyond crime control to encompass dispute mediation, community engagement, and preventive governance. For officers, “care” is a tool for relational safety,

allowing them to navigate the “moral economy” of policing where legitimacy depends on affective judgments of empathy and proportionality.

However, the experiences recounted by our sampled vulnerable respondents point to the potential limits and unevenness of this relational governance. While some citizens experience the “warmth” of the state as a rehumanizing force, others in precarious positions view it with a degree of ambivalence. As scholarship on the “politics of care” suggests, compassion can function as a regulatory force that constructs implicit hierarchies of “deservingness” (Brugère, 2020; Ticktin, 2011; Vuolajärvi, 2019). Although our limited qualitative sample cannot establish a definitive national trend, the narratives of hesitation and strategic compliance among these respondents tentatively suggest that when citizens struggle to align with the prescriptive vision of “harmony,” the care-based apparatus risks reverting to more traditional forms of procedural coercion. This friction underscores that the conclusions drawn here remain exploratory, highlighting a critical boundary of carceral care that warrants further large-scale empirical investigation.

6.4. Reframing Enforcement: The Care–Coercion Assemblage

Synthesizing the textual, institutional, and experiential evidence, the analysis reveals that care does not diminish enforcement but effectively rearticulates it. Within this framework, *homo curans* represents an institutional logic that organizes how care and coercion are co-articulated in practice, moving state legitimacy beyond a sole reliance on deterrence or procedural compliance.

Crucially, this transformation remains inherently ambivalent. As Maile et al. (2023) and Bäckström and Schwarz (2025) observe, practices of attentiveness can humanize authority while simultaneously extending its reach. In this sense, care operates within the structures of control, reinforcing the dual character of contemporary policing. The significance of the “care turn” thus lies in the transformation of the moral and relational conditions under which state power is exercised. In the Chinese context examined here, the institutionalization of relational responsiveness within a traditionally coercive apparatus suggests a reconfiguration of governance legitimacy. Rather than replacing coercion, *homo curans* provides an additional moral register through which authority is justified and experienced. The findings indicate that, in this context, the “warmth” of the state can function as a strategic resource for securing both order and legitimacy across discursive, institutional, and social dimensions.

7. Implications and Future Directions

Our findings suggest that care is becoming an increasingly important source of legitimacy within contemporary policing. Consistent with debates on the moral economy of policing (Fassin, 2015) and the politics of care (Ticktin, 2011), the study shows that care and coercion operate as complementary rather than opposing modes of governance. Rather than replacing *homo economicus*, *homo curans* captures how institutions seek legitimacy through attentiveness, responsiveness, and relational engagement. This positioning of care as a constitutive element of governance highlights its structural friction with traditional Weberian bureaucracy and New Public Management frameworks, contributing to broader debates on governance rationality and public administration (Akopian et al., 2024; Bouckaert, 2023).

Practically, translating care from discourse into organizational reality requires reforming traditional police assessment systems. Shifting away from metrics focused primarily on case-clearance, stability-maintenance, and arrest rates, institutions should incorporate concrete care-based legitimacy indicators, including structured responsiveness, explanation, follow-up, and citizen aftercare protocols. At the same time, the findings suggest that care-oriented practices are most sustainable in low-risk community settings and become harder to maintain under crisis conditions or strong hierarchical pressures, underscoring the need for organizational support and evaluation mechanisms that recognize relational work.

Future research could examine how care–coercion dynamics vary across political and cultural contexts, how algorithmic governance and AI-assisted policing reshape institutional responsiveness, and how frontline officers manage the emotional labor associated with balancing compassion and control. Such work would help clarify the conditions under which care becomes an enduring governance practice rather than a temporary organizational strategy.

Overall, the Chinese case demonstrates that care does not eliminate coercion but reshapes how authority is justified and experienced. By embedding relational responsiveness within everyday policing practices, the care turn highlights the growing importance of moral and relational dimensions of legitimacy in contemporary governance while also revealing the tensions and limits that accompany their institutionalization.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The media discourse data analyzed in this study were compiled from publicly available Chinese news platforms. The qualitative interview transcripts are not publicly available due to ethical constraints and the strict protocols implemented to protect the anonymity and privacy of the participants (frontline police officers, experts, and citizens). However, the analytical coding frameworks or de-identified selective excerpts may be made available from the first author of the article upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors utilized ChatGPT (OpenAI, San Francisco, CA, USA) and Gemini (Google, Mountain View, CA, USA). These Large Language Models (LLMs) were used exclusively to assist with grammar improvement, stylistic refinement, and clarity enhancement of the author-generated text. They were not employed for data collection, core analysis, or the synthesis of research findings. Following the use of these tools, the authors thoroughly reviewed, verified, and edited the content as needed, and they retain full responsibility for the originality, structural integrity, and factual accuracy of the final publication.

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Ecology of Abandonment: Non-Take-Up of Social Rights as a Capitalist Critique

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Abstract

Social protection is often presented as a compassionate response to vulnerability, linking care and inclusion through the lens of autonomy. However, access to social rights is increasingly conditional on activation requirements and compliance with labour market standards. Based on ethnographic research conducted in Switzerland, this article analyzes non-take-up of social rights not as a simple lack of information or a failure of inclusion, but as a socially and morally situated response to these forms of conditional compassion. Using the conceptual framework of an ecology of abandonment, the article shows how some people interpret social policies not as protective measures but as mechanisms of re-commodification (Polanyi, 2001) and moral control. In this context, non-take-up can constitute an infra-political critique of the welfare state, expressed through ordinary practices of refusal or distancing from institutions. The analysis also highlights how these practices are accompanied by a relocation of care towards informal moral economies based on family, community, or collective relationships, which are unevenly accessible.

Keywords

ecology of abandonment; infrapolitics; non-take-up; social rights

1. Introduction

In many welfare states, public institutions present social protection as a compassionate response to vulnerability, i.e., a response that seeks to assist individuals while promoting autonomy and inclusion. In this context, social rights are not only conceived as protection mechanisms, but also as tools for promoting individual responsibility and collective well-being. The promise of “compassionate futures” is thus based on the assumption that social welfare institutions can simultaneously care for vulnerable populations and guide them toward social and economic integration.

However, critical research on the welfare state shows that social rights are far from being universally guaranteed (Bhattacharya & Vogel, 2017; Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Paugam, 1991). Insurance and redistribution mechanisms do not merely protect; they also organise moral and institutional boundaries between individuals considered legitimate or deserving, and those assigned to positions of assistance, who are viewed as suspicious or even deviant (Polanyi, 2001; Wacquant, 2009). These mechanisms contribute to producing hierarchies of value between lives, while masking these inequalities behind the language of solidarity and compassion (Fassin, 2012).

In this context, care is offered selectively, under conditions that associate compassion with productivity and autonomy with integration into the labour market. Care is understood in this article in the broad sense proposed by Fisher and Tronto (1990) as everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible, a definition that encompasses both informal and institutional practices, and that is explicitly relational and political.

This article is part of the broader conceptual framework of an ecology of abandonment, which refers to Povinelli's (2011) work on the economies of abandonment. The ecology of abandonment is understood as the set of material, relational, and institutional conditions that emerge when care is offered selectively and certain lives are structurally left behind. From this perspective, exclusion is not an accident or a failure of public policy, but the systemic effect of administrative, legal, economic, and moral arrangements that organise access to protection while producing unequal forms of assistance (Povinelli, 2011). Whilst Povinelli's concept of "economies of abandonment" highlights the distributive logic through which liberal regimes allocate recognition and protection, thereby determining which lives are preserved and which are left behind, this article proposes the notion of an "ecology of abandonment" to capture the relational and affective entanglements through which abandonment is experienced in bodies and between people. Placing social policies in such an ecology allows us to question how care becomes conditional and how certain lives are kept on the margins of protection without ever being fully recognised.

From this perspective, the aim is to understand how individuals position themselves morally and emotionally in relation to what matters to them (Paperman & Laugier, 2011). For research, this implies taking people's perspectives seriously and treating them as "critiques," in the sense that Boltanski (2011) uses it. This is a central epistemological issue, given that the lives of people in precarious situations are rarely regarded as sources of knowledge (Foucault, 1997; Sarker, 2015).

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Switzerland (Leresche, 2022a), this article shows that some people interpret social policies not as instruments of care or protection, but as mechanisms of re-commodification, designed to reintegrate them into the labour market and reproduce existing economic relations. From this perspective, refusing social benefits becomes a way of resisting what is perceived as a form of conditional and productivist compassion.

By bringing this perspective to the fore, the article contributes to debates on compassionate futures by highlighting the limitations of institutional care when compassion is conditioned by economic productivity. It also shows that social rights are both mechanisms of protection and abandonment, in which lives are hierarchised (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013).

The article is structured as follows. In the theoretical section, I discuss the structural ambivalence within the welfare state between protection and activation, before presenting the Swiss institutional context in which the study is set. I then develop the concepts of non-take-up of benefits, re-commodification through work, infra-political critique, and care, leading to the notion of the ecology of abandonment, which is employed here as an analytical lens. In the methodological section, I describe the ethnographic approach, the field sites, and the construction of the analytical corpus. Then, in the three empirical sections, I examine respectively how critiques of wage labour shape practices of refusal, how activation policies and the re-commodification are experienced as forms of moral control, and how participants redirect care toward informal moral economies as alternatives to institutional dependency. In the discussion, I situate these findings within the framework of debates on compassionate futures, drawing on Tronto's concept of *homines curans* to interpret informal care practices as a different ontological starting point for social protection, while taking into account the risks of their instrumentalisation.

2. Theoretical Frame

Contemporary welfare states are organised around a structural tension. They are simultaneously designed to protect individuals from market risks and to reintegrate them into the market as quickly as possible. This double mandate of protection and activation produces an ambivalence at the heart of social policy that shapes not only how benefits are designed, but how they are experienced by those who receive them. Recent comparative work has shown how this tension has intensified under the pressure of workfare reforms across European welfare regimes (Janssens & Van Mechelen, 2022), tightening the conditions under which protection is granted and maintained. It is within this structural ambivalence that non-take-up can be analysed, as it becomes a reaction to the very conditions under which care is provided.

2.1. Non-Take-Up and Conditionality of Social Policies

Research on non-take-up of social rights has shown that a significant proportion of people entitled to benefits and services do not access the schemes intended for them (Van Oorschot, 1996). Initially understood as a technical or information problem, non-take-up was mainly explained by administrative complexity, stigmatisation, or lack of information (Currie, 2004; Hernanz et al., 2004; Warin, 2016). Economic approaches to non-take-up have emphasised rational cost-benefit calculations, stigma costs, and information asymmetries as primary explanatory factors (Van Oorschot, 1996), to develop policies to tackle non-take-up (Dubois & Ludwinek, 2015; Van Oorschot, 1998). While these perspectives capture important dimensions of non-take-up, they tend to presuppose a calculating subject whose relationship to social rights is primarily instrumental.

Some researchers have developed classifications of non-take-up to better distinguish not only the causes but also the appropriate responses to the phenomenon (Rode, 2009; Warin, 2014). Warin, in particular, has shown that non-take-up can be attributed to a lack of knowledge, or to the fact that entitlements are not being distributed, or even to situations where people know where and how to access a service (at least in part) but do not do so.

It is this form of non-take-up that my research has focused on—the non-demand—seeking to understand the critique in the act of foregoing, not applying for, or deciding to withdraw from a benefit. These situations are

not mutually exclusive and may occur in succession over time, as in the case of Jacques, who entered and left the social protection system on several occasions. The analysis here focuses on a specific subset: cases in which non-take-up was explicitly presented by participants as a critical response to the productivist logic inherent in social policy. It is important to note that non-take-up is rarely complete and permanent. People move in and out of the system, mostly partially, and depending on different factors, including emotions, states of mind, or the hope they have for the future. They combine partial claims with selective refusals, and negotiate their relationship to institutions over time. It is precisely this intermittent quality that makes non-demand difficult to observe and easy to misread as indifference or ignorance.

These dynamics take a specific form in the Swiss context, where the architecture of social protection is itself a site of conditionality and discretion. Switzerland has a highly decentralised welfare state, in which social protection is organised at several levels, in accordance with a federalist system. Unemployment insurance, for example, is a federal scheme that provides income support for a limited period, subject to prior contributions and active job-seeking. However, it is administered at the cantonal level by regional employment offices, whose advisers play a central role in assigning activation measures to beneficiaries, notably compulsory work placements and temporary jobs. Once unemployment insurance entitlements have been exhausted, individuals may access cantonal income support schemes (referred to as “integration income,” “social assistance,” or other terms depending on the canton), which constitute the last resort of social protection and are available only to certain categories of people. These cantonal schemes are means-tested, highly restrictive, and vary significantly across Switzerland’s 26 cantons in terms of benefit levels, conditionality requirements, repayment conditions, and the discretionary powers granted to social workers. Other forms of assistance may be provided in addition to income support (such as housing assistance or health insurance assistance), again at the discretion of the cantons. It is within this institutional framework, characterised by multi-level conditionality, strict activation requirements and significant local variations, that the experiences of non-take-up documented in this article must be understood.

It is important to point out that I use certain terms in different ways. In this article, social rights refer to the legal and political framework of established rights. Protection refers to the expected role of safeguarding individuals against market risks. Assistance refers to concrete last-resort mechanisms, where conditionality and institutional oversight are most visible. Benefits refer to the specific administrative procedures through which this protection is granted or denied. Support, on the other hand, is reserved for informal and collective forms of care that operate outside or alongside institutional mechanisms. Compassion refers to the moral and discursive framework through which institutional care is guided and legitimised.

2.2. Social Rights and Re-Commodification of Labour

To understand non-take-up as a form of critique, it is necessary to situate social policies within broader political-economic arrangements. Classical analyses of social citizenship emphasised the role of social rights in the de-commodification of labour (Castel, 2008; Marshall & Bottomore, 1996), that is, in protecting individuals from total dependence on the market. However, critical perspectives on political economy have shown that social protection also plays a central role in stabilising capitalist systems by reproducing the labour force and maintaining social order (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

Rather than suspending market logic, social policies often work to reintegrate individuals into the labour market by encouraging flexibility and employability. In this sense, social protection functions as a mechanism of re-commodification through labour, orienting beneficiaries towards market participation even when it is precarious, undesirable, or structurally limited. In this article, I therefore use the term “re-commodification” to refer to the process by which individuals are redirected into the market logic of labour, that is, treated as a commodity whose value depends on their employability (Polanyi, 2001).

From this perspective, social policies embody a specific moral economy (Fassin, 2012) in which care is legitimate to the extent that it supports economic integration. Dependence on social rights is presented as temporary and problematic, while autonomy is equated with paid employment. Individuals are encouraged to internalise these norms and align their aspirations with the demands of the labour market. But when social rights are experienced primarily as instruments of activation and control, they can lose their protective and caring significance for those who receive them.

2.3. Non-Take-Up as Infra-Political Criticism

Based on these propositions, this article conceptualises non-take-up as an infra-political critique (Scott, 1990) of social welfare capitalism. Rather than taking the form of explicit political mobilisation, these critiques are expressed through ordinary practices of refusal or distancing. Individuals may forego social benefits not because they reject the assistance itself, but because they contest the conditions under which these benefits are offered and the values it conveys (Leresche, 2019, 2022b).

This conceptualisation differs from both economic and administrative approaches to non-take-up. Where economic approaches explain non-take-up through cost-benefit calculations and administrative approaches focus on information barriers and institutional complexity, this article attends to a third register: the moral and political meaning that refusal carries for those who enact it. The difference is not merely analytical. A person who does not claim a benefit because the paperwork is too burdensome is making a different kind of statement—about the state, about care, about their own place in the social order—than a person who refuses because they experience the conditions attached to that benefit as an affront to their dignity or a betrayal of their values. Collapsing these registers into a single category of “non-take-up” obscures what is politically most significant about the latter.

It is important to emphasise that this approach does not romanticise non-take-up as resistance in itself. The ability to refuse social rights is socially situated and unevenly distributed, particularly according to gender, residency status, age, or physical condition. Non-take-up may express criticism in some contexts, while reflecting structural constraints or exclusion in others. This article therefore focuses on specific configurations in which refusal is explicitly formulated as a rejection of the capitalist rationales embedded in social policies.

2.4. Care and the Limits of Inclusion by the Social State

The concept of “compassionate futures” invites us to refocus our thinking on the role of care in social inclusion. However, as critical studies have shown, compassion is not a neutral or universally benevolent principle (Fassin, 2012). When institutionalised, assistance can serve as a governance tool, determining who

is eligible for assistance and under what conditions. In activation-oriented welfare states, compassion appears more conditional and selective, as it is granted to those who demonstrate a willingness to re-enter market labour. Compassionate discourses can thus coexist with practices perceived as morally demanding or punitive, particularly when inclusion is inextricably linked to economic performance. In this perspective, the welfare state does not merely provide care; it presents its actions as benevolence through a compassionate discourse, and it is this presentation that masks the conditionality, normative surveillance, and selective exclusions that structure access to protection in practice. The analytical value of the ecology of abandonment lies precisely in this gap between the compassionate framework of social policies and the experience of those for whom benevolence, distributed conditionally, turns into abandonment. The concept of abandonment is preferred here to that of exclusion because it captures the condition of being formally included whilst being structurally left behind.

The “compassionate futures,” as understood in this special issue, propose a different starting point. Rather than organising care around the figure of the autonomous and self-sufficient individual who must be temporarily supported until they regain their independence in the labour market, they highlight vulnerability, interdependence and mutual responsibility as constitutive features of social life. This article adopts this perspective, whilst examining the conditions under which it remains unfulfilled. The concept of *homines curans* developed by Tronto (2017) will be drawn upon in the discussion to analyse the alternative practices documented in the empirical sections.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Methodology and the Context of the Study

The empirical material used in this article comes from a doctoral research project conducted between 2016 and 2022 on non-take-up of social rights. Fieldwork was conducted in several locations in Switzerland, including neighbourhood community centres, associations offering hobbies or discussion activities, associations distributing food, rights advocacy associations, and informal networks critical of wage labour and economic growth.

The analysis presented here focuses on a specific subset of the data: people who framed their non-take-up of social benefits as part of a broader critique of capitalism and productivist social policies. This analytical choice reflects the article’s theoretical focus on capitalist critiques of non-take-up and does not aim to represent all the forms or experiences of non-take-up identified in the research.

3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through a combination of comprehensive interviews, participant observation, and field notes. In total, the research project as a whole comprises more than 50 in-depth interviews with people who have various relationships with social rights, as well as extensive observational material collected through regular participation in the field.

For this article, a subset of interviews and field notes were selected for analysis: Those where participants explicitly framed their non-take-up in relation to a broader critique of capitalist social organisation and wage

labour as a norm. This framing was identified both through direct discourse and through the broader narratives participants constructed around their relationship to work, dependency, and institutional assistance. Participants in this subset ranged in age from 20 to 72, with 13 persons identifying as women and 18 as men. The benefits concerned included unemployment insurance, income support (*revenu d'insertion*), housing assistance, family benefits, and health insurance contributions.

The interviews focused on the participants' trajectories, their experiences of social benefits, their perceptions of social welfare institutions and their reasons for refusing or renouncing certain rights. Particular attention was paid to how participants formulated their decisions and framed them within broader moral, ethical, political, or economic critiques. Participant observation made it possible to contextualize these narratives within everyday practices and social interactions.

All interviews were conducted in French, recorded with the participants' consent, and partially transcribed. The data were then classified by theme and keyword. Names and identifying details were anonymised to ensure the confidentiality of the interviewees.

3.3. Analytical Approach

The analysis is based on an inductive and interpretive approach. Interview transcripts and field notes were coded by theme, with particular attention paid to recurring motifs relating to work, autonomy, agency, control, power relations, dependency, care, and market participation.

The extracts presented in this article are illustrative of analytical patterns that recurred across the corpus. They were selected for their capacity to render visible the theoretical dynamics under examination, not as statistically representative instances.

These three analytical registers, critique of wage labour, rejection of re-commodification of labour, and the choice of alternative dependencies, emerged inductively from repeated patterns in the data. They represent distinct, though often overlapping, modes through which participants articulated their relationship to social rights. Some participants moved across all three registers within a single interview; others articulated only one or two. The distinctions drawn here are analytical rather than typological.

3.4. Positionality and Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted with particular attention to reflexivity. The author's position, engaged in long-term fieldwork and prior knowledge of certain areas, facilitated the development of trusting relationships with participants, while requiring continuous reflection on power relations and interpretation.

The aim of the analysis is not to evaluate individual choices or to promote non-take-up as the norm, but to understand how certain practices of refusal emerge as meaningful responses to the conditions in which social protection is organised.

4. Empirical Findings: Capitalist Critiques of Non-Take-Up

4.1. Criticising Paid Work as a Gateway to Social Rights

Access to social protection is mostly structured around contributions and demonstrated efforts to return to the labour market (Bonvin & Moachon, 2007). Some of the people interviewed describe activation measures, particularly reintegration labour programmes, as central components of this process of re-commodification. In that sense, they experience these programmes as coercive and out of step with their aspirations, as Jacques explained to me.

Jacques is 57 years old. He was laid off for economic reasons and continued to accumulate fixed-term contracts with his former employer while he was unemployed, which allowed him to renew his unemployment benefits for ten years. When I met him at the recreation centre, he was receiving income support (considered the last line of social protection), but his advisor, whom he describes as “the Gestapo,” regularly assigns him temporary jobs that he finds “useless, especially for someone who has no chance of finding a job.” Useless, because he thinks he has very little chance of finding a job less than ten years before retirement. Although he has already given up benefits, he has always rejoined the system without being convinced of its utility. He knows that the benefits will allow him to survive, but at the cost of a loss of meaning that seems problematic.

As a recipient of welfare benefits, Jacques is required to take on temporary jobs in the form of internships. In fact, welfare benefits, like unemployment benefits, are a social programmes that comes with reintegration measures. Recipients must demonstrate that they are capable of supporting themselves through employment and that they are self-sufficient in order to be able to leave the programmes.

For Jacques, it is these “work requirements for the unemployed, which cost the community money, that are stupid.” He vacillates between anger and resignation. He knows full well that he will not find a job in a labour market from which he is excluded, not only because of his age, but also because he has had many fixed-term jobs and his resume is marked by instability, making him appear unreliable to potential employers. One must grasp the irony of his situation, which he describes simply: “It makes no sense.” Jacques has also experienced the harsh realities of the job market, as illustrated by an employer who dismissed him because he had become too expensive due to his age, yet continues to employ him on an ad hoc basis through fixed-term contracts, which cost the company less and make Jacques a flexible member of the workforce, adaptable to the company’s economic needs. Unemployment then fulfilled its initial function, which is to maintain the active workforce.

Jacques’s case is not an isolated one within the sample. Several other participants described a similar pattern of cyclical entry into and exit from the social welfare system, in which the requirement to prove one’s employability is experienced as both futile and humiliating. The traumatic experience with the labour market and employers is also a constant feature in most of these stories. What varies from one to another is the extent to which this experience is explicitly framed as a critique of the system and not a personal failure.

Like Jacques, the concerned people questioned the assumption that paid work is the main route to autonomy and social inclusion. Rather than seeing employment as emancipatory, they describe paid work as a source

of dependence on employers, the fluctuating labour market, and institutional norms defining what counts as a “legitimate” life trajectory. In this context, employment-related social rights are not perceived as protective, but as reinforcing an obligation to conform to labour norms.

In these stories, paid work is not merely an economic activity, but also a normative institution that shapes access to care and protection. In this sense, social policies do not challenge the primacy of the labour market, but actively contribute to its reproduction by presenting social rights as transitional benefits geared towards employment. For those who reject this framework, non-take-up becomes a means of challenging the implicit moral economy of the welfare state, in which protection is conditional upon a willingness to participate in paid work.

This critique is expressed through everyday practices of refusal or selective engagement with institutions, and in that sense, constitutes an infra-political critique (Scott, 1990). It also reveals a tension at the heart of compassionate futures. Because when compassionate rhetoric allows access to care to be made conditional on productivity, that care is perceived not as support, but as a constraint—its compassionate framing functioning precisely to render the conditionality invisible. These stories highlight a first dimension of the “ecology of abandonment,” namely a system of institutional assistance organised around participation in the labour market, such that those who cannot or will not conform to its norms are structurally left behind. Jacques’s repeated comings and goings within the social welfare system do not constitute an individual failure, but a structural effect of a welfare system whose logic is activation rather than care.

4.2. Rejecting Re-Commodification of Labour Through Social Policies

Beyond criticising paid work as a normative gateway to social rights, the people I met also expressed a broader rejection of what they see as the effects of the re-commodification of social policies themselves. Benefits are then not experienced as safety nets, but as mechanisms that reorganise life around employability and economic value.

Several people pointed out the conditions to continue receiving benefits. Many point out that time spent outside the paid labour market must be constantly justified by demonstrating effort and compliance with institutional expectations, which entails constant assessment and ongoing justification of one’s choices and motivations.

Stéphanie’s example reveals the gap between what social rights are based on (enabling people to have a minimum level of resources), their application (gaining independence through employment), and the meaning that individuals attach to them. Stéphanie is 30 years old and a single mother to an 8-year-old boy. She worked for 18 years as an employee in a hair salon, but she suffers from recurring health problems and was laid off. She had been unemployed for several months when I met her. As she is unable to find work in her field, she has to reorient herself and takes on several internships in the form of temporary jobs, which are supposed to open the door to a fixed-term contract. Stéphanie is very clear about what she wants to do with her professional life. She is raising her son alone, so she is looking for a job with hours that fit her life as a single mother. She asks her advisor at the regional employment office if she can do work placements in after-school programmes, but her counsellor continually refuses this request, arguing she does not have the professional skills: “She told me that I would need a lot of luck to get hired without a degree.” She then finds her work placement in retirement

homes, where the hours are much more restrictive, but where, according to her advisor, she would have a better chance of finding a job.

Stéphanie's advisor's goal is to get her out of the programme by re-entering the job market and, thus, gaining economic independence. However, Stéphanie's social circumstances (as a single parent) and the meaning she attaches to paid work are not taken into account. She wants to leave the programme to find a job, but not at the cost of another dependency, that on her mother, who will have to look after her son during her demanding working hours in a nursing home.

It is for all these reasons that Stéphanie decides to leave the programme and forge her own path back into work, starting with voluntary work and then moving on to paid work placements, in the hope of finding stability through employment.

Stéphanie's situation is echoed in several other stories in the corpus, particularly among women with family responsibilities, for whom activation measures consistently failed to take into account the time and relationship constraints associated with unpaid care work. In these cases, the gap between the institutional logic of reintegration and the participants' actual living conditions was experienced not only as an inconvenience, but also as a form of institutional indifference to the real demands of care work. This observation is particularly pronounced among single mothers, who, in my sample, have access only to precarious and low-paying jobs, which questions the gendered nature of non-take-up.

These stories highlight a tension between the stated objectives of social policies and their actual effects. While welfare programmes are designed to encourage inclusion, their re-commodifying orientation prevents them from functioning as spaces of care. Non-take-up then becomes a means of challenging these market logics in the intimate and temporal dimensions of life, such as how time is used, what activities are valued, and what forms of dependency are considered acceptable.

Stéphanie's account illuminates a second dimension of the ecology of abandonment: the way in which activation measures, by failing to account for the actual conditions of participants' lives (care responsibilities, temporal constraints, aspirations), produce a form of institutional indifference that is experienced as more coercive than protective. When compliance with activation requirements comes at the cost of other dependencies, on family members, on unsustainable working hours, the welfare state redistributes vulnerability, instead of reducing it.

4.3. Choosing Other Forms of Dependence: Autonomy, Care, and the Moral Economies of Refusal

Significantly, the people I met favour other modes of dependence that they consider more legitimate or less intrusive. The use of family support, informal solidarity networks, forms of shared housing, or collective projects is often described as preferable, placing agency and self-determination back at the centre of their lives.

Refusing social benefits does not therefore imply a rejection of dependence as such. On the contrary, dependence is an inevitable and constitutive dimension of social life for the people I met. What was at stake in their practices of non-take-up was not independence in the absolute sense, but the possibility of choosing forms of dependence perceived as less intrusive or more compatible with their values and ways of life.

In neighbourhoods, families organise themselves by creating collective clothing banks or redistributing food baskets. From this perspective, several of the people interviewed explicitly reject the idea that autonomy should be equated with detachment from others or economic self-sufficiency. On the contrary, they formulate a relational conception of autonomy, rooted in the ability to organise one's life without constant institutional supervision. It is in this perspective that Léo says in an interview: "I want to live outside this capitalist network. I don't take the bus, I don't want a phone contract, I don't want any of that stuff that makes me a little obedient sheep."

These alternative dependencies take shape in concrete, everyday practices of mutual care that participants have developed in response to the inadequacy or intrusiveness of institutional support.

In one neighbourhood where I conducted fieldwork, an informal clothing and toy exchange had been set up in the basement of a residential building. The principle is simple: Everything is free, the exchange is not formalised, and you do not need to bring something to take something in return. The space had its own rhythm, its own economy of attention and trust, entirely outside the framework of institutional social work. Nour, whom I'd met through a food bank, took me there one afternoon.

Nour is a single mother raising her three children on her own. She works as a housekeeper in offices in the evenings. She is constantly confronted by social workers and closely monitored by child protective services, who accuse her of putting her daughters at risk. Her daughters have diabetes, and she sometimes has to bring them to her workplace in the evenings so she doesn't have to leave them home alone. She wants to work full-time, but the more she tries to gain independence, the more social services force her to reduce her hours, arguing that she must prioritise caring for her daughters. She is therefore on welfare, with all the constraints that entails, and regularly leaves the programme only to return a few months later. As we walked through the neighbourhood, she told me she'd just found a job, which she said would enable her to "get off welfare." It was she who took me to this shelter to show me "another way of living together."

A similar logic was at work in the story of Julie, whom I had known as a former neighbour before encountering her at a food distribution point. She told me that the bread she collected from a nearby bakery had gradually become something shared across her entire building. "There's often way too much," she said, "but it's nice, we end up talking too." What began as an individual strategy for reducing food costs had quietly become a small infrastructure of neighbourly connection, operating entirely outside any formal programme or institution.

Gardening, too, featured as a recurring practice across several of the networks I encountered. Vanessa, who was involved in a degrowth collective, described it in those terms: "Maybe there's no collective reach, but there is a shared experience. Gardening together, for example, that can bring about change." For her, the value of these practices lay precisely in their ordinariness, their resistance to being instrumentalised as "alternatives," a word that, as Mathilde put it elsewhere, implies doing things "within the framework, just slightly differently," whereas what some people were reaching for was something else entirely: "another way of life," "another world."

What these practices share is a different organisation of care, one that does not pass through institutional gatekeeping, or the obligation to demonstrate employability. They are forms of what Laugier (2013) calls the maintenance of the world: the ongoing, often invisible work of keeping things liveable, repairing what

tears, attending to what is needed in the specific places where people actually live. In this sense, they do not merely compensate for the withdrawal of institutional protection. They enact a different understanding of dependency, that is based on reciprocity and chosen obligation rather than contractual compliance.

From an analytical perspective, these narratives highlight the importance of distinguishing between different regimes of dependency. This is particularly true for women, who are subject to cross-cutting regimes of dependency: on their “husbands,” in a society built on a patriarchal model, characterised in particular by unequal access to the labour market and economic independence (Togni, 2015), on their families (through state control of bodies and care resources), and on the state through its mechanisms for controlling the people in precarious situations.

By prioritising market-oriented autonomy and framing dependency as a temporary deviation to be corrected, social policies marginalise alternative ways of organising care. Choosing other forms of dependency therefore constitutes a critical stance towards inclusion by the welfare state as it is currently configured. This challenges the idea that social protection necessarily enhances autonomy and well-being, and highlights how care can only be experienced as meaningful when it allows individuals to retain control over their rhythms, relationships, commitments and moral choices.

Taken together, the empirical findings presented in Sections 4.1 to 4.3 show that non-take-up, in these contexts, is less a disengagement from society than a negotiation of the terms of inclusion. By rejecting forms of assistance perceived as re-commodifying and morally demanding, and instead relying on alternative dependencies, participants articulate an infra-political critique of welfare states in which compassion remains conditional on economic conformity.

5. Discussion: Conditional Compassion and the Limits of Inclusion by the Welfare State

We have seen that the institutional care promoted by the rhetoric of the welfare state is in fact conditional and closely aligned with capitalist rationales of productivity and market participation. In this context, non-take-up reveals not a failure of inclusion, but a tension at the very heart of social welfare systems.

The three strands of critique presented in Sections 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 highlight three interdependent dimensions of what this article terms an “ecology of abandonment,” which are the normative centrality of wage labour as a condition for receiving support, the re-commodification effects of activation policies on participants’ lives and relationships, and the shift of protection toward informal moral economies. In this reading, non-take-up is a situated response to structural conditions of unequal access to social programmes.

The ability to employ non-take-up as a form of critique is not, however, equally accessible to all. It presupposes a specific configuration of resources that is itself unequally distributed. Access to informal solidarity networks, alternative housing solutions, or degrowth communities requires social capital and relational ties that not everyone possesses. Gender shapes these conditions in a particular way. The informal care practices documented in Section 4.3 are disproportionately carried out by women, whose ability to refuse institutional assistance is simultaneously limited by care responsibilities that the welfare state does not recognise and by the gendered division of labour within the very alternative networks they help sustain. Many of the women interviewed had access only to precarious jobs in the care or domestic service sectors.

Jobs that are poorly paid, incompatible with family life, and insufficient to guarantee financial independence. For single mothers in particular, institutional dependence is a structural condition. The regulation of family arrangements by the welfare state, through means-tested conditions that take household composition into account, activation requirements that ignore the time constraints of single parenthood, and moral oversight of domestic life, makes breaking free not only difficult, but sometimes structurally impossible. Several women interviewed in this study described feeling trapped not only by poverty, but also by the specific form of control that dependence on social assistance imposes on their ability to organise their own lives and those of their children. Residence status and legal precariousness further limit the possibility of refusal. For residents with precarious statuses or those whose rights depend on proving their compliance, non-take-up entails risks that are qualitatively different from those faced by Swiss citizens or long-term residents. While their ability to opt out is constrained by their room for maneuver, it is nonetheless essential to take seriously their perspectives on state mechanisms or the capitalist system, as well as the strategies they employ to circumvent state control or create alternatives to the constraints that are also inscribed in their bodies. The agency of the people interviewed cannot be reduced to the capacity to formally refuse benefits. It also manifests itself in multiple and often sub-political registers, such as in the way they present themselves at meetings with counselors, formulate their needs strategically, withhold certain information while revealing others, mobilise parallel support networks, or even physically resisting normative injunctions, as in the case of Jacques, who refuses to have his teeth repaired not because he could not request it, but because he has ceased to conform to what the labour market expects of a presentable body.

That means that this agency is always situated and relational and that it must not be romanticised, as the costs of resistance are unevenly distributed according to gender, legal status, and access to alternative resources. What this research highlights is the everyday resilience of people who, in conditions of structural neglect, continue to form a conception of the world as it is but also as it should be.

Non-take-up as a form of critique is also shaped by temporal dynamics. The repeated back-and-forth movements of the individuals interviewed between refusal and reintegration illustrate how what may function as a critical stance at a given moment can become unsustainable over time. The ecology of abandonment is thus a process that unfolds over time, as Auyero (2012) demonstrated in his book on waiting as a mode of domination. Non-take-up, in this sense, is not a stable but a precarious position, sustained by networks and resources that are themselves vulnerable to the very structural forces that make it necessary.

Finally, the practices documented in Section 4.3 are not merely coping strategies in the face of institutional withdrawal. In light of Tronto's (2017) concept of *homines curans*, they constitute a different ontological starting point for reflecting on social protection. While the Swiss activation regime bases its interventions on the figure of the autonomous, self-reliant individual—the *homo economicus*—some participants in this study have organised their lives around a fundamentally different conception of the human being, defined instead by interdependence and vulnerability. When Julie's bread-sharing gradually becomes a neighbourhood practice, or when the exchange of clothing operates on the principle that taking does not require giving in return, what emerges is precisely the kind of continuous cycle of care that produces, in Tronto's terms, the virtues of trust and solidarity, which can hardly be cultivated in a system of distinction and conditionality.

Tronto (2017) identifies three risks associated with care-based alternatives: provincialism, the risk of paternalistic substitution of judgment, and neoliberal co-optation, that is, the reinterpretation of informal care practices as evidence that groups can do without the welfare state.

Identifying these risks is not a reason to dismiss what the participants are doing. Rather, it is a prerequisite for taking it seriously. The non-demand documented in this study is neither a retreat into pure self-sufficiency nor a romantic escape from capitalist social relations. As Laugier (2013) suggests, it is an insistence on sustaining the world carried out under conditions of structural abandonment, and with an awareness of one's own fragility. What distinguishes it from a simple alternative economy is precisely that its practitioners do not claim to have escaped the system. Rather, they claim to be building something within the cracks of a system. Practices of non-demand thus highlight alternative moral economies in which dependency is acknowledged and negotiated outside institutional frameworks. That means the problem is not dependency as such, but the definition of legitimate dependency embedded in social inclusion.

The ethnographic material provides empirical substance to what the ecology of abandonment looks like from the perspective of those affected. In this perspective, abandonment captures the condition of being formally included while being structurally left behind. For example, receiving care that fails to recognise one's actual needs, or being required to undertake integration measures whilst being excluded from the labour market. This distinction is analytically significant because it shifts the focus, on the one hand, to the lived experience of care (rather than the mechanisms that prevent access) and, on the other hand, to the failure of institutions to provide care that is worth claiming (rather than the failure of individuals to assert their rights).

From the perspective of a future marked by compassion, the findings presented here suggest that rethinking social protection requires more than simply expanding access to existing mechanisms or improving their efficiency. It requires a different starting point with the *homines curans*, people who are already caring for one another, rather than the productivist subject who must be reintegrated into the labour market. In concrete terms, this points in three directions. First, reducing conditionality: Activation requirements that make support contingent on employability undermine the protective function of social rights and should be replaced by less conditional forms of protection, whether through basic income schemes, automatic entitlements to benefits, or a reduction in administrative burdens. Second, recognising multiple dependencies: The informal care practices documented in this article deserve to be recognised and supported rather than exploited. A welfare state attentive to futures marked by compassion would ask how public provision could complement rather than replace or exploit them, while remaining vigilant against the risks of reproducing gendered care burdens in the process. Third, listen to refusal: Non-demand, when listened to seriously as an expression of critiques, constitutes a form of knowledge about the welfare state that is currently systematically dismissed. Making room for this knowledge, for example in policy evaluation, participatory design, or the governance of social services, is in itself a prerequisite for a future marked by compassion.

6. Conclusion

This article analysed the non-demand of social rights as a critique of the capitalist system that tends to shape contemporary social policies. The analysis showed that refusal or renouncing can express a challenge to forms of institutional compassion conditioned by activation and employability.

At the same time, the analysis emphasises that refusal does not imply a rejection of care or interdependence. Practices of non-demand are often accompanied by a reconfiguration of dependencies toward informal or collective forms of support, which this article has termed alternative moral economies of care. These

practices remain largely invisible to social protection institutions oriented toward market integration, and their distribution is itself unequal. In fact, the possibility to refuse or renounce is shaped by gender, legal status, access to solidarity networks and material resources. Non-demand must therefore be understood in light of its social and structural conditions.

Situating these dynamics within an ecology of abandonment sheds light on the structural conditions in which institutional compassion coexists with experiences of neglect. According to Fassin (2012), it is a political emotion that governs the recognition of vulnerability and determines who is deemed worthy of care, under what conditions, and in exchange for what. This distinction is important for the argument developed here, because it is precisely because social protection institutions present themselves in the register of care that their conditionality can produce abandonment. The ecology of abandonment is not the absence of care, but its conditional distribution, structured by a compassionate discourse in such a way as to generate exclusion, normative injunctions, and moral surveillance for those who cannot or will not comply.

In that sense, if refusal can constitute a form of critique, then policymakers cannot remain indifferent to what people refuse. Taking this seriously, in policy evaluation, participatory design, and the governance of social services, is in itself a condition for rethinking social inclusion beyond conditional compassion.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Due to their sensitive and personal nature, the ethnographic data supporting this article are not publicly available in order to protect participants' confidentiality.

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Social Workers' Well-Being as a Foundation for Compassionate Futures in Vulnerability Contexts in Portugal

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Abstract

This study examines the psychological well-being of social workers in Portugal and the emotional, ethical, and institutional dynamics that shape their professional practice within contexts of vulnerability. Drawing on an integrated mixed-methods design, the research combines a nationwide survey ($N = 1389$) using the World Health Organization Well-Being Index (WHO-5) with thirteen in-depth semi-structured interviews analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. Quantitative findings show that most professionals report adequate well-being, but 26.3% present low scores, mainly associated with fatigue, reduced energy, and limited rest. Qualitative results deepen this picture, highlighting six interrelated themes: mutual vulnerability in caring relationships, emotional labour and psychosocial strain, institutional barriers to ethical practice, tensions between ideal and real conditions of care, strategies for sustaining professional resilience, professional recognition and collective mobilisation. Participants describe profound emotional resonance with service users, experiences of burnout, and a chronic sense of powerlessness stemming from structural inequalities, resource scarcity, fragmented services, and low professional recognition. Care emerges as relational and ethically demanding, yet structurally constrained. The study argues that workers' well-being is inseparable from organisational cultures and socio-political conditions. Individual coping strategies mitigate strain but cannot compensate for systemic shortcomings. Fostering compassionate institutional ecosystems is therefore an ethical and political imperative.

Keywords

collective well-being; compassionate futures; social work; social workers

1. Introduction

In a global context marked by ecological, social, and ethical crises, a set of frameworks has emerged to overcome the hegemony of individualism and instrumental rationality. Among these proposals, the concepts of compassionate futures and *homo curans* (Moratalla, 2022) stand out, both of which are guided by the centrality of care, empathy, and human interdependence. These approaches contrast with the logic of *homo economicus* (Alkan, 2020; Hudík, 2015), which conceives human beings as rational and self-centred agents oriented toward benefit maximisation and efficiency. Scholars have criticised this model for neglecting affectivity, empathy, and mutual care.

The *homo curans* paradigm repositioned vulnerability as a structural human condition rather than a weakness (Di Somma, 2022; Nullens & van Nes, 2022b). This perspective fosters a relational approach to care where interdependence and shared vulnerability become central to imagining more just futures (Nullens & van Nes, 2022a, 2022b).

At the same time, futures studies argue that collectively imagining more just futures requires an ethical, critical, and creative orientation (Bell, 2017; Kuosa, 2011). Compassionate futures thus emerge as alternatives that call upon moral imagination, integrating care, relational justice, and institutional empathy. This proposal draws on Gopin's (2021) concept of compassionate reasoning, which combines moral reasoning with practices of listening, presence, and compassion as forms of resistance to social and emotional polarisation.

Discussions about care have become increasingly relevant in the health sciences and social work. Watson's transpersonal care theory, analysed by Kinsella et al. (2025), reaffirms that the therapeutic relationship, empathic presence, and active listening are not technical accessories, but structuring elements of the act of caring. Studies on vulnerability show that recognising both others' and one's own fragility creates more humanising bonds (Torres Almeida & Rodrigues, 2018). Care thus emerges as an ethical and relational practice that exceeds technical performance (M. Carvalho, Teles, et al., 2023).

In Southern European welfare regimes, marked by familism and fragmented public provision (Ferrera, 1996), social work operates within hybrid arrangements among the State, the market, and the family. This structural context makes care, relational interdependence, and vulnerability central categories of practice, reinforcing the pertinence of the *homo curans* paradigm as both an ethical and institutional reorientation.

Criticism of *homo economicus* (Fuchs & Lingnau, 2024; Urbina & Ruiz-Villaverde, 2019) underscores the need to rethink how science, economics, and politics are conceived. *Homo curans* thus presents a realistic and transformative proposal for the reorganisation of social systems based on mutual recognition, care, and institutional empathy, which are indispensable foundations for building more inclusive and sustainable futures.

2. Psychological Well-Being and Emotional Labour in Social Work

Social work is a relational profession, requiring its professionals to have a high capacity for emotional management. Hochschild (2012) defines emotional labour as the regulation of feelings and expressions that enable individuals to respond to institutional expectations, distinguishing between surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting involves modifying external expression without changing internal feelings. This

process generates emotional dissonance and exhaustion. It consequently increases the risk of burnout. Studies show that this type of behaviour is associated with exhaustion, subjective alienation, depressive symptoms, and lower job satisfaction (Merighi & Dinis, 2008; Wang et al., 2016). Deep acting, on the other hand, seeks to genuinely align feelings with organisational norms, promoting more authentic interactions and greater emotional coherence, although it also involves significant effort (Riforgiate et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2025). In emotionally demanding professions, such as social work, the cumulative effects of this work tend to spill over into private life, disrupting work-family balance and psychological well-being (Ballentine & Woo, 2021).

Multiple factors influence social workers' psychological well-being. One central factor is emotional overload stemming from continuous contact with people in situations of vulnerability. For the purposes of this study, psychological well-being refers to a multidimensional process involving autonomy, positive relationships, personal growth, life purpose, self-acceptance, and the ability to manage one's environment, reflecting the individual's full functioning (Ryff, 1989). Evidence shows that high emotional demands, combined with weak institutional recognition, are related to lower levels of well-being (Lloyd et al., 2002; Maslach & Leiter, 1999), a finding reinforced by recent research on emotional labour and burnout (M. Carvalho, Cunha, et al., 2023; Ribeiro & Teles, 2025; Teles et al., 2019, 2026). Within the Portuguese context, Merighi and Dinis (2008) showed that surface acting strongly predicts emotional exhaustion. Among the protective factors identified are social support among colleagues (Pisaniello et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2016), professional autonomy (Hussein, 2018; Wu & Qi, 2025), work-family balance (Ballentine & Woo, 2021), and ongoing training in emotional regulation (Robinson, 2025). Recognising the centrality of emotional labour to the profession's well-being is thus essential for sustainable and compassionate practices.

Social intervention takes place amidst persistent structural inequalities such as poverty, violence, and migration. These conditions are continuously produced and reproduced by broader socioeconomic and political systems (Dominelli, 2002; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Fraser, 1997). Social vulnerability, conceptualised from the multidimensional perspective proposed by Spini and Vacchiano (2023), emerges from the intersection between individual factors and structural determinants. In line with this view, Ouellet et al. (2024) advocate integrated territorial approaches to mitigate inequalities, especially in the field of health. The concept of structural vulnerability (Bourgois et al., 2017) reinforces this reading by highlighting how institutional norms, public policies, and power relations produce suffering and restrict access to social protection (Schiff, 2024). Thus, social work intervention requires a critical view of these structures, guided by transformative responses and anchored in human rights (Aksha & Emrich, 2024; Carriquiriborde, 2012).

In this scenario, social workers play a fundamental mediating role between individual needs and broader political dynamics (Disney et al., 2022; Wincott & Crawshaw, 2006). Integrated community models have proven effective in reducing inequalities (Khan et al., 2023), although barriers such as institutional prejudice, stigmatisation, and service fragmentation persist (Beltran et al., 2022; Stajduhar et al., 2019).

Addressing complex vulnerabilities also requires institutions to provide care for the professionals working within them. Hence, the relevance of compassionate institutional ecosystems, which integrate recognition, support, and relational autonomy (Araújo et al., 2016; de la Bellacasa, 2017; Honneth, 1996). Research shows that perceived organisational support (Zhang & Xie, 2025; Zheng et al., 2024) and role clarity (Orgambidez & Almeida, 2020; Orgambidez et al., 2022) are central factors for well-being, contributing to reducing burnout

and compassion fatigue. Interventions such as Compassion Circles have proven to be effective in regulating teams' emotions (Clark et al., 2022). However, these practices often remain constrained by rigid hierarchies and control-centred institutional cultures (Pansini et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the research provides an in-depth understanding of how the psychological well-being of Portuguese social workers relates to their care practices in vulnerable contexts. The choice of this approach is based on the need to triangulate empirical data, validated instruments, and experiential narratives, ensuring a comprehensive response to the research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

This study organised the methodological design into two complementary phases: a quantitative phase and a qualitative phase. The quantitative phase comprised a set of sociodemographic questions (age, gender, years of experience, type of employer, and area of activity), allowing the results to be contextualised. The World Health Organization Well-Being Index (WHO-5) was also applied, recognised for its psychometric robustness and widespread use in occupational contexts, including in Portugal (P. Carvalho et al., 2025). This self-response instrument, consisting of five items, assesses the presence of positive feelings over the last 14 days, with five response categories: *all the time*, *most of the time*, *more than half the time*, *less than half the time*, and *never*.

The survey was administered online through the SurveyMonkey platform. Participants were invited by email using institutional contacts available on the Carta Social platform. Inclusion criteria were limited to licensed social workers practising in Portugal at the time of data collection. The sample was non-probabilistic, combining convenience and snowball sampling. Quantitative analysis was performed using SPSS software, employing descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies).

The qualitative phase took place between October and November 2025 and involved semi-structured interviews with social workers who work with vulnerable groups. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring diversity in professional profiles and practice contexts identified in the quantitative phase.

Theoretical saturation was assessed throughout the analysis. After initial coding, a table of provisional categories was created. From the 9th interview onwards, stability of the central codes was observed. Interviews 10–12 reinforced existing categories without generating new analytical dimensions. To confirm stability, a final participant with a distinct professional profile was included. Two researchers independently coded the 13th interview. No new codes or relevant properties emerged, confirming saturation. The interviews, lasting 35–50 minutes, were conducted via videoconference, according to participants' availability. All were recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed. Qualitative analysis was conducted using MAXQDA software, following a reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), beginning with open coding and subsequent organisation into thematic axes.

The study fully complied with the ethical principles applicable to research involving human subjects, including the Declaration of Helsinki and current national guidelines. It was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Miguel Torga Institute of Higher Education (CE-P62–25).

4. Results

4.1. Sample Characterisation

The sample for this study comprises 1,389 social workers practising in Portugal, representing a wide range of sociodemographic and professional diversity. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 60+, with most aged 40–49 years (35.9%) and 50–59 years (26.1%). The majority were female (94.7%). Regarding marital status, 60% were married or living in a civil partnership, 28.7% were single, and 9.4% separated or divorced. Most held a bachelor's degree (63.5%), followed by postgraduate diplomas (19.3%) and master's degrees (16.4%). Employment was predominantly as salaried employees (95.8%), with 2.3% self-employed. Most worked in the private sector (50.6%) or the public sector (44.2%; see Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents.

	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
20–29 yrs	145	10.44%
30–39 yrs	270	19.44%
40–49 yrs	499	35.93%
50–59 yrs	362	26.06%
60+ yrs	113	8.14%
Gender		
Female	1316	94.70%
Male	72	5.20%
Other	1	0.10%
Marital Status		
Married or living in a civil partnership	834	60.00%
Widowed	14	1.00%
Separated or divorced	131	9.40%
Single	398	28.70%
Other (specify)	12	0.90%
Educational Attainment		
Bachelor's degree	882	63.50%
Postgraduate diploma	268	19.30%
Master's degree	228	16.40%
Doctoral degree	9	0.60%
Postdoctoral	2	0.10%
Current Employment Status		
Seeking first job	2	0.10%
Employee (working for an employer)	1330	95.80%
Self-employed/Entrepreneur	32	2.30%
Unemployed	3	0.20%
Retired	4	0.30%
Other	18	1.30%

Table 2. (Cont.) Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents.

	Frequency	Percentage
Employment Sector		
Public sector	614	44.20%
Private sector	703	50.60%
Both (public and private)	72	5.20%

4.2. Quantitative Results: Levels of Well-Being Among Social Workers in Portugal

The descriptive analysis of the five items of the WHO-5 reveals a moderately positive overall trend, but with worrying variations. The item that obtained the highest percentage of positive responses (sum of *all the time* and *most of the time*) was “I felt cheerful and in a good mood,” with 38 (2.7%) and 538 (38.7%) responses, respectively, totaling 41.4% of participants expressing a recurring positive emotional state. In contrast, the item with the highest incidence of negative responses was “I woke up feeling fresh and rested,” with 557 (40.1%) of participants indicating that they felt this way *less than half the time*, and 80 (5.8%) that they *never* felt this way, revealing signs of significant fatigue.

A further concerning indicator is reflected in the item “I felt active and energetic,” where only 38 (2.7%) responded *all the time*, and 433 (31.2%) responded *most of the time*, contrasting with 359 (25.8%) who indicated this feeling *less than half the time*. This result suggests a significant level of fatigue or exhaustion among professionals.

In the item “I felt calm and peaceful,” 432 (31.1%) responded positively in the highest categories, while 419 (30.2%) reported this feeling *less than half the time*, suggesting a high level of emotional tension. Finally, regarding the perception of interest in daily activities—“My daily life has been filled with things that interest me”—80 (5.8%) indicated this experience *all the time*, and 453 (32.6%) indicated it was *most of the time*, which points to significant level of work engagement, although 356 participants (25.6%) indicated that this experience occurs *less than half the time* or *never*.

Based on the sum of the five items and the recommended WHO-5 cut-off threshold, participants were classified into two groups. One group showed adequate psychological well-being. The other scored below 50%, indicating risk of poor well-being. The WHO-5 data show that 1,024 social workers (73.7%) had adequate levels of well-being, while 365 (26.3%) had low levels, indicative of risk of psychological distress, as shown in Figure 1. These results suggest that, although most professionals demonstrate resilience and positive experiences, a substantial proportion of the class shows signs of exhaustion, fatigue, and a lack of tranquillity or rest, factors that can compromise the continuity of ethical and compassionate care, inherent to the practice of social work.

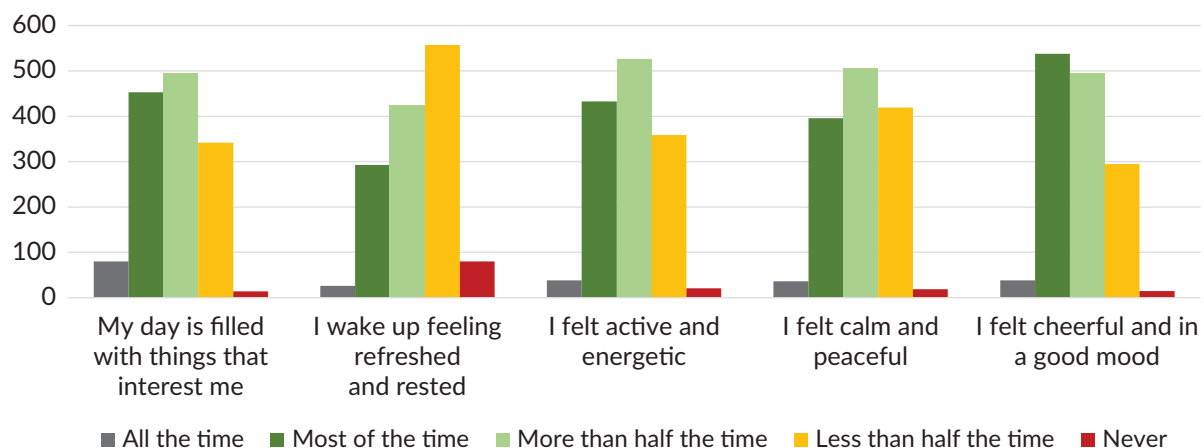


Figure 1. Descriptive analysis of the five items in the WHO-5.

4.3. Qualitative Results: The Centrality of Narratives

The thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews reveals the complexity of caregiving, where empathy, institutional constraints, and emotional involvement are intertwined. Six dimensions emerged from the analysis:

1. Mutual vulnerability in caregiving
2. Emotional labor and psychosocial well-being
3. Institutional structures and care ecosystems
4. Ideal of care and utopia
5. Individual and collective strategies for professional sustainability
6. Professional recognition and collective mobilisation

4.3.1. Mutual Vulnerability in Caregiving

Mutual vulnerability manifests as a profound emotional resonance between the professional and the service user. Testimonials such as “our vulnerabilities are part of us, so it is difficult for them not to be present in our practice” (Ent02) and the report that “I was somehow mirroring the victims’ lives in my own, and that was wearing me down immensely” (Ent07) demonstrate the porosity of the boundary between the “professional self” and the “personal self,” requiring a constant effort of self-regulation.

Institutional powerlessness manifests as frustration with the scarcity of available responses and the perception of the ineffectiveness of intervention, regardless of the professional’s commitment. A sense of moral responsibility exacerbates this powerlessness. Ent01 expresses the dilemma: “At times, I am unable to provide immediate answers to help...and this causes me great demotivation, and I really feel this as a great vulnerability as a social worker.” Ent08 reinforces this structural powerlessness: “There is a way to do it, not to be prevented because the system and organisations do not allow it.” The accounts described above point to a structural vulnerability that intensifies emotional exhaustion.

Empathy is recognised as a fundamental tool, although it also involves emotional exposure. Putting oneself in the other person's shoes strengthens the bond, but when it is excessive, it can increase the professional's suffering and compromise impartiality. The interviewees recognise the ambivalence: "I always try to put myself in the other person's shoes...because I also think it is very important as a social worker" (Ent01), or, "in order to be good social workers, we always have to put ourselves in the other person's shoes. Without that, it is not possible" (Ent10). This empathy, when combined with similar personal experiences, enhances identification and increases the emotional burden (as in the case of professionals who are also informal caregivers, like Ent10).

Emotional resonance involves the involuntary, implicit activation of affections aroused by encountering the reality of the other. The user's emotion echoes in the professional, awakening memories, fears, or experiences of their own, as evidenced in reports such as: "It was more difficult at times when I identified with the situations...it resonated more" (Ent02) and the report that the resonance led to burnout (Ent13), demonstrating the psychological impact. Often inevitable, this resonance contributes to accumulated wear and tear and, in some cases, to the need to interrupt professional activity.

Together, the subcategories reveal a persistent tension between an ideal of care—humane, empathetic, and person-centred—and a reality marked by organisational rigidity, overload, and insufficient resources. This tension fuels feelings of vulnerability and challenges emotional balance, generating frustration, anxiety, and guilt. The expression "what if it were me?" (Ent01) captures the experience of mutual vulnerability: When caring for others, professionals confront their own humanity and the possibility of role reversal. Recognising this shared vulnerability is an essential step in developing institutional responses that can strengthen, support, and welcome caregivers.

4.3.2. Emotional Labour and Psychosocial Well-Being

The results show strong emotional involvement among professionals working under precarious institutional conditions and require team support and emotional self-regulation to sustain their practice. Emotional exhaustion is evident across all testimonies, stemming from continuous exposure to others' suffering, work overload, and pressure to respond to needs that far exceed available resources. Ent06 states that they are "going through a process of professional burnout," emphasising the "overload...which is very exhausting." Ent05 describes the profession as "rapidly wearing," referring to being "immensely worn down by the suffering of those I cannot help." This wear and tear spills over into personal life, with the risk of venting irritation in the family context (Ent01).

Team cohesion and support emerge as essential protective factors. Colleague support alleviates the emotional burden and reinforces a sense of belonging. Ent01 points out: "Thank God, we are a very close-knit team...even when we are not feeling well." Ent08 reinforces this importance by stating that mutual support was "very, very important." This informal network of solidarity becomes vital, especially when institutional support mechanisms fail.

Supervision is perceived as an indispensable therapeutic space for emotional alignment. However, its systemic absence is denounced as a form of institutional negligence that exacerbates burnout. While some participants value monthly sessions for preserving well-being, others highlight a chronic lack of this support

during critical professional moments. Ent01 values monthly supervision for its contribution to psychological well-being. In contrast, Ent06 mentions the lack of supervision in institutions, and Ent13 reports having felt this lack intensely in difficult moments.

Burnout is associated with dysfunctional structures, toxic leadership, and excessive bureaucracy, going beyond mere workload. Ent11 summarises this criticism by stating: “It is not the work that exhausts us, it is the institutional context.” Ent05 questions the paradoxical lack of care for professionals in institutions that, paradoxically, are dedicated to caring for others. This burnout thus reveals the devaluation of care itself.

Poor working conditions have a direct impact on mental health and motivation, notably insufficient salaries, accumulation of duties, and lack of adequate physical spaces. Ent08 denounces care provided in “confined spaces, without breathing space, without light.” Professional satisfaction depends on institutional recognition and working conditions. Where organisational care exists, well-being and resilience increase. When it is absent, chronic exhaustion emerges.

The lack of supervision and team cohesion intensifies exhaustion, while precariousness remains an omnipresent backdrop. Professionals reveal a collective awareness that care for caregivers must be a structural axis of organisational policies, under penalty of compromising the emotional and ethical sustainability of the practice.

4.3.3. Institutional Structures and Care Ecosystems

Institutional barriers emerge as determinants of emotional exhaustion and limitations on professional practice. Insufficient resources and coordination are recurring obstacles. Ent01 emphasises that “the institutions themselves give us the answers we want because they are also limited by a lack of these resources,” while Ent02 highlights structural deficiencies, such as the lack of rooms for homeless people. Inter-institutional coordination is perceived as weak: although the law defines responses that, in practice, are considered ineffective (Ent07), thereby generating continuous frustration.

The lack of preparation among external organisations to address complex issues compromises the effectiveness of support networks. Ent01 reports episodes of insensitivity and lack of professionalism in partner entities, while Ent08 presents a structural reading: “The system and the machine overlap, ultimately forming the primary obstacle.”

Low career progression is another factor in persistent demotivation. The lack of prospects for professional development and remuneration is widely recognised. Ent02 states: “I am at the top of my career. In my salary scale, I cannot go any higher,” describing this situation as “frustrating, discouraging, even revolting.” A similar sentiment is expressed by interviewees such as Ent11, who observes colleagues “counting the days until retirement” due to exhaustion and lack of recognition. This process reveals that professionals are increasingly experiencing job insecurity, which affects their quality of life both within and beyond the workplace.

The articulation between these categories reveals a structural issue: The lack of resources reinforces stigma; the absence of coordination increases the burden on professionals; and the lack of progression results from a system that neglects caregivers. This pattern leads to the normalisation of burnout, where overload

paradoxically becomes an indicator of performance: “Working overtime seems to be normalising....I am a good professional because I work more hours than I was hired for” (Ent07).

4.3.4. Ideal of Care and Utopia

This theme highlights the tension between the ethical commitment to the uniqueness of the person being cared for and the constraints of a rigid institutional context. Active listening and presence are described as the core of the intervention, practices that recognise the other as a subject of dignity. Ent01 states that “sometimes it is just about sitting and listening....I know I am already making that person’s day,” while Ent13 reinforces: “Care is about looking, listening, and being present....Because no one listens to these people, ever.”

However, structural and bureaucratic limitations are the main obstacles to achieving this ideal. Excessive bureaucracy delays responses (Ent01) and is perceived as “obsolete” and “more bureaucratic than it actually needs to be” (Ent06). As Ent06 herself summarises: “Many of these forms are obsolete and are more bureaucratic than they actually need to be.”

The lack of emotional skills in teams also compromises the quality of the intervention. Ent05 criticises the training model, stating: “We were not trained to deal with the emotional side....Someone has put it into our heads that we have to be some kind of superheroes.”

Given the complexity of the situations, the need for integrated responses is evident. Ent07 notes that entities “are not organised to respond to people’s needs.” Adapting to individual needs is therefore both an ethical requirement and a desirable practice. Ent02 envisions “a more flexible, more adaptable model, where it is not one size fits all,” and Ent04 adds: “I have to listen to them first. I have to understand if that person feels cared for in that way and not how I think they should be.”

Flexibility in care, therefore, emerges as a condition for respecting autonomy. As Ent04 points out: “We do not have to start in room number one...and now it has to be one, two, three—no, it does not.” This desire for flexibility reveals the tension between a relational ethic of care and institutional normativity.

The ideal of person-centred care thus clashes with a technocratic and bureaucratic context, making its realisation feel like a “practical utopia” (Ent10). In this way, care also reveals itself as a political space, where values and possibilities for transformation are contested.

4.3.5. Individual and Collective Strategies for Professional Sustainability

Peer and/or team sharing emerges as a central and widely valued strategy, allowing feelings to be validated and emotional burdens to be alleviated. Ent01 summarises this function by stating: “The main strategy I use...is to talk openly with the team and vent.” This sharing takes on an emotional dimension above all, functioning as an informal space for supervision.

Professional sustainability relies on structured support. When available, formal supervision provides a vital space for reflection and self-restraint. In its absence, professionals are forced to rely on informal peer sharing to alleviate emotional burdens.

The separation between personal and professional life is understood as an essential protective measure. Ent01 argues for “not bringing problems from home to work, but also not taking problems from work home.” Despite this, several professionals recognise the difficulty of emotionally disconnecting, as expressed by Ent10: “One of the things that can at times be very difficult is detaching ourselves from what we leave behind when we leave the workplace.”

Personal training, self-care, and psychotherapy are also mentioned as essential practices for preventing burnout. Ent05 states: “I have been developing structures and tools for self-protection and self-care,” while Ent13 refers to resorting to “supervision...training...psychotherapy.”

The ritualisation of mourning is also a resource for emotional processing and symbolic closure of intense caregiving relationships. Ent04 recognises “a very strong need to go to the funeral...if I do not do that, I find it more difficult to close that cycle.”

Taken together, these strategies reveal active resilience, although often sustained by individual initiatives, highlighting a persistent institutional omission in the care of caregivers.

4.3.6. Professional Recognition and Collective Mobilisation

The theme reflects the institutional and social devaluation of social work, with the profession’s perceived invisibility described as a recurring sentiment. Many professionals feel their roles are poorly understood by both the institutions where they work and society at large (Ent01). Ent01 complains: “People do not even know what a social worker does. People are completely unaware.” Ent13 shares this perception: “You would walk into that room and not know who was who, which distressed me greatly...no one cares about us.”

This lack of recognition is structurally embedded, resulting in low salaries and stagnant careers, as we have already analysed. Ent09 emphasises: “What is happening in the third sector is that we are very poorly paid, and the work is highly stressful, both emotionally and physically.”

The role of the Association of Social Workers is fraught with expectation, but also with mistrust. Professionals are calling for firmer intervention in defence of the class and public recognition of the profession. Ent01 suggests that the Association “reach out to the media...to give social workers a voice,” while Ent07 advocates action at the “macro-legislative level.” However, this hope reveals fragility, as Ent13 points out: “We are here with great hope in the Association at the moment, which is also fading.”

There is a clear collective awareness that emotional exhaustion is systemic rather than circumstantial. Ent09 states that “Professional associations must be concerned with the mental health of the people they defend,” while Ent06 criticises the lack of institutional emotional support. Ent05 reinforces this gap by asking: “How is it that there is no one to care for those who care?” This prompts a call for robust public policies and organisational strategies, emphasising the catalytic role the Association can play. Thus, a tension emerges between the ideals of valorisation, greater visibility, fair pay, and political and symbolic recognition, and a reality in which stakeholders perceive social workers as “volunteer firefighters” (Ent09): permanently available to manage crises while rarely being provided with care themselves.

5. Discussion of Results

The results of this study highlight the high emotional, ethical, and organisational complexity of social work practice, especially in contexts of mental health and social vulnerability. In line with Moratalla (2022) and Nullens and van Nes (2022b), the narratives of social workers reveal that care goes beyond the technical dimension, reflecting the *homo curans* paradigm: care rooted in empathy, interdependence, and shared vulnerability. However, the findings also show that this paradigm operates under institutional logics still shaped by efficiency-oriented rationalities, generating structural tension between *homo curans* and *homo economicus* models.

The findings validate a relational ethic of care that legitimises fragility as a core element of the therapeutic bond. This reality challenges the *homo economicus* model and approaches a relational practice, as advocated by Watson in his transpersonal care theory (Kinsella et al., 2025). The recognition of emotions, empathy, and emotional resonance between professional and user refers to an ethic of care that legitimises fragility as a constitutive element of the therapeutic bond (Torres Almeida & Rodrigues, 2018). By evidencing how professionals experience their own vulnerability as inseparable from that of service users, the study extends the *homo curans* paradigm beyond anthropological reflection, situating it within concrete organisational practices and constraints. Care thus emerges not only as an ethical stance but as an institutional field of dispute.

Hochschild's (2012) concept of emotional labour is strikingly evident in reports of exhaustion, institutional burnout, and difficulty in establishing boundaries between personal and professional life. The interviewees oscillate between surface acting and deep acting, the former being more closely associated with psychological distress, as evidenced by Wang et al. (2016) and Merighi and Dinis (2008). The lack of supervision mechanisms deepens this vulnerability, contrary to the good practices recommended in the literature (Pisaniello et al., 2012). Importantly, the data suggest that emotional labour in social work is not merely an individual regulatory process, but a structurally intensified demand embedded in under-resourced welfare contexts. In this sense, burnout should not be interpreted as personal fragility, but as an institutional symptom of misalignment between relational care ethics and bureaucratic governance models. Burnout, therefore, appears less as individual fragility and more as an institutional symptom of misalignment between relational care ethics and bureaucratic governance.

The data indicate that psychological well-being depends on multiple factors: peer support, cohesive teams, technical autonomy, and institutional validation. The fragility of supervision mechanisms identified in the findings contradicts established best practices for occupational health. This gap reinforces the limits of organisations that prioritise bureaucratic efficiency over the "care for those who care," exposing the ethical sustainability risks of the profession. This criticism aligns with the work of Simpson et al. (2024) and D'Cruz and Noronha (2024) on organisational compassion. Thus, the study advances the debate on compassionate institutional ecosystems by demonstrating empirically that compassion cannot be reduced to interpersonal virtue; it must be structurally embedded in leadership models, career progression systems, and resource allocation frameworks. Without this structural embedding, compassionate discourse risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

The analysis also highlights persistent institutional barriers, such as a lack of resources, stigmatisation of mental health, and fragility in the articulation between services. These barriers not only compromise care for users but

also intensify feelings of professional helplessness, illustrating the effects of structural vulnerability (Bourgois et al., 2017; Spini & Vacchiano, 2023). Importantly, structural vulnerability extends to professionals themselves, who experience derivative exposure to systemic constraints. The tension between the ideal of care and the “practical utopia” (Ent10) reveals that the impossibility of acting on ethical-humanistic values (active listening, individualised responses, relational presence) carries a high emotional cost.

Hence, there is an urgency to rethink the role of institutions. The literature on compassionate institutional ecosystems (Araújo et al., 2016; Clark et al., 2022) offers ways to create organisational environments that promote professional well-being and ensure sustainable responses. Empathetic leadership, support networks, recognition policies, and decent working conditions are no longer accessories but have become structural pillars of ethical care. From a futures studies perspective (Bell, 2017), these elements can be understood as anticipatory governance mechanisms capable of transforming present organisational cultures toward more humane and sustainable welfare systems. The narratives collected illustrate that micro-level practices of compassionate reasoning (Gopin, 2021) already exist in everyday professional conduct, but their institutional consolidation remains fragile.

At the same time, the issue of professional recognition exposes a collective feeling of invisibility and devaluation. Despite the establishment of the Association of Social Workers, the perception of a lack of effective representation persists, reinforcing the need for collective mobilisation and public policies that recognise the centrality of social work. This symbolic invisibility echoes the “injustice of recognition” described by Fraser (1997), demanding greater visibility, wage justice, and institutional appreciation. The struggle for recognition, therefore, emerges not merely as a corporatist claim but as a precondition for sustaining relational welfare systems grounded in the *homo curans* paradigm. Without recognition, care work risks being morally expected yet politically marginalised.

Professional sustainability strategies, from psychotherapy to the ritualisation of grief, highlight the critical awareness that one must take care of oneself to care for others. These practices align with proposals for compassionate futures (Bell, 2017; Gopin, 2021) grounded in creative ethics, institutional empathy, and mutual care oriented towards social transformation. Nevertheless, reliance on individual coping mechanisms underscores a structural paradox: The responsibility for maintaining the *homo curans* ethos is disproportionately individualised, while the institutional conditions necessary for its flourishing remain underdeveloped.

The articulation of empirical data with the theoretical framework shows that social work requires more than individual resilience, particularly in contexts of high emotional and structural complexity. It requires compassionate institutions, integrated public policies, and effective social recognition. The transition from systems oriented towards efficiency and productivity to systems based on care and interdependence, as proposed by the *homo curans* paradigm, is no longer only desirable but urgent. Caring for those who care thus emerges as an ethical, organisational, and political imperative for building more just, empathetic, and sustainable futures. In this sense, the study not only confirms the relevance of the *homo curans* model but empirically demonstrates the institutional conditions under which it is either sustained or undermined, thereby contributing to its operationalisation within welfare governance debates.

Despite the robustness of the mixed-methods approach, the study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. The use of a non-probabilistic sample, obtained for convenience,

limits the statistical generalisation of the results and may also introduce self-selection bias. Participation may have been more attractive to professionals who are either more emotionally engaged with the topic or experiencing higher levels of psychological strain, which may have influenced both the distribution of well-being scores and the prominence of certain qualitative themes. Consequently, the sample may overrepresent more reflective or more distressed professionals, requiring caution when extrapolating the findings to the broader population of social workers. The cross-sectional design of the quantitative phase prevents the establishment of causal relationships between psychological well-being and care practices, allowing only the identification of associations at a single point in time. Thus, although significant relationships were identified, it is not possible to determine directionality: Adverse organisational conditions may contribute to lower well-being, but it is equally plausible that professionals experiencing emotional exhaustion perceive institutional support more negatively. Longitudinal designs would be necessary to clarify temporal sequencing and potential causal pathways. The use of self-response instruments, namely the WHO-5, may be subject to social desirability and does not allow for an in-depth analysis of specific dimensions of professional distress. Online data collection and videoconference interviews may have conditioned the participation of some professional profiles and limited the observation of relevant nonverbal dynamics. Finally, despite the rigorous strategies adopted in the qualitative analysis, it inevitably involves situated interpretive processes, and the results should be understood as contextualised in time and in the organisational context of Social Work in Portugal.

6. Conclusion

The study analysed the psychological well-being of social workers in Portugal. The triangulation between quantitative and qualitative data revealed a structurally ambivalent reality. Most participants demonstrated resilience. However, one quarter reported low well-being, mainly characterised by persistent fatigue, insufficient rest, and emotional tension. This ambivalence reflects the coexistence of a strong relational commitment to care with institutional arrangements that do not adequately support it.

The qualitative results deepen this evidence by showing that care is permeated by mutual vulnerability: The suffering of users echoes in professionals' personal experiences, producing emotional resonances that are difficult to manage in the absence of institutional containment mechanisms. Emotional labour, central to the profession, often manifests as burnout, especially when performed in a bureaucratic, inflexible, and under-resourced environment. Inadequate supervision, low autonomy, and symbolic devaluation contribute to the internalisation of feelings of powerlessness and the risk of burnout. These findings allow us to argue that the sustainability of relational welfare systems depends directly on the psychological sustainability of those who embody them.

These dynamics reveal that social workers' well-being cannot be understood solely as an individual responsibility. It depends on organisational ecosystems capable of recognising the ethical and emotional complexity inherent in care, offering working conditions, technical support, and recognition compatible with the demands of the profession. The discrepancy between the ideal of care centred on the uniqueness of the person and the normative constraints of institutions results in an "ethical misalignment" that compromises both the quality of the intervention and the psychological health of professionals. Such misalignment signals the persistence of governance models closer to *homo economicus* rationalities than to the *homo curans* paradigm announced in contemporary ethical debates.

In this context, particularly relevant ethical and political implications emerge, summarised in the following recommendations: (a) restructure work environments, strengthening teams and material resources to mitigate work overload, recognised as the main cause of fatigue; (b) systematically and mandatorily implement professional supervision as a protected space for ethical, emotional, and technical reflection; and (c) promote fairer recognition in political and salary terms, and that reflects the complexity of the emotional and ethical work inherent in the practice of social work. Beyond organisational reform, governments/policymakers/institutions require broader welfare governance reforms to institutionalise compassionate reasoning within public policy design and implementation.

The establishment of the Association of Social Workers constitutes, in this context, a symbolic and political opportunity to strengthen the defence of professional rights and promote workforce mental health, contributing to the construction of compassionate futures (Bell, 2017; Moratalla, 2022) in which caring for those who care is affirmed as an ethical and structural imperative. By empirically linking emotional labour, structural vulnerability, and recognition theory within the *homo curans* framework, this study advances the theoretical consolidation of compassionate futures as a viable orientation for contemporary social policy.

Although the non-probabilistic sample limits the generalisation of the results, the consistency between the different methods strengthens the validity of the conclusions and highlights the urgency of organisational and public policies that care for those who care. Sustaining social workers' well-being is both an operational necessity and an ethical imperative. It ensures that interventions remain socially just and emotionally responsible while strengthening communities in vulnerable contexts. Ultimately, the transition towards compassionate futures will not occur through moral exhortation alone, but through structural transformation that aligns institutional architectures with the relational anthropology they implicitly require.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

The authors did not use any large language models (LLMs) in preparing this manuscript.

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Arts-Based Laboratories for Compassionate Futures With Adolescents in Colombian Public Education

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Abstract

Many adolescents in Colombia grow up in contexts of socioeconomic vulnerability, in a society marked by profound and painful experiences resulting from political violence, and with a fast-paced daily life that places them in the paradoxical situation of being forgotten and neglected. In other words, the pace of contemporary life and the expectations of their social environment regarding how they should behave and what they should be like, leaves adolescents with no opportunity, or few opportunities, to get to know themselves, recognise what is happening in their lives, and, in turn, take action to care for themselves and ensure their well-being. Within this context, the Conversations in the Garden programme was integrated into a public school as a laboratory for creative artistic expression, allowing adolescents to talk about and create from their emotions, bodies, identities, future projects, and opinions as citizens. This article presents the methodologies, results, and conclusions from four years of collaborative work, conducted in accordance with the principles of arts-based, narrative, and collaborative research. Among the results, this programme has promoted adolescents' socio-emotional well-being through art and dialogue, grounded in emotional recognition and management, and by addressing relational and interpersonal issues to cultivate empathy, interdependence, and mutual responsibility. Likewise, art-mediated conversations have promoted greater self-awareness, resilience, and life skills in adolescents. In short, the process, grounded in dialogue among stakeholders within the educational institution, has been slow; however, progress has been made in recognising the need to create spaces for shared care and to pursue compassionate futures.

Keywords

adolescents; arts-based research; compassionate future; narrative research; pedagogy of slowness

1. Introduction

The contemporary Colombian educational system is increasingly defined by a “pedagogy of acceleration” that prioritises neoliberal performance and the fragmentation of school time. This framework creates an ecosystem of constant pressure in which the system demands that pupils “be productive,” a requirement that often leads to the loss of their human essence (Fernández-Cediel et al., 2022). In this context, “human essence” is understood as a singular subjectivity and an inherent capacity for *sentipensar* (sensing-thinking) that precedes and transcends the roles of academic or economic utility; it is the core of human existence, enabling self-recognition and relational care beyond productive performance (Bastidas, 2020; Domènech Francesch, 2009). This focus on immediate results and “doing” leaves adolescents with little space to recognise their own identities or take action for their well-being. The urgency of this issue is underscored by national data from the Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education (ICFES)—the national agency responsible for standardised educational assessment tests. Results from the Saber Tests through the 2023 Socio-Emotional Skills Index show critical gaps in the development of skills such as empathy and self-regulation among students in vulnerable contexts (ICFES, 2024). Specifically, these indicators show that students in rural areas and in official (public) schools have significantly lower socio-emotional scores, confirming that the educational system often fails to provide adequate support to its most disadvantaged populations.

In response to these systemic failures, a growing national trend has emerged, utilising art and storytelling for social and emotional healing. This movement gained significant institutional momentum around 2016, when the Ministry of National Education introduced initiatives such as “Step by Step” and “Emotions for Life” to integrate social-emotional learning into the national curriculum. These programs arose from the need to address emotional awareness and regulation within a formal framework (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016). This trend has evolved through diverse applications, such as the 2021 programme Schools as Territories of Peace in Bogotá, which utilises restorative school justice and horizontal dialogue to move beyond punitive models. Furthermore, specialised interventions such as the “Unarmed Warriors” in Manizales (Lugo, n.d.) and the FutYouRes project (British Council, n.d.) have demonstrated since the late 2010s that arts-based approaches can facilitate the expression of traumatic experiences and foster resilience among conflict-affected youth.

The urgency of this issue is compounded by a convergence of historical and structural pressures. The legacy of Colombia’s 6-decade-long internal armed conflict is not merely a historical backdrop but a pervasive force that has normalised aggression and invisibility within the social fabric. This complex national reality frames the context for Conversations in the Garden, the creative-artistic laboratory and research project presented in this article. This initiative was implemented in the Department of Huila—located in the country’s southwestern Andean region—specifically in its capital city, Neiva. Here, socio-economic vulnerability is acute. The programme and subsequent research were implemented at the CEINAR Educational Institution, the only public school in the region specialising in artistic training. For these students, more than 75% of whom belong to low-income households, poverty represents a “critical crossroads” where material barriers fuel psychosocial stress.

Furthermore, the demands of late modernity impose a “pedagogy of acceleration” that prioritises immediate productivity and performance. This acceleration results in a profound “depersonalisation” of human

relationships, leaving students feeling like “objects” of educational policy rather than “subjects” with a voice. Contextual observations prior to the implementation of the Conversations in the Garden programme revealed that this environment generates an “emotional turmoil” characterised by a persistent sense of invisibility and loneliness, which adolescents describe as a “knot in the heart.” This distress is often exacerbated by the pressure to meet unattainable aesthetic standards, leading to severe self-criticism and shame regarding their own bodies. Consequently, the adolescent in Huila is often trapped between a resilient ambition for success and a reality marked by silence, domestic violence, and a lack of validation from the adult world.

Building upon this emerging national trend of utilising art for social-emotional healing, the research team proposes arts-based research (ABR) as a methodological response to the rigid, diagnostic intervention techniques of traditional experimental research. By integrating academic inquiry with artistic practice, ABR allows for a more imaginative and emotional understanding of school practices. Within this framework, the research method is assimilated to a concept of “style,” where the objective is not to obtain definitive answers but to use the expressive qualities of art to generate new conversations and convey complex meanings.

Complementing this, the pedagogy of slowness serves as a critical antidote to the neoliberal acceleration of performance that dominates contemporary education. While European scholarship emphasises finding the “right time” for deep, lasting knowledge (Domènech Francesch, 2009), this perspective is expanded by the “Slow Humanities” movement. Berg and Seeber (2016) challenge the “culture of speed” in the academy, arguing that deliberate reflection and a slower pace are essential for protecting the quality of thought and the integrity of the educational encounter. This aligns with South American scholars who offer a vital localised perspective. Bastidas (2020), drawing on the foundational work of Colombian sociologist Fals Borda (2009), proposes *sentipensar* (sensing-thinking) as an epistemological subversion of traditional utopias. For an international audience, it is crucial to clarify that *sentipensar* is not simply the addition of emotion to reason. As expanded by decolonial scholars such as Escobar (2014), it is a political and ethical stance that explicitly rejects Western Cartesian dualisms (such as the separation of mind/body and reason/emotion), validating lived experiences and bodily emotions as rigorous forms of knowledge. When linked to compassion, *sentipensar* transforms empathy from a passive emotion into an active, relationally responsive practice. It demands pedagogies of the pause that foster deep listening and mutual recognition. This framework allows adolescents to move from being “objects” of educational policy to “subjects” with their own voices, humanising a school environment often depersonalised by a pace of instruction that may not suit all students or allow for ample individual contributions, self-reflection, and optimal self-development.

Finally, compassion and the pursuit of “compassionate futures” provide a moral foundation for reimagining these systems. Drawing on Nussbaum’s (2013) conceptualisation of political emotions, “compassion” is defined here not as an individualised, passive feeling of pity, but as an active, relational driving force behind school coexistence. It involves a present-day praxis and a commitment to “being with” the other, validating their suffering, and co-constructing meaning. Consequently, a “compassionate future” is the *telos* (the ultimate aim) of this practice. It is not merely a distant, abstract utopia, but what Freire (1992) terms an “untested feasibility” (*inédito viable*)—a concrete reality actively built in the present through horizontal and dialogical relationships. As informed by the critical pedagogy of scholars such as Cabrera Hernández (2022) and Giroux (2014), we interpret the “compassionate future” as a form of ongoing political resistance: a call to transformative action that leverages present compassion as a means of denouncing inequality and rebuilding the social fabric.

Building upon these foundations of artistic inquiry, slow pedagogy, and compassionate ethics, *Conversations in the Garden* is presented as an intervention to restore human dignity within the Colombian public education system.

2. The Conversations in the Garden Programme: A Collaborative Laboratory for Compassionate Futures

Conversations in the Garden is a qualitative and collaborative intervention integrated into the CEINAR Educational Institution in Neiva, Huila. Since 2022, the programme has served an average of 433 adolescents annually, aged 11 to 20, most of whom navigate high socio-economic vulnerability. The programme was structured to operationalise its three theoretical foundations—ABR, the pedagogy of slowness, and the ethics of compassion—through an ecosystem of strategies that shift the focus from academic productivity to human existence.

The ABR methodology is operationalised through “creative-reflective workshops.” These workshops use symbolic tools such as metaphorical collages, timeline friezes, and graffiti murals to allow adolescents to materialise complex emotions that verbal language often fails to capture. Within this framework, artistic practice is seen as a primary means of examining human experience. For instance, adolescents use these artistic media to navigate “emotional turmoil,” expressing a persistent sadness and loneliness they describe as a “knot in the heart.” Through art, the programme addresses the shame tied to unattainable aesthetic standards and the daily fear linked to normalised physical punishment in their upbringing.

The pedagogy of slowness is integrated through the creation of “floating meeting spaces.” Unlike traditional corrective school models, these spontaneous, non-punitive conversations in corridors and green areas allow for a “necessary pause” from the relentless pace of academic assessments. This strategy validates the adolescent’s need for movement and meaning, turning the school into a territory of “being” rather than just “performing.” By adjusting the pace of learning to the individual’s uniqueness, the programme fosters deep, lasting knowledge rather than superficial results.

Finally, the ethics of compassion is enacted through “listening spaces” guided by postmodern collaborative practices. In these sessions, the mental health professional acts as a “conversational partner” rather than an authoritarian figure, recognising the adolescent as the expert on their own life. These horizontal relationships facilitate the re-narration of painful experiences, transforming pain into possibility. As noted by scholars, this compassionate future functions as a form of political resistance, denouncing inequality and rebuilding the social fabric through an ethic of care.

3. Methodological Design and Study Context

This article presents a comprehensive synthesis of the advanced processes and results obtained from the *Conversations in the Garden* programme. The initiative emerged organically in the post-pandemic context, when students returned to in-person classes and explicitly expressed feelings that had been unheard and marginalised within their school environment. In response to these institutional challenges, the director of the CEINAR Educational Institution—who is also a member of the CRECER research group—invited the

group to design and implement a tailored programme to address the adolescents' need for participation and emotional validation.

Therefore, this study is not a singular, isolated evaluation but rather a robust recognition of the programme's progress, drawing on evidence generated by multiple specific research processes developed within the programme's framework over four years. These embedded studies focused on distinct dimensions of the adolescent experience, including emotional regulation, bodily self-awareness, active participation, and the profound impacts of domestic violence.

3.1. The Research Team and Professional Positioning

The programme and its embedded research exercises were initiated and directed by the author of this manuscript, who serves as the creator, main implementer, and lead researcher of the initiative. Given the programme's longitudinal nature, the operational team rotates over the years. Under the author's continuous leadership, this multidisciplinary team has integrated psychology professionals, final-year practicum students in psychology, undergraduate student researchers (*semilleristas*) from the CRECER research group, and volunteer professionals from various social science disciplines.

The professional relationship between the research team and the school was collaborative yet independent. While the team actively facilitated the programme within the institution, they did not act as traditional school staff. Instead, they positioned themselves as "conversational partners," maintaining an independent, empathetic stance to foster horizontal dialogue.

3.2. Methodological Approach, Data Sources, and Participants

Methodologically, ABR was established as the programme's core foundation. However, it was operationalised beyond a mere data-collection tool; alongside social constructionism, ABR was adopted as an empathetic, accessible pedagogical strategy designed to bridge communication gaps with adolescents through alternative, artistic languages.

By utilising art as both a communicative bridge and an analytical source, the research design integrated Narrative Research (NR) to co-construct meanings from the students' life stories. The data sources discussed in this article—ranging from visual metaphors to narrative transcriptions—are the consolidated outcome of the aforementioned specific research exercises. The participant group generating these narratives ($N \approx 433$ annually) has a balanced gender distribution (45.5% female, 54.4% male). Notably, over 75% of these participants live in low-income households, constantly exposed to environmental stressors and domestic violence.

3.3. Operationalisation and Procedures

The intervention is structured into three work blocks:

1. Creative-reflective workshops: This component addresses identity, future projects, and emotions through symbolic artistic tools.

2. Listening spaces: This component involves individual sessions where adolescents propose their own narratives.
3. Floating meeting spaces: This component evolved from the initial implementation of “floating chats”—defined as spontaneous, informal, and non-punitive dialogues—into an emergent institutional practice known as “floating meeting spaces.” These spaces are strategically located in school corridors, sports areas, or green zones, where the program team engages with adolescents outside formal classroom structures to humanise educational practice and to identify emotional distress in real time.

3.4. Rigour and Ethical Considerations

Methodological rigour was ensured through a systematic triangulation of sources, cross-referencing field notes, photographic records, and adolescents’ visual works with quantitative data gathered from satisfaction surveys and registration platforms. The analytical process followed the six-phase thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Categories were constructed using a hybrid approach: deductive categories were derived from the programme’s theoretical foundations (ABR, pedagogy of slowness, and ethics of compassion), while inductive categories emerged from recurring patterns in the participants’ narratives and artistic metaphors. This process involved a recursive coding of field notes and narrative transcriptions to identify key themes in socio-emotional transformation.

Ethically, the programme strictly adhered to informed consent and assent protocols involving both students and parents. To guarantee confidentiality, all participants were identified through pseudonyms. Given the sensitive nature of the narratives handled—including domestic violence, coming-out processes, or potential suicidal ideation—the programme implemented rigorous referral protocols (*Rutas de Atención*). In the event of such disclosures, the team immediately activated school protection mechanisms and facilitated referrals to specialised mental health and social services. This ensured that the programme’s socio-emotional accompaniment served as complementary support to the formal institutional and legal frameworks, prioritising the safety and integrity of adolescents at all times.

4. Results

The implementation of “Conversations in the Garden” has generated significant positive changes in both adolescents’ socio-emotional well-being and the CEINAR institution’s internal educational dynamics. These impacts were achieved through the strategic integration of artistic mediation and horizontal dialogue.

4.1. Strengthening Socio-Emotional Well-Being and Self-Awareness

The implementation of Conversations in the Garden effectively promoted adolescents’ socio-emotional well-being by fostering emotional recognition and management through the strategic integration of art and dialogue. This impact was primarily achieved through creative-reflective workshops, in which artistic mediation enabled participants to cultivate empathy, interdependence, and mutual responsibility. As a result, adolescents demonstrated measurable growth in self-awareness, resilience, and essential life skills.

Significantly, this growth serves as a qualitative subversion of the national indicators reported by the ICFES. While the 2023 Saber Tests’ Socio-Emotional Skills Index highlights a critical gap in low-income

sectors—suggesting that material well-being is a primary determinant for developing skills like empathy and self-regulation—our findings demonstrate that narrative agency can bridge this divide. Despite more than 75% of our participants belonging to households with low income-generating capacity and high vulnerability, they successfully developed the very socio-emotional competencies that standardised assessments identify as lacking in their socio-economic demographic.

Furthermore, a significant positive change was observed in body self-awareness and identity construction. By using symbolic tools such as metaphorical collages to navigate social standards, adolescents reported feeling more confident and happier, recognising their bodies' functionality beyond mere aesthetic pressures. This process allowed them to externalise constant doubts in front of the mirror, such as: “Do I look ugly or pretty?” (*¿Me veo feo o bonito?*). Furthermore, the workshops revealed distinct gender nuances. While younger girls expressed discomfort at being taller than average (*más altas que el promedio*), boys' concerns focused on being too short (*muy enanos*) or lacking muscle tone. Specifically, male participants showed increased confidence and self-acceptance in their artistic productions. Likewise, the programme revealed distinct developmental nuances across the age spectrum (11–20 years). While younger adolescents (11–14 years) focused predominantly on body changes and peer acceptance—as exemplified in Figure 1, which illustrates the complex emotions experienced during discrimination or teasing—older participants (18–20 years) presented more nuanced narratives about career uncertainty and the transition to active citizenship. Within these narratives, digital interaction was identified as a core component of their emotional world, characterised by “multimacy”—defined here as the construction of shared intimacy and affective bonds across multiple digital interfaces and social media platforms.



Figure 1. Drawing about feelings when teenagers feel discriminated against or teased.

The programme also provided a vital safe refuge for the LGBTIQ+ community. Through art, these students found a safe space to express their feelings and narrate their coming-out processes. This facilitated the mitigation of fears regarding stigmatisation by the family and allowed students to view their sexuality as a “normal” and valid aspect of their identity.

The shift toward emotional autonomy was further catalysed by the “listening spaces” and “floating meeting spaces,” which provided a non-punitive environment for expression. Adolescents expressed the weight of social standards through powerful self-criticisms—“I discriminate against myself”—or described their emotional distress as a persistent “knot in the heart” (*nudo en el corazón*). A pattern of recurring discouragement often accompanies this feeling, which they refer to as “being bummed” (*bajoneadas*), stemming from a sense of being a “nobody in their homes” (*cero a la izquierda*), where their voices are often not validated. However, the programme allowed them to identify alternative supports, with many recognising music and pets as “cures for the soul” (*curas para el alma*). This means that by slowing the pace of school life and offering horizontal dialogue, the programme enabled adolescents to transform deep emotional distress into narratives of hope and agency. Ultimately, the use of art enabled participants to highlight their individual skills and talents, effectively reducing the stigma associated with their socio-economic vulnerability and empowering them to propose alternatives within their precarious contexts.

4.2. From Political Apathy to Active Citizenship

The programme achieved a significant paradigm shift in how adolescents perceive their role within the school community, moving from political apathy to active agency. This transformation was facilitated by abandoning rigid, adult-centred structures in favour of horizontal methodologies that aligned with the students’ realities. By positioning the programme team as “conversational partners” and recognising adolescents as experts in their own lives, the intervention effectively subverted the traditional passive role often assigned to students in public education.

This impact was operationalised through creative workshops designed to strengthen leadership and collective deliberation. For instance, the use of “emergency committees” allowed participants to negotiate solutions to fictional community conflicts. At the same time, specific sessions on “rights, responsibilities, and leadership” helped them understand their active role in renewing civic life. As a result, adolescents reported a marked improvement in their ability to engage in dialogue and negotiate agreements in conflict situations at both school and at home.

The success of this component is reflected in participants’ evaluations, which explicitly highlighted “having a voice and a vote” as the aspect they valued most after years of feeling like a “nobody” in their own homes and schools. In fact, 84% of participants reported high satisfaction with the experience, citing the validation of their opinions as a key factor in their empowerment. By integrating their tastes and life experiences into decision-making through murals and social cartographies, the programme effectively empowered adolescents to propose alternatives to their precarious contexts and take control of their own future narratives.

4.3. Humanisation of the Educational Climate

The implementation of Conversations in the Garden significantly humanised the educational environment by replacing punitive, corrective models with a culture of shared care and deep listening. This transformation was primarily achieved through the operationalisation of the pedagogy of slowness by institutionalising “floating meeting spaces.” This component evolved from the initial implementation of “floating chats”—defined as spontaneous, informal, and non-punitive dialogues—into an emergent institutional practice that provides a “necessary pause” from the neoliberal acceleration of performance. By legitimising these

encounters and ensuring terminological and procedural consistency, the institution evolved from a place of mere surveillance into a territory for “being” and “feeling.”

A decisive factor in this shift was the redefinition of the psychological team’s role from authoritarian figures to “conversational partners.” This horizontal relationship fostered a safe climate that allowed adolescents to express deep emotional discomfort and discuss sensitive topics and traumatic experiences such as future plans or the daily fear of the “slipper” (*chancla*) as a tool of domestic punishment. In these spaces, adolescents also revealed the deep impact of psychological violence, reporting that they were frequently treated with derogatory terms like “stupid” (*brutos*), “useless” (*inútiles*), or “good for nothing” (*no sirven para nada*), which had led them into a state of profound silence. For the research team, transitioning to “conversational partners” represented a profound personal and professional challenge, requiring an unlearning of traditional clinical hierarchies to embrace the vulnerability of the encounter. While this shift was initially met with institutional scepticism, the school administration progressively came to value the programme as it observed a reduction in punitive disciplinary interventions and a noticeable improvement in student engagement.

Consequently, the programme facilitated the early identification of extreme situations before they escalated into crises, effectively serving as a fundamental protective factor within the school. Ultimately, by validating students’ subjectivity, the programme succeeded in subverting adult-centredness and establishing the school as a setting for social justice and civic reconciliation.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the transformation of the Colombian public education system requires more than administrative changes; it demands a fundamental shift in the organising principles of school life. By moving away from a “pedagogy of acceleration” focused on productivity, Conversations in the Garden offers a blueprint for a school system grounded in the ethics of care and the construction of compassionate futures.

5.1. Compassion as *Sentipensar*: A political and Organising Principle

In the context of Colombian public education, compassion transcends a mere individual emotion; it emerges as a collective, political, and relationally responsive capacity to recognise the structural suffering of youth and take transformative action. This political dimension finds a profound local, emic resonance in the Latin American tradition of *sentipensar* (sensing-thinking). Rooted in the legacy of Orlando Fals Borda, *sentipensar* advocates for the subversion of dominant pedagogies by holistically integrating reason and emotion.

Conversations in the Garden demonstrates how compassion, understood as *sentipensar*, can function as an organising principle of social life within the educational domain. By integrating “floating meeting spaces” and “listening spaces,” the programme effectively institutionalises a framework in which human relationships are lived to the full, rather than fragmented by the demands of productivity. This shift subverts the “pedagogy of acceleration” and the “evaluation clock,” allowing for a pause that restores human dignity in contexts marked by exclusion (Anderson, 2019; Cabrera Hernández, 2022; Giroux, 2014).

By positioning adolescents as experts in their own lives, the programme operationalises this compassionate framework through the co-construction of new meanings. As proposed by Freire (1997), this process of consciousness-raising is fundamental for restoring human dignity in contexts marked by exclusion and violence. The shift toward a relationally responsive identity is evident when students move from being “objects” of educational policy to “subjects” with their own voices, utilising art and narrative to transform their “emotional turmoil” into collective resilience (Bastidas, 2020; Freire, 1997; Gergen, 2009).

International studies and reviews of the arts’ impact on resilience reinforce this idea (Malchiodi, 2020; McNiff, 1998; Stickley & Clift, 2017), demonstrating that creative mediation facilitates access to areas of thought that purely rational language cannot address. By externalising trauma through visual symbols, adolescents build a protective distance that allows them to re-narrate their stories from a position of agency rather than victimhood.

Ultimately, this localised understanding of compassion—as a relational and political practice rather than a diagnostic intervention—reinforces the idea that the future of education lies in fostering communities where compassion and social justice become the driving forces for a world free of discrimination and for transforming pain into collective possibility.

6. Scaling and Global Lessons

The positive changes initiated by Conversations in the Garden demonstrate that when educational processes prioritise emotional validation over neoliberal productivity metrics, adolescents undergo a transformative shift from political apathy to active agency (Fernández-Cediel et al., 2022). By identifying emotional distress in real time and transforming it into narratives of hope, the programme has established a foundational model for a more compassionate school climate, with 84% of participants reporting high satisfaction at finally having “a voice and a vote.” On a national scale, these lessons suggest that the reimagining of the Colombian educational system lies in institutionalising non-punitive “floating spaces” and horizontal dialogues as essential components of the curriculum rather than as peripheral interventions. Such an approach aligns with and strengthens existing national trends toward restorative justice and social-emotional healing. For an international audience, it is crucial to note that in Colombia’s post-conflict context, restorative justice in schools involves shifting away from punitive disciplinary models—which often mirror the country’s historical normalisation of violence—toward practices that actively repair harm and rebuild trust through horizontal dialogue. Concurrently, social-emotional healing addresses the intergenerational trauma and psychosocial legacies left by the six-decade-long internal armed conflict. By operationalising these frameworks, Conversations in the Garden provides a scalable model for educational institutions in regions still grappling with these historical wounds, demonstrating how schools can transition from inherited cycles of aggression to enduring cultures of peace (Secretaría de Educación del Distrito, 2022).

On a global scale, the success of this laboratory informs the reimagining of future educational systems by positioning the pedagogy of slowness as a universal antidote to the depersonalising effects of performance-driven acceleration (Domènech Francesch, 2009). By protecting the “right time” for reflection, error, and deep listening, schools worldwide can transition from sites of surveillance and performance to territories of being and feeling (Bastidas, 2020). Ultimately, building compassionate futures requires a global community of practice dedicated to social justice and civic reconciliation, in which the voices of

adolescents—as historical subjects—serve as the central driving force in institutional life (Bastidas, 2020; Domènech Francesch, 2009; Giroux, 2014).

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The qualitative data (including visual arts and narrative transcripts) that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions regarding the adolescent participants, but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical approval.

LLMs Disclosure

No LLMs were used in any stage of this research or the preparation of this manuscript.

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Who Cares About Fieldwork? A Person-Centred Framework for a Compassionate Early-Career Fieldwork Pedagogy

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Abstract

The concept of “fieldwork” has been subject to longstanding critique, particularly regarding unequal researcher–participant dynamics, and the extractive colonial legacies that shape knowledge produced in the “field.” Early-career fieldworkers often operate within neoliberal, productivity-driven norms that reproduce unequal researcher–participant dynamics in the field and leave little room for researcher care. This article proposes understanding fieldwork as an inherently relational, pedagogical process. We use person-centred psychotherapy to advance a framework in which to understand fieldwork as a relational, pedagogical process. Building on vignettes from our experiences of ECR fieldwork, we outline three key pillars on which a compassionate fieldwork pedagogy can be built. These are (a) embedded institutional enablers that encourage care and compassion; (b) person-centred care throughout the fieldwork process; and (c) researcher self-awareness. We suggest that understanding fieldwork as a relational pedagogy, through core person-centred psychotherapy principles, is an important first step in co-creating compassionate fieldwork futures.

Keywords

care; neoliberalism; relational; research

1. Introduction

Hearing the trials of the people there
Who's to care if they lose
(Nick Drake, *Parasite*)

Within geography, fieldwork is often understood as a key means of data collection and as a rite of passage within early-career research (doctoral and post-doctoral, henceforth: ECR; Bruun & Guasco, 2023). Despite this, longstanding accounts of research extractivism, vulnerability, and trouble related to marginalised positionalities in the “field” remain persistent and have led to calls for fieldwork research praxis and process to be reinvigorated (Berry et al., 2017; Thornton et al., 2022). Feminist geographers have long paid attention to issues of reflexivity, power and positionality in the field (Katz, 1994; G. Rose, 1997), heroic and masculinist tropes that permeate expectations in fieldwork (Sundberg, 2003), as well as the embodied, emotional dimensions of fieldwork (Ross, 2015). Indeed, many personal accounts surrounding mental health struggles, violence, sexual violence, and harassment in fieldwork have also been documented (Douglas-Jones et al., 2020; Hirsch, 2020; Taylor, 2019). Scholars who highlight the inherent coloniality of research have also pointed to the epistemological research extractiveness and contradictions of the “field” (Berry et al., 2017; Smith, 2008).

Neoliberalism has been widely noted as shaping higher education (HE) practices. Neoliberal ideology marketizes HE as a private rather than public good, applies “free market” individualising and competitive principles into management logics of the public HE sector, and has meant that HE has been systematically defunded, to the detriment of both staff and students (Mintz, 2021). Competitive and individualising neoliberal tendencies within the academy also exacerbate gendered, classed, and racialised vulnerabilities for researchers and for those who participate in research projects (Mountz et al., 2015; Pickerill, 2024). Studies highlight poor rates of mental health amongst ECRs (Bergvall et al., 2025), whilst uncaring pedagogical practices within doctoral education exacerbate existing power imbalances in neoliberalised academia (Castelao-Huerta, 2026). Additionally, ECRs are often employed on precarious contracts. Precarious contracts in HE create a transient lifestyle that is isolating and stressful, which, alongside high expectations and demands on researchers’ time, can lead to mental health issues and departure from academia (Nordling, 2023; Woolston, 2020).

Large numbers of proposals challenge the individualisation and competitiveness of the neoliberal university by provoking us to enliven teaching and research practices and create acts of solidarity. Such proposals have centred on slow scholarship (Mountz et al., 2015), becoming humble (Saville, 2021), playing with time within the pressures of the neoliberal university (Pickerill, 2024), increasing emotional support and promoting self-care (Butler-Rees & Robinson, 2020; Jones & Whittle, 2021), advancing gentleness within methodological approaches (Pottinger, 2025), and encouraging relational pedagogical education (Hickey & Riddle, 2024). For fieldwork, calls have centred on taking a “compassionate turn,” whereby both the wellbeing of the researcher and their participants is attended to (Taylor, 2019; “Towards a compassionate turn,” 2019).

The key factor in these proposals is the fostering of an environment, which facilitates an interdependent, non-judgemental, empathic, authentic, and emotionally aware way of being. However, whilst the proposals make several suggestions about why it is important to enact interdependent, non-judgemental, empathic, authentic, and emotionally aware approaches, there is little engagement with how to enact these suggestions. While calls for more relational, empathic, and authentic pedagogy in HE (which is understood as fostering belonging through the important relational dynamics between “teacher,” “student,” and “knowledge production”) advance movements towards inclusive and dialogic teaching (Hickey & Riddle, 2024), the role of the intra- and interpersonal relations of fieldwork in discussions of relational and inclusive pedagogies has

been absent. This is despite the fact that fieldwork is central to research (Naveed et al., 2017), and that it is inherently a dynamic, relational, and pedagogical process between the university as an institution, supervisor(s)/principal investigator (PI), ECRs, and participants (Moser, 2008; Taylor, 2019).

In this article, we take the “field” in fieldwork as a fluid, political, and spatial-analytical category (Sultana, 2007) to illuminate the difficulties of fieldwork for ECRs within the context of the neoliberal university. Responding to the above calls for care, solidarity, and compassion in HE, we propose that engaging with person-centred psychotherapy provides an intra- and interpersonal relational underpinning for the co-creation of compassionate fieldwork within a care-full university environment; one that treats care and compassion in fieldwork as a political act of resistance against dominant logics within the neoliberal university environment. We contribute to discussions surrounding the problems *in* and *of* fieldwork by arguing that ECR fieldwork should be approached by researchers, supervisors/PIs, and universities as a relational and pedagogical endeavour. As such, we advance the term “fieldwork pedagogy” to underline how and why fieldwork needs to be approached as a relational and pedagogical process. We suggest that understanding fieldwork as a pedagogy creates the foundation for moving towards safe, equitable fieldwork research experiences and compassionate futures for researchers by facilitating researchers’ trust in their experiences, values, and self.

This article therefore aims to advance the notion of fieldwork in HE as a relational and pedagogical endeavour. Due to the high prevalence of harassment and assault in fieldwork, with marginalised researchers such as LGBTQ+ individuals, people of colour, and women facing particular harm (Clancy et al., 2014), we respond to growing calls for safe, inclusive and equitable fieldwork in HE (Taylor, 2019; “Towards a compassionate turn,” 2019). We further suggest that person-centred psychotherapy can support the relational qualities required to ensure a compassionate fieldwork pedagogy. This is because person-centred psychotherapy can provide a therapeutic framework in which to support a researcher in preparing for and processing their fieldwork encounter(s).

Fieldwork pedagogy involves several distinct and interconnected relationships between universities, researchers, and participants. In this article, we solely focus on the relationships between researchers, supervisors/mentors, and their institutions. While vital and needed, it is beyond the scope of this article to conceptualise a fieldwork pedagogy regarding the relationships between participants and researchers, and researchers, participants, and knowledge production, specifically via decolonial and Indigenous scholarship. We suggest that focusing firstly on the relationships between researchers and their institutional context could be a first step in moving towards grappling with broader issues of marginalisation, decolonisation, and production of knowledge in academia.

2. Who Cares About Fieldwork?

The “field” in field-based disciplines such as human geography has long been understood as the epistemological and physical site in which knowledge and data are produced (Berry et al., 2017). Fieldwork belongs to a broader base of research approaches such as ethnography, qualitative inquiry, and case study approaches (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Fieldwork in disciplines such as human geography can be understood as “living with a group of people for extended periods...in order to document and interpret their distinctive way of life, and the beliefs and values integral to it” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 17). Moser

(2007) highlights how fieldwork is key to “the development of ideas, research themes and methodologies” (p. 235) and how fieldwork is, as such, intrinsic to the development of a disciplinary research culture. Fieldwork is therefore a key part of research praxis and is shaped by contextual, relational, embodied and political factors (Sultana, 2007), both in the “field” and by research institutions.

As Cîrstea et al. (2024) ask: Who bears the responsibility for fieldwork care? Work in universities is becoming increasingly complex and precarious (Ivancheva et al., 2019), and institutions often pass the “burden of care” onto individual researchers (Cîrstea et al., 2024). Practices of care within universities have become antithetical to dominant market-driven values and norms within the neoliberal university environment (Ivancheva et al., 2019). Consequently, a culture of carelessness has emerged within HE, which neglects and devalues relational, emotional, and care-based work (Lynch, 2010). Care and its concurrent emotional labour in HE also meet at intersectional racialised and gendered axes (Magoqwana et al., 2020).

Recent reflections on fieldwork have recommended embedding researcher care within institutional ethical processes for fieldwork. Embedding care within ethical processes for fieldwork would mean that universities take responsibility for this required care. For example, Cîrstea et al. (2024) propose a praxis of care, which includes recommendations for a range of support from the institution, supervisors, mentors, and peers that focuses on staying connected, self-care practices, and rest when in the field. Meanwhile, Gatwiri et al. (2025) recommend a trauma-informed framework to facilitate researchers in developing self-awareness, connection with participants, access to emotional support, reflection, and rest in the fieldwork process.

Intersections of care, gender, emotions, race, and personal life play out in key ways in fieldwork. In line with a critical feminist ethos, the researcher “cannot conveniently tuck away the personal behind the professional, because fieldwork is personal” (England, 1994, p. 85). In recognising the time constraints, pressures to publish, and limitations of care in the neoliberal university (Jones & Whittle, 2021), it remains important to question what role care has within fieldwork pedagogical praxis. Enacting an ethics of care in fieldwork pedagogy before, during, and after fieldwork could assist with difficulties regarding mental health, loneliness, violence, and sexual violence in the field, and combat the culture of shame in which expressing fear or difficulty in and of fieldwork is a sign of research failure. “Care,” as Mountz et al. (2015, p. 1238) argue, “is not self-indulgent; it is radical and necessary.” Care is therefore a complicated but vital part of ensuring compassion in fieldwork.

3. Problems in and of Fieldwork

The concept of the “field” has been shaped by historical and present-day legacies of US and European imperialism and colonialism (Berry et al., 2017; Smith, 2008). Indeed, dominant understandings of ethnographic fieldwork involve the (mostly white and often male) researcher who goes to the “field,” who then brings back information to be analysed, processed, and turned into knowledge in the Global North (Hirsch, 2020). The concept of the “field” involves an intrinsic othering of (sometimes violent, unruly) places “out there” to be studied and analysed (Smith, 2008). We acknowledge that the term “the field” contributes to this continued othering but deem its use necessary to encapsulate and engage with the multiple politics of the “field.”

Staying with the well-documented trouble (Haraway, 1988) of and in fieldwork means debunking the trope of the often Western, heroic, white, cis-male, economically secure, and able-bodied researcher (Sundberg, 2003).

Inherent to this trope is an expectation that in the complex process of preparing, conducting, and returning from the “field,” fieldwork “does not involve the researcher emotionally” (Hirsch, 2020, p. 211). The lack of regard for researcher emotions in the field props up the image of an ideal researcher as an objective, “rational,” and detached observer (Taylor, 2019), leaving little space for tending to care and compassion as an intrinsic part of research before, during, and after the field. Risks of and in fieldwork are also shaped by a growing economic and social precarity amongst ECRs (Hamdan, 2025). Research expectations that idealise the ideal researcher as white, male, unafraid, economically secure, and able-bodied, in combination with precarity and the research pressures in the neoliberal university, render many ECRs with many often invisibilised barriers to conducting safe, compassionate, and equitable fieldwork for researchers and participants.

For example, Pollard (2009) notes that fieldwork can be “an intense time of vulnerability” (p. 1), due to acute feelings of loneliness and fear, shame surrounding failure in the field, harassment, sexual violence, and navigating mental health concerns. In regard to gendered risks of fieldwork, it is estimated that over 64% of fieldworkers experience sexual harassment and almost 20% experience sexual assault, with the majority of those experiencing harassment and assault being women and ECRs (Simmonds, 2014). Regarding mental health struggles during and after the field, Taylor (2019) describes his experience of receiving a post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis after witnessing violence during fieldwork. Moreover, emotional impacts on researchers who conduct research with participants who are experiencing significant hardship and distress (Reed & Towers, 2023) have also been little engaged with by universities and academic research praxis. Shame around researcher mental health struggles, instances of sexual violence, and a general disregard for non-positivist research stifles conversation around emotion, violence, and difficulty in fieldwork (Hirsch, 2020). Fieldwork can have significant impacts on the mental health of the researcher and exacerbates vulnerabilities that fall along the lines of sexuality, gender, race, class, age, and disability, to name a few (Taylor, 2019). It is particularly common for fieldworkers to experience direct or vicarious trauma, where little to no training on how to emotionally manage complex challenges in fieldwork leads to a culture of silence and shame (Reyes-Foster & Lester, 2019). Shame and silence around fieldwork arises ultimately to the detriment of all those who participate in the research process.

Berry et al. (2017) reflect on the “inherent contradictions of politically engaged research” (p. 537), in which the researcher often examines the political, social, and emotional contours of the “other,” yet this reflection is not often expanded in scope to the political, social, and emotional hierarchies which a researcher experiences themselves in the “field.” They examine how the “givenness of the field often obscures its constitutive interlocking racial and gender hierarchies” (p. 537). They go on to argue that “activist research that does not pursue epistemological decolonisation will...inevitably reproduce the very hierarchies of power that it seeks to help dismantle” (p. 538). The question therefore arises of how a collective imagining of, and action towards, more equitable, compassionate fieldwork can occur.

Fieldwork is an inherently relational process. Despite a lack of engagement with fieldwork ethics and risk at ECR level, fieldwork is still formed and executed within relational parameters. Such relational parameters involve students, educators, and the university environment, leading to the creation of plural relations when we travel to multiple field sites (Poopuu & van den Berg, 2021). Despite fieldwork being a core part of research and HE, it is still often viewed as belonging outside of the debates within the politics of research (Berry et al., 2017) and the politics of teaching within neoliberal university environments. As such, encapsulating ECR fieldwork as an *intrinsic* part of HE teaching pedagogical models can help us move towards creating a more caring, equitable, and compassionate approach to fieldwork.

4. Person-Centred Psychotherapy: Radical Care

Psychotherapeutic qualities, including interpersonal, listening, and responding skills, have been highlighted as important in processing fieldwork experiences (Tolmos et al., 2023). Turning to person-centred psychotherapy reasserts the importance of intra- and interpersonal relationality and provides a framework for the co-creation of a compassionate fieldwork pedagogy. Carl Rogers developed person-centred psychotherapy, where he brought to the fore the role of the therapeutic relationship and the agency of the client, who is active and dynamically involved in the process of therapy (Rogers, 1951, 1957). Person-centred psychotherapy influenced the development of humanistic approaches to psychotherapy throughout the 1950s–1960s (Schmid, 2007) and has been demonstrated to be therapeutically effective (Elliott et al., 2021; Joseph, 2018). Person-centred psychotherapy has been applied outside of therapy within the workplace (Henderson et al., 2007), education (O'Hara, 2006), and nature-based interventions (Harrod et al., 2024). Finally, person-centred psychotherapy is considered to be a socio-political approach, with Rogers (1977, p. 14) stating the approach involves “a conscious renunciation and avoidance by the therapist of all control over, or decision-making for, the client,” which challenges the dominant hierarchies and structures that seek to exert control over people (Schmid, 2012).

The relationships people are part of exert influences on each other's sense of self, including the personal, cultural and socio-political factors considered when making choices and taking actions (Rogers, 1951). Rogers (1957) proposed specific qualities within relationships that co-create nurturing/therapeutic encounters and support personal growth. These proposals are underpinned by Rogers' (1959) *Theory of therapy, personality, and interpersonal relationships*, which accounts for a person's development, constructive and unconstructive ways of being, and a process for moving from emotional distress to individual and collective flourishing. To understand the significance of intra- and interpersonal relational dynamics for underpinning a compassionate fieldwork pedagogy, we first discuss the development of a person's sense of self. Secondly, we highlight the qualities involved in nurturing relationships.

The development of a self-concept (a representation of who a person perceives and believes they are) involves a process of differentiation, whereby an organism (a holistic human) differentiates between self and not-self experiences (Rogers, 1959). This process is centred on the actualising tendency, which drives an organism to maintain and enhance itself (Sanders, 2007). The actualising tendency is prosocial and supports social relationships and action, which facilitates personal growth (Kim, 2018). The actualising tendency is expressed through an organismic valuing process, which evaluates experiences and their influence on survival and development of the organism (Mearns & Thorne, 2007). The organism values and moves towards beneficial experiences, and away from detrimental experiences. This process is accompanied by emotions, which facilitate the organism's behaviour. Relational environments which are supportive affirm people's trust in their own feelings and appraisal of their experiences as an accurate guide to acting and living interdependently (Mearns & Thorne, 2007). This leads to the formation of an internal locus of evaluation.

However, people's experiences/actions are typically selectively responded to, depending on how their experiences/actions are accepted and/or valued by others. People can internalise these value judgements into their self-concept and act in ways which satisfy others instead of relying on their own judgement. These internalised value judgements produce conditions of worth, where experiences are not evaluated depending

on whether they enhance or diminish the organism but on receiving approval from others, creating an external locus of evaluation (Rogers, 1959). As a person responds to these conditions of worth, they become estranged from their organismic valuing process, via denying and distorting their own appraisals of their experiences. As such a self-concept that is out of kilter with the organism develops, leading to incongruence. This leads to personal and/or relational difficulties as the person's actions are not informed by their direct experience, but by conditions of worth.

A person's self-concept develops through and with experience, and in and with relationships. As such, whilst a self-concept may become fixed, it is possible for shifts to occur towards a more authentic self-concept, within unthreatening relationships. Rogers (1957) suggested six conditions that must be present for a sufficient duration for meaningful personality change to occur. Personality change involves a person developing improvements in self-awareness, self-worth, and reductions in internal conflict, supporting flexible actions relevant to the situation:

1. The therapist and client are in a relationship.
2. The client is experiencing emotional distress.
3. The therapist is authentic within the relationship.
4. The therapist experiences non-judgemental acceptance for the client.
5. The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's inner world and communicates this to the client.
6. The client perceives the therapist's empathy and non-judgemental acceptance.

Through the presence of these conditions, the therapist and client co-create a therapeutic relationship. This occurs as, through the process of the client being unconditionally and empathically "met," their experiences are validated and feelings of being trusted, of being able to be oneself without fear of reprisal, and of belonging emerge (Mearns & Thorne, 2007). This supports the client in focusing on the change they desire, as well as reappraising their sense of self (Cornelius-White, 2007). The client experiences less emotional distress as incongruence is reduced between their experience of their world and their actions within it. This occurs because their self-concept begins to align more fully with their organism, meaning the person becomes more authentic in how they experience and respond to the world, which reduces alienation and the unhealthy behaviours developed to cope with this estrangement from self and others (Rogers, 1961). Meanwhile, the client's locus of evaluation also shifts from external to internal, as they trust responding to situations based on their own feelings and thoughts rather than through seeking approval and avoiding rejection (Mearns & Thorne, 2007). Clients express these changes as improvements in their self-acceptance, self-confidence, self-worth and sense of belonging.

Rogers' approach was influenced by the Western individualistic culture that he belonged to. Despite Rogers stating people are prosocial, his ideas have been criticised as emphasising individualism and autonomy over interdependency and social relationships (Kim, 2018). As such, the self-concept proposed is not considered to reflect aspects of collectivistic cultures (e.g., Eastern), specifically social norms concerning maintaining social harmony or respecting hierarchies (e.g., elders, superiors). However, Rogers' emphasis on the actualising tendency and an internal locus of evaluation is not concerned with positioning oneself before others, but rather about not conforming to external and social control, which is detrimental to self and society (Rogers, 1977). As such, whilst culture is a mediating factor in people's self-concept, the process of movement towards an authentic prosocial self remains the same.

Person-centred psychotherapy, along with all psychotherapies, has been criticised for not including the cultural, social, and political factors involved in fostering people's wellbeing (Smail, 2015). However, Schmid (2012) argues that person-centred psychotherapy is a socio-political endeavour due to its stance that the client is the expert, in control, and their agency is respected. This is underpinned by Rogers' proposal that conditions of worth are not just placed on a person by their caregivers, but also by "social others" (e.g., teachers, politicians), recognising influences beyond the family on a person's sense of self (Lago, 2018; Rogers, 1959). Lago (2018) develops this argument with "culture-specific conditions of worth," which represents the structural and material inequalities within societies (e.g., institutions, ideologies) that can have a particular impact on minority groups.

Due to the presence of these power imbalances in influencing psychological distress, therapists need to be politically engaged and challenge structural inequalities, as neglecting structural inequalities risks therapists becoming agents of social control through reinforcing unequal relational situations (Schmid, 2012). Politically aware therapy aligns with the call to decolonise therapy and challenge the dominant discourse regarding the medicalisation of emotional distress and the silence over the influence of ancestral and intergenerational trauma on people's emotional health (Mullan, 2023).

Recognition of the personal, cultural, social, and political factors involved in the development of relational environments parallels the factors involved in a fieldwork pedagogy: Neither are endeavours that are neutral and individually constructed and maintained, but instead are dynamic and fluid encounters, which, depending on how and for whom they are co-created, influence the present and ongoing experiences of those involved. Subsequently, a person-centred psychotherapy-informed fieldwork pedagogy that centres the role of lived experience, relational dynamics, and the structural social factors that shape ECRs' educational experiences, could facilitate fieldwork which supports ECRs' emotional health and socio-political engagement.

5. Practicing Caring and Compassionate Fieldwork

Anti-colonial, critical, Indigenous, and black feminist scholars have long noted that education and pedagogy can be a practice of freedom and a radical space of possibility (Bishop, 2023; Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994). We argue that fieldwork needs to be included in pedagogical debates. In conversation with person-centred psychotherapy, we advance a relational fieldwork pedagogy that centres compassion and care for researchers. The vignettes come from our ECR experiences and highlight different aspects of pre-, during, and post-fieldwork experiences.

We write from two perspectives with excerpts from three different fieldwork projects. Both authors are ECRs; one is a white Welsh woman who managed and experienced chronic illness, harassment, and assault in the field. The second is a white British man who experienced grief (childless-not-by-choice and animal companion loss) and shame (Harrod, 2021) during fieldwork, and is a person-centred psychotherapist who specialised in sexual abuse and violence. We recognise that our relational selves have been shaped by various personal, cultural, social, and political factors which influence our experiences and responses to them. However, through discussion with colleagues and in conversation with the literature (e.g., Butler-Rees & Robinson, 2020; M. Rose, 2022), we also recognise that our experiences are common within ECR fieldwork.

The vignettes are informed by reflexive fieldnotes which were kept by the two authors as part of their ethnographic or phenomenological fieldwork. Reflexive fieldnotes support the researcher in attuning to their positionality and conversing with themselves about the research process, including the research environment and participant engagements (Frechette et al., 2020). The vignettes were chosen based on the dissonance and distress felt by the authors during the experiences. The projects involved intermittent fieldwork in Ghana (PhD) between January and December 2022, online fieldwork with participants in nature-based interventions (PhD) from October 2020 to June 2021, and fieldwork at a forensic inpatient hospital in England (ECR) between June and September 2024. Fieldwork can be considered a relational pedagogy, which we explore via five vignettes based on our own fieldwork experiences.

6. Risk (Non)assessments

Prior to going to the field, I completed a risk assessment form, which asked me to explore the risks involved with fieldwork. One example was how to mitigate kidnapping, where the only suggestion was to “lock the car door.” This risk assessment did not prepare me for what to do in case of a severe car accident, sexual assault, mugging, or, indeed, kidnapping. I felt that there was a mismatching of experience and emotion between me and the almost non-existent fieldwork processes set out in the university. I was more concerned about how to navigate lone working and what to do in case of an emergency, how to navigate (gendered) danger and risk. The university, on the other hand, did not require checks regarding my fieldwork. I received no training or discussion of what to expect regarding danger and risk, and what to do in risky situations. I felt ashamed that I was worried about fieldwork, as my questions regarding fieldwork were met with a sense of shock that I could be worried. I felt that I should be a brave, independent, and confident researcher, and that I was also ungrateful for questioning the opportunity to conduct fieldwork abroad. (vignette from fieldwork)

The relational environment present does not meet the researcher within her experience of the world, but with disdain for her concerns. There is an absence of empathy, accompanied by judgement over what is worthy of consideration by a university and its members regarding fieldwork preparation and scenarios. The researcher is left with a set of conditions of worth, which implies that, to be a good researcher, she needs to be independent and to be able to face any scenario with bravery and confidence, regardless of the risk to life involved. These conditions are subsumed into the researcher’s self-concept, moving it away from the organism, creating emotional distress (Rogers, 1959); they also create a set of barriers to asking for support (Gatwiri et al., 2025). If the researcher were instead met with empathy, non-judgement, and authenticity, then her concerns could have been openly explored (Rogers, 1957). Despite the researcher being aware of heroic and masculinist researcher academic tropes, they persist, as the researcher’s own experience is rejected. Whereas if the researcher’s own experience is validated, this supports them in rejecting such tropes, reducing emotional distress and the impact on their sense of self (Mearns & Cooper, 2018). Whilst what may happen in the field remains unknown, a supportive conversation will have begun, which could foster constructive actions that could allay the impact of distress in the field.

7. Danger and Harassment

During the field, I pushed myself into situations that I knew were dangerous because I didn’t feel I was a worthy enough researcher, and I felt ashamed that I was scared. Despite my best attempts, I also

did not know how to deal with my presence there due to what I felt to be the extractive nature of my research. Several incidents occurred in the field that shook my sense of self. For example, I was stalked and harassed by a man who followed me from my interview sites and hung around outside the place I was living. This significantly impacted my ability to build relationships and interview the people I was working with. A man with a machete also tried to mug me; however, due to a fortunate turn of events, I managed to escape. I was also fortunate to have survived an almost car accident on a motorway that led us to spin off the motorway at high speed. I was also subject to frequent sexual harassment and incidents of sexual assault. Overall, I dealt with these incidents alone as I didn't feel able to share them, which resulted in me withdrawing, ruminating, and spending a lot of time alone indoors. (vignette from fieldwork)

The researcher enters the field with conditions of worth (e.g., a good researcher is masculine, heroic, and confident despite the dangers), which supports an external locus of evaluation. This leads her to deny her experiences and override her organismic valuing process (going into dangerous situations) and limits how she acts in response to threats to herself (Sanders, 2007). These conditions of worth, alongside the perceived and real absence of an empathic, non-judgemental and genuine network, leave the researcher feeling unable to discuss her experiences. The researcher is left alone with her emotional distress. The resulting sense of shame impacts the researcher's choice of actions, which causes further detriment to her wellbeing (Mearns & Thorne, 2007). Whilst the availability of a warm relational environment for the researcher cannot stop other people's actions and the harm caused by these, it can facilitate people in developing ways to engage constructively with social situations and respond in ways which mitigate their impact (Warner, 2018). This doesn't imply it is the individual's responsibility to account for others' actions, but rather that whilst we may wish for the situation to be different, we can act in ways that are helpful rather than diminishing to ourselves.

8. Shame and Denial

Upon return, I struggled to understand what happened in the field. There was a sense of incongruence between what happened to me and what a "good researcher" should look like. I felt a shock in returning to analyse the "data" in an objective sense, and found re-listening to my interviews difficult. I was not met with a sense that my colleagues felt similarly about fieldwork. The denial of fieldwork difficulty contributed to my temporary withdrawal from research. I sought therapy to discuss my fieldwork and how it had impacted my sense of self. I felt a sense of compassion in therapy that I had not found in the university environment and began to process the fieldwork experience(s). (vignette from fieldwork)

The researcher's experiences are not met on her return, and through the reinforcement of conditions of worth, the researcher's emotional distress increases. This occurs because the dissonance between her experience and how it is responded to reinforces a sense of "having got it wrong," which parallels a growing dissonance between their organism and their self-concept (Rogers, 1959). Subsequently, the researcher becomes estranged from her lived experience, causing them to withdraw. The withdrawal mechanism protects her self-concept but thwarts her actualising tendency. Only upon being received in an empathic and non-judgemental environment is the researcher able to integrate her experiences as they are and revise her sense of self (Cornelius-White, 2007). Whilst therapeutic relationships are unique, their qualities are transferable to our everyday lives. These qualities support the co-creation of relational environments that enable people to trust in themselves to appraise and respond to their experience (an internal locus of

evaluation), which reduces emotional distress and supports constructive action (Henderson et al., 2007; Rogers, 1961).

9. Disenfranchised Grief

Sadly, one of my cats, Charley, died towards the end of fieldwork. My arms ached without her, and my lap felt empty. I gave a lot during the interviews, and one way to recover was to spend time with Charley. Due to being inconsolable and unable to facilitate affective interview spaces, I postponed the final interviews, despite feeling I should carry on. These feelings arose from a sense that a good researcher would put research first and not let their emotions get in the way. Being honest with the participants about why I was postponing the interviews helped them to understand. I am grateful for their kindness and for respecting my need for space by agreeing to the postponements, despite the disruptions to their schedules. During the first interview on my return, the participant referred to her cat when offering an analogy regarding the uniqueness of the community garden she attended. As I had been honest about my situation and begun processing my grief, my emotions were not ambushed by her reference to her cat. Instead, I very much understood what she meant, due to the depth of my own loss. (vignette from fieldwork)

The researcher's choice to meet his participants with authenticity facilitates a reduction in the power imbalance, as it expresses respect for them as equals in the research process, and shows him as a person with emotions and difficulties (Mearns & Thorne, 2007). Through the researcher reflecting on his experience in the moment, he was able to be congruent and meet his experience as it was and not through conditions of worth, which are likely to have led to actions that would have compounded his grief (Rogers, 1961). Through being congruent, the researcher was able to stay with the participant during the interview and maintain it as a safe and open space for the interview.

10. Second Chances

The participants were kind, caring, and motivated to change their lives towards constructive ways of being, both individually and socially. As the research progressed, I began asking myself how I felt about working with participants whose pasts may have involved physical and sexual violence. I felt especially conflicted due to my previous experience of working with survivors of sexual violence. I was also aware that their previous actions would be situated within their experiences and arising from within relationships and not centred on individual attributes. It was clear that both the participants and I wanted the research to demonstrate the role of therapeutic gardens in mental health care. In the end, I continued as I began, meeting the participants with a non-judgemental and empathic attitude. This decision was supported by an open discussion with the garden manager who met my difficulties regarding sexual violence, not knowing the participants' histories and the role of second chances in complex lives, with acceptance and warmth. (vignette from fieldwork)

The researcher approaches the research encounter with the relational qualities of non-judgement and empathic understanding as a basis of his approach. However, this approach is tested when the researcher's experience is confronted with behaviours from others that are inconsistent with aspects of his values. This leads the researcher to question his perception of violent actions and to seek further understanding.

The researcher responds to his dissonance between his self-concept and his experience of the participants with an open and constructive attitude, which is supported by the garden manager's care and non-judgemental attitude. This reduces the researcher's distress as fixed ideas regarding what being a good person involves are loosened through recognition of the complexity of human experience (Rogers, 1959). This enables the researcher to approach his encounters with the participants informed by the present moment rather than preconceived ideas. This supports the researcher in their endeavour for research to be open to all and have meaningful impact on individuals and society.

11. Recommendations for ECRs Conducting Research in the “Field”

We recommend the following actions for consideration by universities, supervisors, and researchers. Advocating for the creation of a person-centred fieldwork pedagogy urges universities, supervisors, and researchers to begin to foster a supportive and compassionate environment for ECRs, supporting the co-creation of current and future compassionate research praxis.

11.1. Embed Institutional Enablers That Encourage Care and Compassion

Have you, as an institution or supervisor, created enablers that reward, rather than penalise, care and compassion prior, during, and after fieldwork?

1. Embed time, support, and resources in funding models, timelines, and budgets for community/research participant dialogue.
2. Embed care criteria into research ethics review and workload models to reward compassionate practice, for example, the creation of open, pedagogical spaces for researchers to discuss distress and difficulty regarding fieldwork.
3. Ensure support and guidance, for example, support ECRs to consider worst-case scenarios in the field. Set up a telephone tree, which details what to do and who to contact in these scenarios (Pollard, 2009).

How universities view and relate to people will influence the processes and practices in place (Lago, 2018; Schmid, 2012). Institutions and supervisors embracing relational qualities of empathic understanding, non-judgement, and authenticity will facilitate people to act from their internal locus of evaluation, reducing distress and enabling care-full and compassionate fieldwork.

11.2. Ensure Person-Centred Care Throughout the Fieldwork Process

Do you, as a permanent member of staff, ensure there is care for ECRs prior to, during, and after fieldwork?

1. What is your role within the university? Do you have the power to push for person-centred care for ECRs?
2. Are safe, open spaces available to explore fieldwork concerns prior to departure?
3. Are fieldwork dangers and risks acknowledged, and is training provided to counter these risks and dangers?
4. Are pre-existing health conditions acknowledged and discussed?

5. What protocols are provided in case of accident, emergency, mugging, sexual assault, kidnapping, illness, arrest, death, etc.?
6. Is there a provision for a buddy or group mentoring system?
7. Is there access to field-informed counselling for researchers?

Developing relational environments that value lived experience, empathy, non-judgement and authenticity centres care towards ECRs in the research process (Rogers, 1957). This will enable discussions that value and support ECRs with their concerns and facilitate acting constructively in difficult situations, supporting their emotional health (Warner, 2018), thus taking a step towards the co-creation of a compassionate fieldwork pedagogy.

11.3. Understand Yourself, Your Motivations, and How Your Research Environment Shapes Your Research

Do you, as an ECR, have an awareness of yourself and how your experiences and values shape your research?

1. Who are you? What assumptions do you hold?
2. How will you connect to people in the field?
3. What pressures do you feel shape your actions and encounters in the field?

As the researcher develops their self-awareness, (which can be in conversation with peers or mentors), including the role of conditions of worth on their actions, they will be able to understand their needs and barriers regarding support, their impact on others, and their aims for research (Rogers, 1961).

Ensuring compassion and care within ECR fieldwork pedagogy is contrary to prevailing neoliberal individualising, competitive, and “fast scholarship” tendencies within HE (“Towards a compassionate turn,” 2019). Our three recommendations above encompass, but do not limit, the potential caring practices that can be embedded within our proposed fieldwork pedagogy.

Throughout this article, we have argued how and why fieldwork needs to be situated within pedagogical theory. Fieldwork needs to be understood and practiced as a relational pedagogy in order to support inclusive and compassionate research environments, so that ECRs are able to undertake care-full research. We have demonstrated that the relational person-centred psychotherapeutic qualities of non-judgement, authenticity, and empathy are essential in facilitating care, trust, and constructive actions. We propose that a fieldwork pedagogy, supported by these principles of person-centred psychotherapy, can co-create facilitative relational environments to respond to the problems *in* and *of* fieldwork.

12. Conclusion

Despite long-standing calls for change in fieldwork research praxis, little has been done by universities to confront issues inherent to fieldwork. In this article, we explored the numerous calls for more care in neoliberal HE, in conversation with literature detailing the problems *in* and *of* fieldwork, particularly for ECRs (Pollard, 2009; Taylor, 2019). While such calls for change in neoliberalised HE and fieldwork are important, we have suggested that these calls require deeper engagement with the intra- and interpersonal relational

dynamics required to foster an environment that would support compassionate fieldwork experiences. We argue that viewing fieldwork as a pedagogy, which is embedded within webs of (un)supportive relations, can help advance the creation of more compassionate fieldwork research praxis. Moreover, viewing fieldwork as a relational pedagogy, underpinned by the qualities of person-centred psychotherapy, can provide a framework for compassionate intra- and interpersonal relations in fieldwork praxis. A person-centred relational pedagogy advocates for institutional- and supervisory-level relational environments that provide supportive networks and spaces, which facilitate researchers to be met with and act with care throughout the research process. Future research could include engaging in decolonial, Indigenous, and pedagogical scholarship to widen our discussion of the role of relational environments, self-concepts, and the more-than-human, for movement towards an inclusive, care-full, and compassionate fieldwork pedagogy for researchers, participants, and universities. Understanding fieldwork as a relational pedagogy therefore is an important first step in co-creating compassionate fieldwork futures.

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Living the Lab: Rethinking Collaborative Practices in Living Lab Contexts Amid Polycrisis

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Abstract

Positioned as a response to the proposition of conducting research in times of polycrisis, this article explores attentive collaboration as a research praxis for addressing cumulative societal challenges in living lab contexts. While living labs are inherently collaborative spaces, they have been criticized for prioritizing productivity and scalability, making the relational dimensions of collaboration difficult to realize. At the same time, the capacity of living labs to meaningfully involve people who are not typically in positions of power, as well as those experiencing crisis situations, has often been overlooked. In response to these challenges, this article presents a living lab workshop, designed as a space to experiment with collaborative research approaches in response to crisis scenarios. Rather than framing the workshop as merely a participatory research event focused on studying crisis, we approached it as a generative site of care-full being-with. During the workshop, temporal, ethical, epistemic, and affective tensions emerged, informing our conceptualization of attentive collaboration in living lab contexts. We argue that living labs must cultivate attentiveness not only to the complexity of issues, but also to the relationships necessary for responding care-fully.

Keywords

attentive collaboration; collaboration; crisis; ethics; living lab; participatory research; polycrisis; slow science

1. Introduction

In this article, we respond to the proposition of conducting research in times of polycrisis. While a crisis emergency can be considered a sudden and harmful (series of) event(s), a polycrisis presents the interconnection between such disruptive happenings (Lawrence et al., 2024). The various crises we are struggling with (e.g., political conflict, climate change, pandemics, racial inequality, gender-based violence) are so deeply intertwined that they constantly reinforce one another: One crisis seems to exacerbate another, which in turn creates new problems. The combined impact of such entangled crises is often more severe than that of one crisis alone. As such, polycrisis can be understood as the entanglement and mutual reinforcement of problems, crises, and harmful processes (Mark et al., 2025; Rakowski et al., 2025). In this context, we should also consider the notion of slow violence: Those harmful, invisible, and ongoing processes that cross time and space, which are often not considered violent, yet bring about systemic harm (Dowler et al., 2024; Nixon, 2011, p. 2). In their book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Kathryn Yusoff, for instance, shows how environmental harm is rooted in racialized histories, linking climate change to extractive and colonial powers (Yusoff, 2018). Polycrisis, as we understand it here, does not merely present the entanglement of several crisis events, but also considers the slow violences that underlie and further deepen those crises.

Whereas a single emergency crisis might require urgent responses, this notion of polycrisis calls for a rethinking and undoing of entire systems, asking for different research approaches to better account for the complex and cumulative challenges of our time. In the midst of polycrisis, Knight (2023) argues that methodological experimentation “provides openings for different ways of thinking about the rights and responsibilities of knowledge and how this responsibility is as much about rethinking the modes of information gathering as the theories informing those methods” (p. 38). Koro and Wolgemuth (2023) use the “apocalyptic world on fire” as an opportunity to rethink methodologies and consider what such new methodologies should do in apocalyptic times. Experimental methodologies that are responsive to the apocalypse, Koro and Wolgemuth (2023) contend, should “generate spaces for reparative methodological actions, which could lead toward less siloed, irrelevant, and efficient/rapid/simplified scholarship and practice” (p. 652). While dominant crisis discourses often steer research toward quick solutions in the name of urgency (Patterson et al., 2021), we argue that research practices must resist premature resolution and instead “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016). That is, we need to learn “to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configuration of places, times, matters, and meanings” (Haraway, 2016, p. 1). Research practices must cultivate attentiveness not only to the complexity of issues, but also to the relationships necessary for responding care-fully (Bringhurst & Zwicky, 2018; Whyte, 2019).

Drawing on those insights, this article sits with the question of what research (methodologies) could be and do amid the complexity of polycrisis. As a response, we suggest the need for care-full research approaches to better account for the cumulative challenges we are experiencing. To do so, we explore *attentive collaboration* as a theoretical and methodological orientation to address the culminating challenges of our

time, as well as an ethical and ontological stance for engaging attentively in collaborative relationships in research and beyond. We consider attentive collaboration as a praxis for imagining and enacting more compassionate futures. To *attend* is to lean in, to direct your awareness; it is not merely registering that something exists but holding space for it. We explore this notion of attentive collaboration in the context of the methodological premises of living lab approaches. Living labs are generally considered collaborative and explorative research contexts that involve multiple stakeholder groups in early stages of research and innovation processes, aiming to address complex challenges (Følstad, 2008; Hagy et al., 2016; Pallot et al., 2010). Yet, their potential to include the voices of people facing crises remains underexplored. Whereas some describe the living lab as an approach, methodology, or tool to find solutions to so-called “wicked problems,” such as climate change, energy transition, food insecurity, or pandemics (Schuurman & Leminen, 2021), we consider living labs as explorative and collaborative *spaces* in which to critically and carefully attend to complex challenges *and* to each other, both within and beyond the living lab context.

This understanding of living labs and attentive collaboration evolved out of a living lab workshop that invited a group of early-career scholars to think-with the proposition of “living labs in (times of) crisis.” Rather than framing the workshop as merely a participatory research event focused on studying and addressing crisis, we approached it as a generative site of care-full being-with, where temporal, ethical, epistemic, and affective frictions guided collaboration and co-creation. The workshop process, collaborative practices, and generative discussions during the workshop made us reflect on how and when living labs can(not) be considered as spaces that elicit attentive collaboration. Here, the notion of attentive collaboration was not the starting point of the workshop, but one of its outcomes. We mainly draw on feminist theories and scholars that attend to care, complexity, and research (methodology) to unpack what attentive collaboration might mean in living lab contexts. In what follows, we discuss living labs and the workshop, highlighting the tensions that emerged and how the notion of attentive collaboration provides a response to these tensions.

2. Living Labs Amid Complexity

We begin our exploration of attentive collaboration as a research praxis by tuning into the methodological premises of living labs. Living labs present participatory and co-creative research contexts that aim to bring various stakeholder groups together to collectively develop responses to complex challenges through (iterative) experimentation of potential solutions in real-life conditions (Hossain et al., 2019). Those diverse stakeholder groups often cover the actors from the Quintuple Helix model for innovation (Carayannis & Campbell, 2012), including education and research, society, the private sector (e.g., industry, businesses), the public sector, and the environment (Baccarne et al., 2016). By bringing those actors together, the living lab approach has mainly been employed to discover new strategies suitable for approaching complex and real-world challenges (Bergvall-Kareborn & Stahlbrost, 2009; ENoLL, 2026). Such living lab approaches closely relate to participatory and user-centered design practices and have first been utilized in the development of technological and consumer-oriented innovation (Ballon & Schuurman, 2015). As an illustration, the Turin Living Lab actively involved city residents in co-producing and enhancing apps, carpooling services, and techniques for collecting environmental data (Nesti, 2018). Besides technology-based living labs, the methodology has also appeared in urban studies and sustainability research (Radulescu et al., 2022; Vicini et al., 2012), with applications in sectors like agrifood (McPhee et al., 2021) and healthcare (Kim et al., 2020). By including societal actors in the ideation of solutions, living labs aim to move beyond top-down and expert-driven development, fulfilling citizens’ unique needs (Ersoy & van Bueren, 2020).

However, as discussed by Pfothenauer et al. (2022), among others, the dominant focus of living labs as problem solvers and innovation producers might lead to solutionism, guided by hegemonic objectives of efficiency, productivity, and scalability. These normative aims tend to position living labs in support of enterprises and industry rather than users or participants, who are often granted only restricted access to user-generated innovations (Kommonen & Botero, 2013). This focus challenges the idea of living labs as genuinely open and co-creative spaces. At the same time, the “projectification” of living labs, where “experiments are shaped by a project logic that emphasizes delivery and implementation, strict monitoring of quantifiable outputs, and the expectation of efficient operations in a controllable and cost-efficient manner” (Sachs Olsen & van Hulst, 2024, p. 996), makes the relational dimensions of collaboration hard to realize. Only by rethinking hegemonic principles that privilege efficiency, productivity, and scalability can we make room for the relational dynamics, care, and compassionate explorations that are indispensable in times of polycrisis. While living labs have been successfully applied across various sectors, the relational capacity of living labs to meaningfully involve people who are not typically in positions of power (Taylor, 2021), as well as those experiencing crisis situations, has often been overlooked. At the same time, living labs cannot simply be used to come up with solutions that respond to all aspects of the complexity of polycrisis. As such, our perspective on living labs had to take a slightly different form, approaching them as a research praxis in which participants collaborate in an attentive and careful way to critically discuss complex challenges. We explored such collaborative practices in living lab contexts by organizing a living lab workshop that gathered a group of scholars to collectively experiment with living lab approaches in crisis contexts.

3. Designing and Living The Lab

3.1. *Workshop Living Labs in Times of Crisis*

The living lab workshop was directed at thinking-with the proposition of “living labs in (times of) crisis.” Its focus emerged from a collective concern about how to meaningfully engage people experiencing crisis situations in research, particularly in the context of the geopolitical conflict in Ukraine. Such conflicts often make in-person engagement impossible, prompting questions about the ethical responsibilities involved in discussing sites of crisis from the outside in order to contribute to finding answers. More generally, the proposition “living labs in (times of) crisis” focused on the challenges of doing research amid polycrisis. Crisis, as we understand it here, takes various forms. On one hand, we were thinking of interconnected crises, including but not limited to political conflict and sovereignty, climate change and social inequality, cultural erasure through colonial powers, national debt and socio-economic vulnerability, and lack of energy supply and issues of unequal access. At the same time, we also considered the idea that research in itself is in crisis, referring to the growing questioning of the sciences in post-truth worlds where perceptions of ‘truth’ are more dependent on collective feeling than on research (McIntyre, 2018), to misinformation and fake news seeping into mainstream discourse and understanding (Miró-Llinares & Aguerri, 2023), and to the issue that conventional and dominant approaches in research (methodology) are no longer equipped to respond to the complexity of our time (Vannini, 2015).

The living lab workshop consisted of two days of intensive collaboration to think about the potentialities of living lab approaches in polycrisis contexts. Taking place at the University of Leuven (Belgium), the workshop aimed to immerse participants in a living lab environment while actively engaging them in the rethinking and reimagining of living lab practices. While the invitation for the workshop was open to anyone interested in

joining, specifically addressing “researchers, industry professionals, and community leaders,” our group of fifteen people ended up mainly coming from academia, either as students, early-career researchers (doctoral or post-doctoral), or university staff, with only one exception (i.e., one participant coming from the public sector). To make relationship building and collaboration easier, our group of fifteen was divided into three smaller groups, each consisting of three to five members, that intensively collaborated over the course of the workshop, interspersed with group discussions for collective knowledge sharing.

To initiate the collaborative process, we drew on the Bristol approach for living labs and designed a roadmap to guide and structure the workshop activities (Zimmermann et al., n.d.). This roadmap outlined six stages we moved through collectively: identifying, framing, designing, reflecting, testing, and sharing (see Figure 1). A deck of guiding cards accompanied each step, prompting the small groups to deepen or redirect their collaborative engagement and shape emerging ideas. These stages were interspersed with plenary discussions on living lab methodologies and processes.

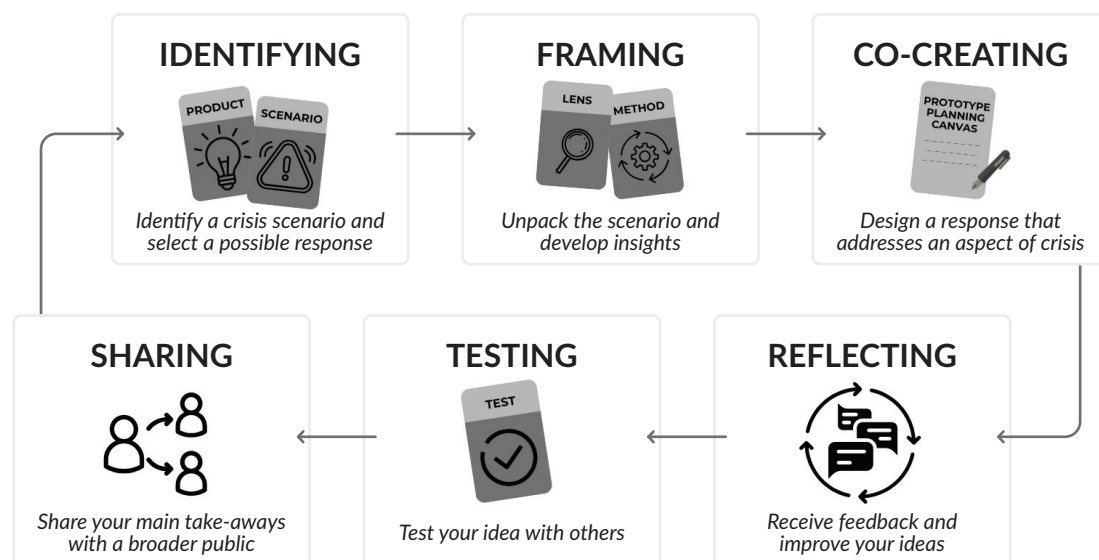


Figure 1. Overview of the six stages of the Living Labs in Times of Crisis workshop, based on the Bristol approach for living labs (Zimmermann et al., n.d.).

The workshop began by *identifying* what specific crises we wanted to explore and how we intended to respond. Using scenario-cards and product-cards, each small group selected one of each to define a shared crisis focus and possible response types, such as designing an intervention plan, running an educational workshop, developing a policy guide, setting up a museum exhibit or artwork, among other possibilities. This first phase helped participants connect with one another and establish a foundation for collaboration before delving into deeper conversations about crises. In the *framing* phase, the groups unpacked their selected scenarios to gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexities and challenges of responding to and researching crises. Each group selected a framing lens and method card from the card decks provided. These cards shaped participants’ inquiries, suggesting different ways to approach the scenarios, for instance, through stakeholders’ profiles, systems and relations mapping, speculative storytelling, or media and narrative analysis. In this process, specific emphasis was placed on critically reflecting on who is affected by crises, while remaining attentive to how these voices are often marginalized or unheard.

The resulting insights opened new ways of seeing the problem, which then informed the *design* phase. In this phase, we used a prototype planning canvas that helped groups map their key insights, outline their intended responses, and consider how they addressed aspects of the crisis scenario. Once their responses were formulated and created, each group presented its ideas to the others, who could offer feedback and comments. These comments were used in the *reflecting* phase to generate insights into recurring feedback, potential improvements, underlying assumptions, and unexpected perspectives. Based on these reflections, the groups designed small-scale experiments to test their ideas, which could take the form of roleplays, rapid iterations, brief interviews, or mock-ups. After completing these experiments, each group created a *sharing* or legacy card, summarizing the ideas they had co-created or discussing their key takeaways. Figure 2 illustrates the material dimensions of the workshop.

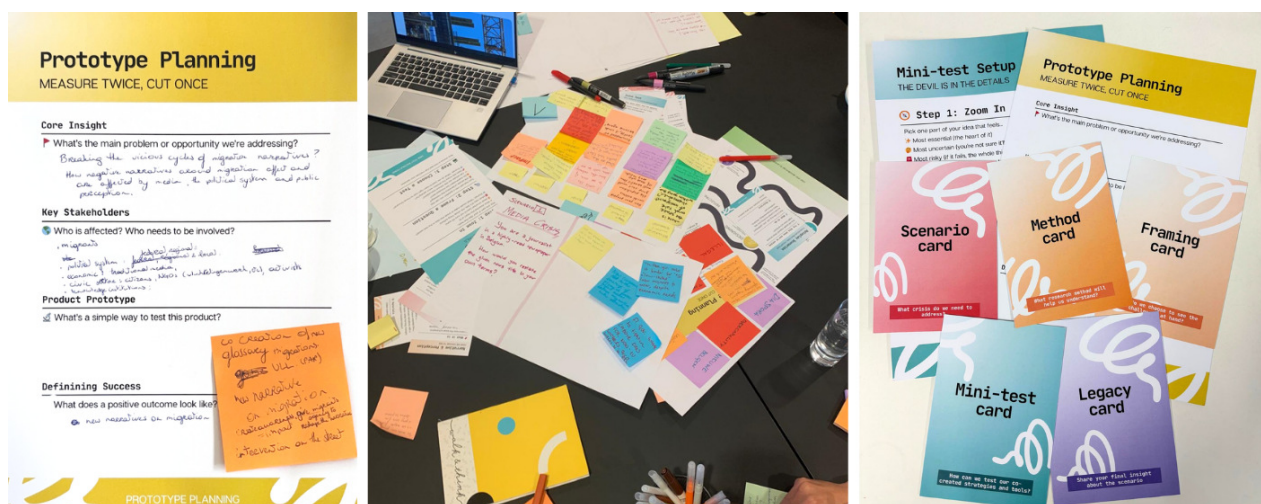


Figure 2. Photographs taken during the Living Labs in Times of Crisis workshop. From left to right: prototype planning canvas, material and creative dimensions of the co-creation phase, and selection of cards used to guide the process.

3.2. Creative Outcomes of the Workshop

The workshop process led to each of the three groups presenting a final design. The first group proposed the creation of a new urban living lab focused on developing a fair migration glossary as a response to the often-negative perceptions of migrants in the media, public discourse, and politics. Another group addressed the lack of national debt literacy by designing an interactive media campaign that visualized what healthy debt might look like in Belgium. In response to the “cumulative weight” of overlapping crises, a third group developed an affective and performative role-playing game that used emotions as stakeholders or characters. The three responses did not directly align with the theoretical and methodological proposition of this article on attentive collaboration. However, the collaborative processes, plenary exchanges, and the thoughts that lingered afterwards made us reflect on the need for and value of collaborative and relational spaces in research, especially when navigating the complexities of polycrisis.

This collaborative reflection also gestured towards rethinking publication practices. Participatory and co-creative research practices, such as those presented in the living lab workshop, generally focus on generating new understandings about certain topics. Without the involvement of participants, these new understandings would take different forms or would not even emerge. In such contexts, we should rethink

conventional approaches to “research data” and instead emphasize the notion of “shared knowledge.” Simply using co-constructed knowledge as “research data” and without involving those who co-created it would raise some serious ethical concerns about intellectual ownership. As discussed by Stouten et al. (2025), participatory and co-creative forms of inquiry require adapted ethical considerations that specifically address the relationality between participants and researchers (if the divide still stands), response-ability to the unpredictability of co-creative research, and acknowledging the situatedness of a research project. In response to these renewed ethical considerations, this article is not so much concerned with analyzing what participants produced during the lab. Rather, it conceptualizes the emerging ideas and understandings that we collectively developed throughout the process. “We,” the authors of this article, refer both to those who conceptualized and organized the living lab workshop, and to those who participated in it and continued to collaborate afterwards. As such, this article essentially presents (parts of) the shared knowledge that emerged during the workshop. We extend our notion of attentive collaboration by not only focusing on the relational dynamics part of the collaborative process, but also on the aftermath of presenting and disseminating that shared knowledge.

4. Towards a Praxis of Attentive Collaboration in Living Lab Contexts

The concept of attentive collaboration evolved from our collective living lab experience and ongoing discussions thereafter, grounded in concerns that the capitalist institutionalization of ethics in times of polycrisis has reduced matters of care to matters of efficiency, leaving room for slow violences to continue their progress in the meantime (de la Bellacasa, 2017; Nixon, 2011). To trouble the dominant imaginary of living labs as problem solvers and innovation producers, we argue for attentive collaboration as a central characteristic of living lab approaches. This resonates with Stengers’s (2018) argument for slow science, where “slowing down means becoming capable of learning again, becoming acquainted with things again, reweaving the bounds of interdependency. It means thinking and imagining, and in the process creating relationships with others that are not those of capture” (p. 82). By naming attentive collaboration as the much-needed relational dimension we need to work towards in living labs, we hope to define an aspect of slow science.

For us, attentiveness means not only paying attention to what demands our attention, but to what matters to those involved and those that remain invisible. Attention is your object of focus, what you are looking at, scrutinizing. To attend is to lean in, to direct your awareness; it is not merely registering that something exists but holding space for it. Attending is closer to care, meaning that it is relational and processual (Mol, 2008). María Puig de la Bellacasa suggests that “relations of thinking and knowing require care” (de la Bellacasa, 2012, p. 198). Care, here, is understood as “vital ethico-affective everyday practical *doings* that engage with the inescapable troubles of interdependent existences” (de la Bellacasa, 2012, p. 199, original emphasis). Such doings are always context-specific, and an ethics of care calls for situated engagements with its complex conditions (Williams, 2017). When you attend to something, you do not simply register it; you stay with it and live-with it (de la Bellacasa, 2017). You respond and adjust yourself around it, allowing it to matter in a way that changes you. You must acknowledge, in attentiveness, that your involvement changes what you attend to as well. Whereas attention keeps the subject-object distinction intact, attentiveness dissolves it. It implies ongoing involvement, as a form of collective care that is developed reciprocally, including both human and other-than-human worlds (Rigkos-Zitthen & Granberg, 2024).

Drawing on what emerged during the workshop, our shared experiences, and the discussions and reflections that continued in the aftermath, we identified a set of tensions that prompted us to reflect critically on living lab processes. In the following sections, we flesh out the temporal, ethical, epistemic, and affective tensions we encountered and consider the possibilities of incorporating a notion of attentive collaboration within living lab settings. As such, our exploration of attentive collaboration responds to the identified tensions, offering an alternative lens to engage with them. We highlight these tensions and potentialities through vignettes, presenting brief scenes, experiences, or reflections from participants (e.g., about the workshop, living labs, or personal experiences), which serve as propositions to further conceptualize attentive collaboration.

4.1. Temporal Tensions: The Urgency of Crisis, Living Labs, and Attentive Collaboration

Attentive collaboration draws on Stengers' (2018) call to slow down as "speed demands and creates an insensitivity to everything that might slow things down: the frictions, the rubbing, the hesitations that make us feel we are not alone in the world" (p. 81). In other words, speed diminishes our capacity to attend to what truly matters. Yet, when this need for slowness and attentiveness is combined with the urgency of crisis and the practice of living labs, a temporal tension emerges. Vignette 1 highlights a friction between the desire for efficiency and the need for building trustful relationships.

Vignette 1. Reflections on temporality

Working with migrants and mobile communities in a living lab setting surfaces tensions: between protection and autonomy, between institutional expectations and lived uncertainty, between the desire for efficiency and the need for trust building. But these tensions can also open other conversations. When researchers and communities co-create tools, stories, or spatial practices, new forms of agency become visible. Crises can generate experimental spaces where solidarity networks strengthen, where alternative infrastructures appear, and where people reimagine mobility not as vulnerability but as resilience.

This tension is echoed in a question raised by another participant: "Where is the mental space to think beyond survival in this situation to participate in a living lab?" Crises of climate, conflict, economic instability, or health are often framed through urgency, yet within this urgency lie relationships, trust, accountability, and forms of situated knowledge that only emerge through attentive, place-based engagement (Whyte, 2019). In this context, Dowler et al. (2024) emphasize how responses to the Covid-19 crisis produced slow violences rooted in the material and bodily precarity of marginalized communities, including Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and Queer and Trans communities. Whyte (2019), similarly, discusses how urgency-centered discourses on climate change are often used to "justify solutions that ultimately harm Indigenous peoples," such as the dispossession of Indigenous lands in the name of forest conservation (p. 5). In doing so, these discourses neglect the relational qualities necessary for just responses to crisis:

Consent, trust, accountability, and reciprocity are qualities of relationships that are critical for justice-oriented coordination across societal institutions on any urgent matter. Yet they are precisely the kinds of qualities of relationships that take time to nurture and develop. That is, they are necessary for taking urgent action that is just, but they cannot be established urgently. (Whyte, 2019, p. 2)

We agree that real-life challenges, such as flooding, *do* ask for urgent responses, but they *also* and *always* ask for considered, care-full relationships. Rather than positioning urgency and care as oppositional, research in times of crisis might aim to cultivate responses that are ample enough to hold both. In such contexts, different researchers within one team can attend to different temporalities of response, without urgency excusing careless action. From this perspective, the epistemic potential of living labs extends beyond the sharing and creating of problem-based knowledge to include experiential knowledge about relational qualities of consent, trust, accountability, and reciprocity. Such qualities essentially relate to being attentive to multiple needs (both urgency and care) that operate across different interests. Yet, the ability to slow down in research is not a universal privilege, as many scholars, especially those in precarious positions, are compelled to maintain accelerated research and publishing rhythms.

4.2. *Ethical Tensions: Stakeholder Inclusion and Real-Life Challenges*

Living labs are known for their engagement with various stakeholders. One of the greatest concerns for us coming out of the workshop was that, as researchers experimenting with real but removed crisis scenarios in a contained two-day lab, we were acting as if we were pretending to be “outside the worlds we wanted to see transformed” (de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 11). Vignette 2 reflects this tension, showing the importance of stakeholder inclusion in real-life crisis contexts.

Vignette 2. Ethical reflections on inclusion

As a former aid worker in Haiti, the notion of attentive collaboration triggers an internal dilemma. In Port-au-Prince, even years after the destructive earthquake hit, mothers are buying mudcakes to feed their children—or at least still their feeling of hunger, as the dried mixture of soil and water does not provide any nutritional value. She moves on to the makeshift shelter her household lives in, a shack that hardly offers any protection against the surrounding violence or the elements, be it the soring sun or the torrential Caribbean rains....Water sources polluted, the rich forest disappeared, the coastline full of plastic against a backdrop of polycrisis, including gang-violence, political instability, fragile infrastructure, a high risk to flooding, earthquakes and hurricanes, poverty and public health crisis. It is clear that it is exactly the actors suffering from the consequences from these crisis are to be centrally engaged in addressing them, on both a strategic and practical level, as the communities living in these dire conditions, the organizations working with them and the environments and biodiversity present are exactly the ones holding the knowledge and the key to change the way crises are addressed.

In our workshop, we were concerned that there were not enough entangled stakeholders involved to make the workshop grounded in a sociomaterial reality. Were we basing our speculation on situated knowledge (Haraway, 2016), or acting like “an enlightened outsider who knows better” (de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 11)? Sitting with this discomfort, we wonder what a living lab would look like that did not center its speculation on out-there scenarios, but the scenarios that affected the lives of the participants directly. Some felt uncomfortable working on topics we are not necessarily experts in, lacking emotional closeness and situated insights on the complexities. As Tronto (1998), we wonder: “Who gets to articulate the nature of needs and to say what and how which problems should be cared about?” (p. 18). At the same time, and in a cosmopolitical sense, we wonder how we are complicit in being captured by systems we are a part of, rather

than being responsible for how we are entangled in causes and capable of change (Stengers, 2018). Maybe we were presuming our own right to judge, or maybe we were denying our ability to respond.

Our unease was not incidental but instructive, signaling that speculation becomes meaningful only when it attends to the realities we are already part of. Perhaps the role of a living lab is not so much about inventing “the” solution for any complex topic in society, but to grapple with themes that are part of our everyday lives and emotionally significant to us. Living labs do not resolve big unknowns of crises but help participants develop skills to navigate them. In this setting, attentive collaboration can take the shape of co-creating new stories for the future using pieces of the present and fragments of the past. In this way, attentive collaboration is messy, but “what is messy is not defective but simply that with which we have to learn to live in and think with” (Stengers, 2018, p. 120). At the same time, for us, attentiveness should be concerned with what matters to those involved or those affected yet unable to participate. This involves but also goes beyond multiple stakeholder inclusion. The European Network of Living Labs (2026) argues that, by including citizens, academia, the private sector, and public authorities, “living labs create a neutral and trust-based environment.” We contend, however, that living lab processes are never neutral, nor should they be, and that simply assembling a diverse group of stakeholders does not guarantee just transformation or innovation. Taylor (2021), for instance, argues that living labs risk reproducing power asymmetries by attracting stakeholders “who are already on the receiving end of power” (Sachs Olsen & van Hulst, 2024, p. 996). Attentiveness refers not only to cultivating relationships among those who participate, but also attending to those who remain uninvited or unable to join the discussion, for example, by considering how outcomes of a living lab extend beyond those represented in the room.

This perspective moves beyond a focus on human actors alone and should encompass other-than-humans, such as non-human animals, plants, landscapes, and more. As living labs are not isolated units of inquiry, attentiveness requires considering how their activities and outcomes affect broader human and other-than-human actors and environments. In two labs situated in Australia and South Africa and (co-)facilitated by some of the authors of this article, attentiveness particularly extended to other-than-human environments with the aim of eliciting a collective imagination of multispecies urban and community spaces (i.e., Jacobs et al., 2026). Here, attending to the place and context in which the labs unfold also allows engagement with the specific histories and sociomaterial realities that shape these settings. It is exactly this attentiveness that allows for rethinking power dynamics within the living lab itself. In doing so, attentiveness enables living labs to generate more just and care-full practices (Williams, 2017).

4.3. Epistemic Tensions: The Challenge of Being Stuck and a Practice of “Unlearning”

For us, attentiveness means not only paying attention to that which demands our attention, but to what *matters* to those involved: Our values must reflect the here-and-now sociocultural, environmental, affective materialities with which we live. Adjusting that relationship toward some kind of harmony is a part of the messy work. In this way, there is an epistemological aspect to attentiveness as well, because “the answer to the question, ‘is it a fact?’ belongs to those for whom this question is a matter of concern” (Stengers, 2018, p. 83). We understand that values and science can go hand in hand when we realize that the facts of the crisis are made up of situated knowledge (Haraway, 2016), rather than deferring to general authority. What matters and what is valued becomes a collective negotiation taking place in context. In this manner, we are trying to learn “what a life worth living demands, and the knowledges that are worth being cultivated” through research in times of crisis (Stengers, 2018, p. 82).

The unease and uncertainty we felt regarding stakeholder inclusion allowed further explorations on living lab approaches and inclusion, providing an opportunity for collective learning. During the workshop, we worked with card stacks to form rearrangeable narratives that encouraged a “sense of multiple subjectivities” (Hostetler, 2022, p. 24). Yet, this multiplicity of possibilities created a delicate balance between offering enough structure for participants to feel confident in their actions and maintaining openness for new ways of thinking and acting. Participants also struggled with the uncertainty and complexity of the issues, group dynamics, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Vignette 3 highlights how collaborative processes generate feelings of difficulty and unease, inviting a practice of unlearning.

Vignette 3. Epistemic stuckness

Coming from diverse backgrounds and experiencing the world in diverse ways, this led to speaking different languages in our group during the workshop. At times, this led me to feel a bit helpless and frustrated, losing the flexibility and playfulness that is so key to untangling such complex crises in living labs.

What is the role of emotions within such more improvised living labs? I wondered not only about my own internalized frustrations of not moving forward and uncomfortableness to work on topics I am not an expert; but also about the level of complexity and “emotional closeness” a non-expert living lab can and should have. Living labs should provide the room to get “unstuck” together with fellow worried citizens in those topics we otherwise experience as unsurmountable.

This vignette highlights the difficulties of collaboration, as strangers navigated the delicate process of becoming a possible “us,” often generating feelings of stuckness. Being open to these feelings is not the same as inaction, or as Mol (2008) says, “doubt does not preclude action” (p. 93). Whereas we often expect to address problems in a kind of transactional way, such as by creating a product that can be given or sold as the solution, our conceptualization of attentive collaboration is more in line with Mol’s (2008, p. 18) ethic of care in which care is “an interaction in which the action goes back and forth (in an ongoing process).” Stuckness invites a tolerance for ambivalence and uncertainty, epistemically and affectively. After all, discomfort can be pedagogical (Boler, 1999).

In this context, living labs should offer opportunities for becoming ‘unstuck’ when faced with topics that otherwise appear unsurmountable, attending to alternative possibilities, generating a space for “learning again, becoming acquainted with things again, reweaving the bounds of interdependency (Stengers, 2018, p. 82). They function as environments for piecing, re-piecing, assembling, constellating, and collaging elements together that may initially seem disparate. From this perspective, living labs align with a rhizomatic mode of inquiry that connects any point in a system in a non-hierarchical way, thereby creating new units of meaning and action (Lapointe, 2020). Attentiveness within living labs, then, involves exploring new or diverse knowledge sources to encourage alternative ways of understanding crises, leveraging existing knowledge to reach shared views on how to address them, and sustaining and valorising epistemic diversity sources throughout collaboration. This attentiveness to multiple ways of knowing (and being) can guide the development of creative, innovative, and just ideas.

Attentive collaboration strives to hold space for this discomfort with openness, acceptance, and equity by meeting each participant where they are, understanding that each person comes with their own prior experiences, which build our understandings and responses in crisis. In this context, stuckness signals a commitment to care deeply about the issue at hand by attending to its complexity, discomfort, and dilemmas, while avoiding what Whyte (2019) calls “relational tipping points.” The stuckness experienced in the collaborative process gestures towards a critical need for unlearning. Natasha Myers suggests:

Sometimes we need to forget and unlearn what we think matters. We need to rearrange our sensorium and sense-making practices and disrupt disciplinary thought styles and ways of seeing so that other worlds within this world can come into view. (Myers as cited in Truman et al., 2019, p. 232)

The issue of polycrisis in particular, with its low levels of certainty and agreement on its causes and how to tackle them, resists linear thinking and conventional problem-solving approaches.

4.4. Affective Tensions: Building Affective Relationships in Collaborative Processes

Presenting a space for collective meaning-making, we also consider living labs as an affective site of encounter, both between participants and between participants and the topic or issue at stake. Within these encounters, affect emerged as a central dimension. We understand affect as the relational dynamics that unfold and develop between actors (both human and non-human), which shape living lab experiences and the emotions that emerge from them (Clough & Halley, 2007; Massumi, 1995). As participants collaborated in response to crisis scenarios, affects existed and emotions emerged. These affects and emotions influenced how one builds relationships during the workshop, and how one relates to the topic. Vignette 4 addresses these dynamics by focusing on relationship-building within living lab conditions.

Vignette 4. Building affective relationships

Relations emerge between the members of the group working together in the living lab. These relations can seem to flow naturally, or be more contentious, as for example, several members might have a strong personality and harshly disagree during the discussions. This generates other affects that can reinforce or modify our previous state of mind/heart regarding the subject.

In our group, these affects were very much felt, and I think that it is why we created a role-playing game where each character was assigned a specific emotion. Instead of socio-economic, political, or religious elements constituting the fundamental characteristics of the character, it seemed natural to us to put the emotion central, showing how affects matter. They really matter, in the sense that they have a materiality, an impact. We thought that emotions particularly shape people’s reaction to a crisis, and therefore we wanted to use the role-play game to encourage people to try and understand others’ emotions when dealing with a crisis.

Vignette 4 illustrates how affective relationships within living labs and polycrisis are not static but emerge dynamically through the process. This process shows the relationality and complexity of collaborative spaces, where emotions such as anxiety, hope, frustration, and curiosity, among others, shape both the social fabric of the group and the epistemic engagement with the issue at hand. In this sense, affect operates as a mediating force, influencing how participants position themselves and negotiate meaning collectively. De la Bellacasa

(2017) highlights that “a politics of care goes against the bifurcation of consciousness that would keep our knowledge untouched by anxiety and inaccuracy. Involved knowledge is about *being touched* rather than observing from a distance” (p. 93, original emphasis). Attentive collaboration within living labs reflects this stance in that it should generate a space to affect and to be affected (Latour, 2004), whether arising from interpersonal interactions, the topic under discussion, the process itself, the workshop environment, material infrastructures, other-than-human actors, or other affective and embodied intensities that shape the living lab space.

Rather than treating affect and emotion as secondary, some of us made them a central aspect of our inquiry during the living lab workshop. This choice illustrates what living labs can enable. From the perspective of attentive collaboration, living labs become a site of proximity, co-presence, and ongoing interaction that allows us to develop a sensitivity for subtle affective cues and emotional responsiveness. This sensitivity should pick up what remains unsaid. In such a context, emotions become infrastructures of care, supporting collaborative decisions, ethical adjustments, and inclusive knowledge production. Developing a feel for others is not just ethically important, it is a methodological necessity and ontological precondition for engaging in collaborative relationships in times of crisis, both within research and across wider fields of practice, including politics, policymaking, education, and social or institutional engagements.

5. Concluding Remarks

Based on our experience in and reflections after the workshop Living Labs in Times of Crisis, we have identified temporal, ethical, epistemic, and affective tensions that helped us conceptualize attentive collaboration. Through these tensions, we came to realize that a notion of attentive collaboration treats knowledge as plural, contextual, and co-emergent, honoring alternative ways of knowing, including affect as essential rather than incidental. It sustains the relational fabric by building trust across differences in ways that allow people to think, feel, and act together and alongside uncertainty. Attentive collaboration, then, is not simply a method; it is an ethic. It moves away from quick-and-dirty solutionism; instead, it stays with the discomfort. Building on those insights, we invite readers to engage with the following questions to reflect on attentiveness within (your) collaborative research contexts:

- Responsible action beyond urgency: Where might intentionally slowing down lead to more responsible and care-full forms of action, even under pressure? Urgency should not justify careless action, for neither action nor collaboration can ever be neutral. Evaluate which dimensions of practice allow slowness in order to ensure attentive, careful, and relational forms of collaboration. We have considered living labs as a way of redistributing temporal labor rather than choosing one pace over another. Some work must move fast, and other work must slow down so that speed does not become a form of violence.
- Inclusive and reflexive engagement: Whose perspectives or lived experiences can further deepen and steer attentiveness in practice? Actively include stakeholders to meaningfully engage with the issue. But even when one is not directly affected by a crisis, critical reflection is required to examine possible complicity or avoidance of responsibility for transformation. This calls for a critical reflection on one's positionality, since the realities we study are always shaped by our presence as researchers. Such reflections also involve attending to those not present in the room, both human and other-than-human, while critically examining assumptions that define “we” versus “them” and who has the power to decide the “what, when, and how” of the polycrisis.

- Embracing discomfort: What assumptions, habits, or dominant practices might I need to unlearn to allow alternative possibilities to emerge? Stay with discomfort rather than rushing to resolve it. During discomfort, create space for “unlearning”: Shift from dominant paradigms and practices, enabling new directions to take shape. Attentive collaboration reframes “being stuck” as an epistemic event, pushing back against methodological norms that equate fluency with rigor. Here, difficulty becomes evidence of ethical attunement rather than incompetence.
- Affect as epistemic insight: What emotional and affective dynamics are present in this collaborative space, and what might they be revealing about the situation? Recognize living labs as affective sites of encounters where actors, both human and other-than-human, mutually influence one another. In this context, emotions provide essential epistemic insights. Living labs have always operated affectively, whether acknowledged or not. Prioritizing affective care as a part of attentive collaboration simply makes this explicit and accountable.

These guiding questions can enable attentive collaboration and help activate the “living” dimension in living labs, which involves cultivating attentiveness and care within its collaborative processes. De la Bellacasa (2017) challenges us to think of research as a form of living-with each other, leading us to ask: What does it mean to live-with polycrisis? As discussed by de la Bellacasa, the notion of living-with attends to building caring and affective relationships amid urgency, uncertainty, and discomfort, both in human relationships and with other-than-humans. The “living” in living labs, thus, reflects a commitment to interdependency, reciprocity, and compassion, encompassing both living-with each other (i.e., building caring and affective relationships) and with the issue (i.e., attending carefully to it). These “living” qualities become a counter-practice to polarization, individualism, fear, and social fracture that increasingly shape contemporary life. In this way, attentive living labs can become forms of resistance in themselves. Activating this notion of living in living labs and in research more generally holds potential for shaping more caring and compassionate societies.

We suggest that, in polycrisis, one such act of care lies in cultivating relational capacities rather than prioritizing outputs. Something important is lost when living labs are judged by output alone, and so we wanted to consider, in our workshop and this article, what becomes possible when living labs are treated as “living” sites of epistemic humility and care. In this sense, it pushes back against the prevailing demands for productivity and efficiency in academia and related fields. In naming attentiveness and attentive collaboration, we aim to offer not a method to be replicated but a stance for research in polycrisis: one that slows down (on occasion), honors situated knowledge, and sustains the relational conditions needed for collective response. Living labs, approached this way, become more than innovation infrastructures; they become spaces where care, imagination, and responsibility can be practiced together. There lies an opportunity here to further flesh out what it means to build meaningful relationships in living lab and polycrisis contexts. In times when crisis demands rapid action yet resists simple solutions, cultivating attentiveness may be one of the most meaningful contributions the humanities and social sciences can make.

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Transformative Research and Social Inclusion: An Educational Research-Policy Dialogue

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Abstract

This article presents the outcome of an interdisciplinary co-creative research-policy dialogue between senior policymakers in education and scholars in transformative research about what it means to create a caring society in the face of persistent inequalities. The article is based on an innovative collaboration between policymakers in the Department of Education and Youth in Ireland and researchers working on deep whole-of-society transformation. The participating policymakers within the Department of Education and Youth cover a wide range of issues across the Department's policy portfolio, including quality, wellbeing, workforce planning, inclusion, curriculum development, and teacher education. Three key future-oriented ideas with potentially transformative potential were presented by the research group to the policymakers and responses were gathered through a follow-up questionnaire and in-depth conversations. The ideas presented were (a) the idea of the polycrisis, (b) a generative framework for transformation, and (c) social duality and the “sacred ordinary.” The article presents the findings of this dialogue, focusing on the challenges and opportunities of implementing such far-reaching ideas in practice, including the deep structural changes needed to address issues of social inclusion in education.

Keywords

education policy; futures thinking; human flourishing; polycrisis; research-policy dialogue; social inclusion; societal transformation

1. Introduction

The UNESCO report *Reimagining Our Futures Together* by the International Commission on the Futures of Education acknowledges the power of education to bring about profound change. The report calls on education to underpin a transformation in our relationships with each other, with the planet, and with technology (UNESCO, 2021). Such a transformation, it asserts, is necessary to address persistent poverty and entrenched inequalities at both national and international levels, to counter democratic backsliding and growing polarisation, to mitigate against climate change and environmental harm, and to prepare for technological disruption, including that caused by artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies.

This article is grounded in a co-produced research-policy engagement between a senior management group within the Department of Education and Youth in Ireland and a university-based futures-oriented research group working on deep societal transformation. This engagement took place within the context of preparations for a national Convention on Education in Ireland. This national Convention is planned to run throughout 2026 as “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for children, young people, parents, educators and wider society to help shape Ireland’s education system for decades to come” (Department of Education and Youth, 2026). The Convention comprises 150 people across four groups: children and young people; parents and guardians; school employees and early years educators; and education stakeholders. The focus is on “primary and post-primary schools, the transitions within education, looking at what is working well, what challenges need attention, and what changes may be needed in the years ahead.” The agenda for the Convention is being informed by a National Conversation on Education which comprises a national survey of public views on education, along with school community engagements and regional consultations across Ireland. Recommendations from the Convention will inform a long-term Department of Education and Youth strategy which will set the future policy direction for education in Ireland.

Simultaneously, an interdisciplinary research project—Deep Societal Innovation for Sustainability and Human Flourishing (DSIS)—based in an Irish university, is exploring the challenges and opportunities of formulating and implementing transformative policy, that is, the far-reaching policy changes needed to bring about rapid, deep whole-system transformation to address the myriad challenges currently facing society (Hughes et al., 2024). One of the authors of this article has the unique position of being employed full-time by the Department of Education and Youth while also being seconded two days per week to work within the university on the DSIS project. This arrangement facilitated the presentation of ideas from the DSIS project to senior policymakers in the Department with a view to achieving co-creative research-policy engagement aimed at exploring how futures-oriented research might inform the Convention on Education and the Department’s subsequent long-term strategy. Throughout the research-policy dialogue, the dual-role author was guided by the terms of the agreement between the Department of Education and Youth and the research university, which ensures confidentiality of government information where necessary while abiding by the research ethics guidelines of both organisations.

The participating policymakers within the Department of Education and Youth cover a wide range of issues across the Department’s policy portfolio, including quality, wellbeing, workforce planning, inclusion, curriculum development, teacher education, education settings inspections, and strategy development.

Three key future-oriented ideas from the DSIS project with potentially transformative potential were considered by the policymakers through group discussion, follow-up questionnaire, and in-depth one-on-one conversations. These ideas were (a) the idea of the polycrisis, (b) a generative framework for transformation, and (c) social duality and the “sacred ordinary.” The article was subsequently co-developed to articulate shared insights emerging from this dialogical process.

1.1. Background Context on Ireland's Education System

A short overview of the education system under the remit of the Department of Education and Youth is given here to facilitate an understanding of the terms used later in the article. The education system in Ireland is made up of early years education, primary, and post-primary education. Education is compulsory for children in Ireland from the ages of six to sixteen or until students have completed three years of post-primary education. Most children attend state-funded schools. All forms of pre-primary education under age six are optional. In general, early childhood care and education is delivered outside the formal education system by a range of private, community and voluntary providers. In Ireland, all children are entitled to free primary education. Post-primary education consists of a 3-year Junior Cycle, followed by a two- or three-year Senior Cycle, depending on whether an optional transition year is taken between Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle, which culminates in the Leaving Certificate examination. Performance in the Leaving Certificate examination is widely used for purposes of selection into employment, and into further and higher education. The Department of Education and Youth is also responsible for policy and delivery of services related to youth and youth work. Inclusive education is stated as a central principle of Ireland's education and training system, with the aim of meaningfully engaging all learners, including those with special educational needs and learners impacted by disadvantage.

A snapshot of some of the key areas of Ireland's education system that are the focus of current policy and public discussion include: the need for Ireland's teaching workforce to reflect the changing demographics of Irish society (Keane et al., 2023); the competitive nature of the Leaving Certificate “Points Race” and its influence on second level education; patronage of schools, given that, for example, 88 percent of primary schools in Ireland are run by the Catholic Church (Department of Education and Youth, 2025a); the disruption to education being caused by AI and the possible opportunities and dangers arising from that disruption; and the need to equip children and young people with the holistic knowledge, capacities, and skills to succeed and thrive in a rapidly changing world (Department of Education and Youth, 2025b).

2. Futures-Oriented Conceptual Thinking: Deep Societal Innovation

The research-policy engagement presented here draws on the literature on DSIS (Hughes et al., 2021, 2024). DSIS is a novel conceptualisation of whole-of-society transformation to address the multiple challenges of the polycrisis. As Rakowski et al. (2025) have documented, there is significant variation in the literature with regard to the characteristics of the polycrisis, the specific crises it encompasses, its key drivers, the regions and groups most affected, and the potential interventions to address it. Nevertheless, they conclude that there is a common understanding of the polycrisis as “multiple co-occurring, causally entangled crises with synergistic and cascading effects on multiple systems degrading humanity's prospects.” Moreover, proposed interventions to address the polycrisis emphasize a need for transformational change. The DSIS model aligns with Rakowski et al.'s definition as well as their diagnosis of the need for fundamental transformation.

The DSIS model aims to reframe the dominant narrative of societal change from sociotechnical transitions, in which the development and adoption of sustainable technologies will suffice to address the crisis of climate change, to a narrative of deep global cultural transformation whereby deep changes in multiple societal systems will be required to address not only climate change but the whole array of individual crises which make up the polycrisis. The DSIS model posits the urgent need for transformational change through a fundamental reimagining of the major social institutions that together comprise contemporary societies. The social institutions which are included in the model are politics, economics, technology, religion, gender, and education.

DSIS asserts that these social institutions are failing not only because they are unable to address the polycrisis but also because in their present form they are actively contributing to it. In its formulation of the urgent necessity to fundamentally reimagine these social institutions, the DSIS model highlights the need to place care at the core of such deep reimagining. This in turn involves a reexamination not only of the structures and practices of contemporary social institutions and the values that underpin them, but also, more fundamentally still, a reexamination of what it means to be human. In this respect, the DSIS model draws upon the concept of *Homo Curans* and the principle of care both as a central animating principle in human nature and for ethical directionality in the task of reimagining global society.

The DSIS model has so far been applied to assert the importance of approaches to economics “beyond growth” (Hughes et al., 2021), the need to develop spaces for exploring new forms of democracy involving the supplementing of representative democracy and the growth of direct, autonomous, and communal forms of democracy (Harris & Hughes, 2020), and the need to expand the concept of responsible research and innovation to design effective governance for the ethical development of technology for the common good (Hughes & Winickoff, 2021). As mentioned above, the DSIS model also explicitly includes religion, gender and education as additional social systems in need of deep reimagining. The inclusion of this diverse range of social institutions is aimed at acknowledging the deeply interconnected nature of social systems and demonstrating that such an inclusive approach is essential for addressing the accelerating polycrisis.

Societal transitions or transformations have been classified based on two key dimensions: the speed of transformation (ranging from sudden and disruptive to gradual and protracted) and the scale of the system being transformed (from mega-transformations affecting entire societies to changes in specific systems or subsystems; see Linnér & Wibeck, 2020). While policy discourse tends to emphasise incremental reform of individual sectors or social institutions, the DSIS model stresses the need to focus on rapid, large-scale transformation of our entire global society. Such a focus is not entirely without precedent in policy. The United Nations 2030 Agenda, for example, emphasizes the implementation of 17 interconnected Sustainable Development Goals and is aimed at rapidly transforming societies worldwide into more ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable entities (United Nations, 2015). However, international research and practice in transformation governance still generally concentrate on specific sectors or topics rather than on the governance of holistic, whole-of-society, and global changes (Patterson et al., 2017). The DSIS model, in contrast, stresses the need for joined-up policy visioning and action at deep structural levels.

2.1. *Homo Curans and the Multidimensional Nature of Care*

The DSIS model places care as central to the reimagining of social institutions for greater sustainability and human flourishing (Hernandez, 2026). As already stated, it adopts the concept of *Homo Curans* (the caring human) as a more authentic and evidence-based model for what it means to be human than the concept of *Homo Economicus* which currently underpins many of the contemporary social institutions that are exacerbating the polycrisis.

Over recent decades, socio-political mobilisation of care has gained momentum as a pathway to achieving greater sustainability and human flourishing (Daly, 2021; Held, 2006; Tronto, 2013). Psychology has acknowledged its fundamental role in human development, while the disciplines of economics, political science and sociology continue to conceptualise and incorporate care into key areas, including health, work, migration, inequality, power, and climate change (Ley, 2023; Lynch, 2022; Moriggi et al., 2020). In line with this literature, the DSIS model stresses that care is a multifaceted term studied across multiple disciplines, each of which offers distinct perspectives and contributions. The multiplicity of scholarship on care includes perspectives from psychology, which defines care as prosocial behaviour characterized by empathy, compassion, and supportive relationships. Feminist theories, particularly the ethics of care, address care's gendered nature and societal undervaluation. Religious traditions present care as a moral imperative tied to ethical living. In science and technology disciplines, care manifests through ethical innovation, human-centred design, and sustainability practices. Indigenous wisdom traditions provide a holistic and relational approach that complements modernist academic and professional conceptions of care, while the concept of care intersects with discourses on conservation, natural resource management and resilience, highlighting the interdependence between humans and natural systems.

Within the DSIS model, the importance of different ways of seeing is included as an essential element in the reimagining of social institutions. This diversity in definitions of care within the DSIS model is seen not as a weakness, but a strength, enabling disciplinary, cultural, and epistemic diversity. This multiplicity offers valuable entry points for the understanding of care as a central element in human flourishing and sustainability transformation.

2.2. *DSIS Futures-Oriented Ideas*

The three key ideas from the DSIS literature considered by a group of senior policymakers in the Department of Education and Youth will now be outlined. These ideas individually represent key concepts relevant to deep system reimagining, while together they comprise a coherent narrative for conceptualising whole-of-society change.

2.2.1. *The Contemporary Polycrisis*

Humanity currently faces a long list of crises, including climate change, ecological destruction, technological disruption, socially destabilising levels of inequality, steeply rising geopolitical tensions, and war. A growing body of opinion views these crises as deeply interlinked and a signal of the necessity for deep systemic change across the whole of society (Kanger & Schot, 2019), as well as for methodologies that allow decision-makers to understand and foster deep structural change. The term polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2022) has been used

to recognise the multiple nature of the crises we face and also to highlight the fact that the deepening of one crisis can exacerbate and accelerate every other crisis. As articulated by Morin and Kern (1999, p. 74): “There is no single vital problem, but many vital problems, and it is this complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem.”

The idea of the contemporary polycrisis, and the need to think beyond climate change as the sole global issue that needs to be addressed, was considered by the policymaker group, represented in the form of a single slide with pictorial representations of each of the major crises which constitute the polycrisis.

2.2.2. Framework for Global Cultural Transformation

A generative framework for conceptualising deep whole-of-society transformation was the second DSIS idea considered by the group. This framework comprises four sides of a picture frame, with the social institution to be reimagined placed at the centre of the frame. The four sides of the frame are: narratives of global transformation; ethical direction; conceptualising transformation; and ways of seeing (Hughes et al., 2024). These four sides of the DSIS framing reflect the underlying premises of the model: that the transformation to sustainability will extend beyond the narrative of techno-social transition (narratives of transformation); that the transformation will be inherently normative (ethical direction); that considerations of the dynamics of transformation must include a diversity of types of change, including changes in culture, practices, and values (conceptualising transformation); and that any model of transformation must be deeply transdisciplinary and inclusive of currently marginalised worldviews (ways of seeing).

The framing is generative in that, rather than presenting answers to each of the questions posed, it invites input from participants on perspectives on each of the four aspects of the frame. The framework was discussed by the group, represented in the form of a single slide showing each of the four sides of the framing, each of which was briefly explained.

2.2.3. Social Duality and the Sacred Ordinary

The DSIS literature also presents the idea of social duality as the basis for societal transformation. This idea is that contemporary society comprises two contrasting but coexisting social templates. The dominant social template operates on values of hierarchy, inequality, coercion, and private gain. The rewards within this template are status, power and wealth. Alongside this dominant template, however, an alternative social template coexists which is based on values of equity, cooperation and public good. DSIS's articulation of this social duality draws upon philosophy (Badiou, 2022), sociology (Eisler & Fry, 2019), feminist theory (Lynch, 2022), and archaeology and anthropology (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021) to articulate the two contrasting social templates.

Moreover, the value accorded to the functions of each system reflects the dominant systems' values and power. While status, power, financial reward, and wealth are accorded to those within the dominant hierarchical social system, this system could not persist if the essential functions performed within the coexisting relational system were not being carried out. These essential functions include having and raising children, educating for social good, caring for the sick and elderly, and providing essential services such as

food and care. Gender norms play a central role in this division of labour and the value ascribed to tasks across both social templates. According to Jablonka (2022), whatever is done by hypermasculine males is seen as highly valuable, and whatever is done by women and “weaker” men is viewed as being inherently of less value. As a result, the very functions which are essential to the survival of humanity, including producing and nurturing life, are denigrated and devalued.

To further explain the concept of social duality, DSIS also introduces the idea of the “sacred ordinary” (McAleese & Hughes, in press). It identifies the loss of “the Sacred,” which can be interpreted in either a religious or secular sense, in modern society as one of the deep roots of the contemporary polycrisis. In our materialist, hyper-competitive, and hyper-acquisitive societies, human beings and Nature are seen as resources for exploitation. Human value and meaning are sought through material wealth and hierarchical social status. The essentials that most people truly value as sacred, such as love, care, beauty, meaning, and relationality, are denigrated and undervalued. The DSIS model proposes a narrative of transformation to greater sustainability and human flourishing as entailing a “restoring of the sacred ordinary,” through which the rediscovery of the fundamental experiences of relationality, joy, meaning, and beauty, which are found in everyday experience and which motivate and define us as human, can bring about a rebalancing of the dual templates for social organisation.

The ideas of social duality and the sacred ordinary were discussed by the policymaker group, presented in the form of a single slide with pictorial representations of the two templates along with a brief explanation of each.

2.2.4. Goals of This Study

The present study has three key aims. First, to test the conceptual basis of the DSIS model (its conceptual validity and overall coherence of the framework) with senior policymakers in a national education system. Second, to gain insights into how the DSIS model, and its vision for reimagining social institutions to address the polycrisis, might be usefully applied in practice to bring about transformative change in education. Third, to use the findings gained from engagement with senior policymakers in education to further develop the DSIS conceptual framework and research engagement process.

3. Methodology

The engagement for this study took place within the context of preparations for a national Convention on Education and was facilitated by the fact that one author of the current article, through a unique secondment arrangement between policy and academia, is both an employee of the Department of Education and Youth and a member of the future-oriented academic research team. The methodology which emerged as a process of research-policy engagement is outlined in greater detail below. It is acknowledged at the outset that the findings of this study should be viewed in the light of the limits of inference from a small sample and a highly specific institutional context, but present a valuable contribution to the literature nonetheless.

3.1. Discussion of Key Ideas by the Senior Policymaker Group

The first step in the process was the consideration of the three key DSIS concepts delivered as a short presentation, outlined above, by the senior policymaker group. This presentation included an explanation of the idea of the contemporary polycrisis, which was depicted in a single slide with pictorial representations of each of the major crises that constitute the polycrisis. The DSIS framework was then presented in the form of a single slide showing each of the four sides of the framing, each of which was briefly explained. Finally, the ideas of social duality and the sacred ordinary were presented in the form of a single slide with pictorial representations of the two social templates along with a brief explanation of each.

A discussion session took the form of a 15-minute presentation on these key DSIS ideas by the author of this article who works in both the Department and the DSIS research group. This presentation was followed by 15 minutes of questions and answers and group discussion. The members of the group comprised 10 officials, including assistant secretary, principal officer, and assistant principal officer grades. These grades are the three highest grades in the Irish civil service below the secretary general, who is the head of a government department. The areas of responsibility of the members of the management group covered a wide range of functions within the Department, as mentioned above, and as will be clear from the questionnaire and further findings presented below.

As well as presenting the DSIS ideas, this session also allowed members of the group to clarify their understanding of the concepts and agree to participate in an online questionnaire as the next step of the research.

The number of policymakers involved in the study overall was 10. Of these, all 10 participated in the initial presentation session, nine of whom responded to the online questionnaire, which will be outlined below, and four of whom were involved in the in-depth conversations.

3.2. Reflective Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was co-designed by one researcher in the DSIS research group and one policymaker from the Department of Education and Youth and distributed to members of the policy group. The questionnaire comprised the 11 open-ended questions shown in Table 1.

Questions 1 to 6 were designed to ascertain the level of interest and practical policy relevance of each of the 3 key DSIS ideas. Questions 7 and 8 aimed at assessing the resonance and practicality of the overall narrative and framework of the DSIS model taken together. Question 9 asked for views on the opportunities and challenges for implementing the future-oriented ideas that DSIS espouses. Question 10 specifically asked about the relevance of these ideas for policy aimed at creating a caring society in the face of persistent inequalities. Finally, Question 11 allowed respondents to add any comments they feel are not covered elsewhere.

Nine out of ten of the policymaker group responded to the questionnaire. Feedback from participants showed that several took up to two hours to record their views, reflecting a very high level of commitment on the part of participants.

Table 1. Online questionnaire.

1	Is this idea of the contemporary polycrisis of interest to you in your role within the department? Please explain why (or why not).
2	Is this idea of the contemporary polycrisis of direct practical relevance in your role in the Department? Please explain why (or why not).
3	Is this framing of deep global cultural transformation of interest to you in your role within the Department? Please explain why (or why not).
4	Is this idea of deep global cultural transformation of direct practical relevance in your role in the Department? Please explain why (or why not).
5	Are the related ideas of social duality and the sacred ordinary of interest to you in your role within the Department? Please explain why (or why not).
6	Are the related ideas of social duality and the sacred ordinary of direct practical relevance in your role in the Department? Please explain why (or why not).
7	Do these ideas resonate with you? (i.e., the polycrisis, the framework for global cultural transformation, and the sacred ordinary)
8	Could they inform the far-reaching policy changes needed to address the polycrisis?
9	What are the challenges and opportunities of implementing such far-reaching ideas in education in practice?
10	With regard to social inclusion, could these ideas improve our understanding of what it means to create a caring society in the face of persistent inequalities?
11	Would you like to add any final thoughts that have not been covered?

3.3. In-Depth Conversations Between Policymakers and Transformation Researchers

As a third step in the process, two senior members of the DSIS research group met one-to-one with four members of the Department of Education and Youth's policy group for one-hour in-depth conversations to further explore the themes that had emerged from the process thus far. The selection of policymaker participants in the conversations was based on balancing two principles, namely seniority and coverage of critical policy areas. The selection criterion of seniority was included as the more senior policymakers in the group can be expected to have a wider systemic view of the Department's policy activities as well as direct personal experience of the challenges and opportunities involved in system change. The criterion of coverage of critical policy areas was included as it was deemed important to capture as wide a range of views from across the Department's activities as possible to inform the research findings.

Two of the in-depth conversations were held in person; two conversations were held online. While in-person conversations were deemed preferable, logistical reasons dictated this mix of in-person and online conversations. Conversations were recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed for analysis. Recordings and transcripts were offered to the participants and, following analysis, the copies were destroyed.

A number of themes which emerged from the research team's analysis of the questionnaires were used as a guide for the in-depth conversations. These themes were: (a) highlighting the potential and need for systemic

policy responses; (b) naming everyday realities in education; (c) highlighting necessary/holistic educational outcomes; and (d) naming (and empowering) potential agents of change. While these themes were used as a guide, in practice the in-depth conversations diverged to cover a wide range of issues.

This article was subsequently co-developed by both researchers and policymakers to synthesise and reflect upon their shared insights, positioning this contribution as a conceptual and reflective account of co-production between research and policy, rather than as an analysis based on data collection from human subjects.

4. Findings From the Research-Policy Engagement

This section presents the findings from both the questionnaire and in-depth conversations under each of the three aims of the study, as outlined in Section 3.

4.1. *Testing the Resonance and Key Conceptual Basis of DSIS*

The findings from the research-policy engagement strongly confirm the overall coherence and validity of the DSIS model as a framework for engagement with policymakers in education. The three ideas presented and the overall framing met with a high degree of enthusiasm for their novelty, holistic nature, and resonance with a wide range of issues facing policymakers across the education policy system. A key finding from the research-policy engagement therefore is that potentially transformative future-oriented ideas, such as those developed within the DSIS literature, do meaningfully resonate with policymakers.

The difficulties of translating research into policy and practice are well documented (Head, 2022), particularly in environments characterised by tight timelines, operational pressures, and competing priorities. In this context, it is entirely plausible that future-oriented conceptual work would be perceived as abstract or of limited immediate relevance.

However, this study reveals a strong alignment between the DSIS conceptual framework and policymakers' lived policy concerns. Across the exchanges, the three future-oriented ideas introduced from the DSIS model (polycrisis, framing of global cultural change, and social duality and the sacred ordinary) were consistently taken up as useful lenses for sense-making. Participants engaged with these ideas not as distant theoretical constructs, but as tools that help articulate existing challenges, surface tensions within current policy approaches, and open space for reflection on alternative trajectories for education policy.

The following comments capture this overall openness and enthusiasm to engage practically with the ideas presented:

These ideas could offer a lot to the discourse about what an inclusive society actually means and how policies promote...a shared vision for inclusive participation in a society where all can belong and flourish.

These ideas are really provocative—in a positive way. We need to make time and space for further reflection on them and on the practical ways in which they can shape and influence educational thinking, policy, practice and pedagogy....This is really important work.

A number of participants strongly identified with the concept of social duality and the sacred ordinary as reflecting and naming the social reality within which education operates. The following comments reflect this theme:

These ideas resonate because they name something that is often felt but not always articulated in education policy: that our systems are caught between two competing logics—one that values status, competition and measurable outputs, and another that values care, relationships and the quiet, everyday work of holding communities together, especially in times of crisis.

[The sacred ordinary could offer] an alternative roadmap for how teachers might navigate the challenges already presenting in their classrooms as a result of the polycrisis....I suspect that the philosophy of the sacred ordinary already permeates the classrooms of our best teachers, though the term may not be known to them.

From the researchers' perspective, one particularly striking reflection captured how the three DSIS ideas presented functioned together as a movement from diagnosis to agency—from recognising the scale of the polycrisis to identifying spaces for individual and collective responses:

It's almost like there's a wide canvas adopted initially conceptually and it lands down in the frame of reference of the individual.

While the sample size is small, the overall findings from the engagement strongly point to the high degree of relevance of ideas on transformational thinking to contemporary education and the utility of the DSIS model for facilitating productive conversations on reimagining education in the context of complex societal challenges.

4.2. Insights on How DSIS Could Be Applied To Education in Practice

A key practical application that emerged is how the DSIS framing can be used to highlight the need for a systemic approach to policymaking, particularly for implementing deep structural change. The DSIS framing was seen by policymakers as useful in highlighting the need for systemic responses that involve a whole-of-government approach, on the one hand, and the need for an acknowledgement that schools are part of a much broader context of communities and society (which also needs to be mobilised to address many of the challenges which education is tasked with addressing), on the other hand.

As one illustrative comment stated:

This type of framing may be useful in terms of providing a scaffold around educational policy development. It can help to define issues and problems facing our education system and build momentum behind possible approaches—societal and political. This form of framework can also be useful in terms of evaluation of successful implementation or otherwise.

This systemic interconnection of issues in education across government departments is reflected in the following comment:

For those of us who work in government ministries, charged with specific remits and specific domains in which to exercise those remits, it seems to me essential that we educate ourselves collectively on an ongoing basis on this idea of a polycrisis.

The DSIS ideas also solicited multiple responses regarding the need for a focus on holistic educational outcomes. Responses included:

Political and ecological consciousness on a global scale should form part of children and young people's learning experiences from their earliest years.

Assessment methodologies need to measure and evaluate [children's] capacity to critically assess societal "noise" that they are exposed to through technologies and an ever-growing acceptance of open hate speech against minorities and women....[Curricula frameworks] can help children and young people to develop respect and understanding for the sacred ordinary and its importance for social cohesion.

Although it was only mentioned explicitly by two respondents, the importance of both children and teachers as agents of change is highlighted due to its importance in considering the dynamics of how deep transformative change might come about. The role of children and young people in advocating for more urgent policy action on climate change in the form of the youth-led "Fridays for Future" movement, for example, is illustrative of this potential:

[We should consider] children and young people as a potentially very significant force for change.

[The DSIS ideas have] the potential to inspire teachers to inspire students to become agents of change.

To summarise, the DSIS ideas were found to have immediate practical relevance across a wide range of policy areas, including: workforce planning and development (with particular focus on a workforce that itself represents an inclusive system); future school leadership and future school governance; values-based leadership (highlighted as relevant to policymaking for school leadership and for high quality inclusive education); Initial Teacher Education policy; curriculum development and assessment methodologies; the facilitation of teachers/educators as curriculum makers; holistic educational outcomes; school inspections; and the formulation of the Department's strategic vision and strategy.

The following comment reflects the positive views of respondents to these practical opportunities:

The opportunities of implementing such ideas in education range from, in a best-case scenario, providing a solution to the polycrisis, or to better preparing students to endure the polycrisis. But even if the polycrisis disappeared in the morning, I believe that implementing these ideas would result in a far better society with happier children.

4.3. Further Developing the DSIS Model and Research Engagement Process

Alongside the opportunities, participants also identified challenges in implementing the DSIS ideas for deep systemic transformation. These challenges included resistance from vested interests who benefit from the status quo, accusations of being ideological in advocating for “normative” systemic change, and public sensitivity and potential charges of indoctrination around advocating for the values represented by the idea of the sacred ordinary. These different aspects of challenge and resistance are reflected in the following response:

[These ideas could make a difference] but our system would require an overhaul, so it doesn't simply reward the visible, hierarchical achievements [grades, exam results, economic output, employability, PISA scores, etc.] but also values the relational, caring and community-based work that makes education humane and sustainable.”

In our analysis of both the questionnaire response and the in-depth conversations, some structural elements emerged particularly as potentially contributing to exclusion in Ireland's education system, namely: early years education, patronage, school workforce, and the selection system for entry into higher education. This analysis does not claim, of course, that these are the only structural elements that potentially contribute to an exclusionary aspect of the education system. The following comments reflect participants' thoughts on these structural issues.

Concerning early years education:

We know really high-quality early years absolutely transforms children's outcomes, like, particularly children who are disadvantaged. I mean, the research is just absolutely unarguable on that.

On the school workforce:

A quarter of our education budget [is] spent on inclusive measures, particularly special education. But then when I look at the workforce, I see—and it's not just the teaching workforce, but if you look at our psychologists, you look at the teachers, and you look at...the inspectorate. We have a very homogeneous profile for the workforce, so we have, in the main...very few people from, like, differing socioeconomic backgrounds, very little diversity now in terms of race [and gender].

On school patronage:

[88 percent] of primary schools are Catholic, you know, they're run by the bishops and the diocese in a situation where, you know, I think people might identify as Catholic, but they're not practicing as Catholics.

On the selection system for entry into higher education:

And you ask any parent, they'll say they're all about the welfare of their child...all the way through to fifteen, and then it becomes what [exam] points are they going to get....Teachers will say, the children

themselves in fifth and sixth year will say: “Why are you teaching us about that [if it’s not going to be on the exam]?”

The following comment reflects other general concerns that emerged in the policy engagement:

Traveller and Roma education is a huge issue, you know, in terms of inclusivity. And the prison populations, like we know they’re being fed from the areas, the pockets of deprivation they’re being founded from....But because of these growing pockets of intergenerational [disadvantage] where nobody has had a job in four generations. Like we’re seeing that in Ireland. We’re seeing that very, very deep rooted deprivation, which we shouldn’t be seeing...what you really need to do is have a laser target on those areas of highest deprivation.

On care and belonging:

We engage with the perspectives of children and young people in primary and post-primary schools. We are finding, and I think this resonates with some academic research as well, that I think it’s one in four primary pupils and one in five post-primary pupils....But what we’re finding is that number, that, that those percentages of pupils...feel they don’t belong. They feel they don’t feel connected.

In summary, the research-policy engagement surfaced a wide range of policy areas where the DSIS model could be of immediate practical application, but deep systemic barriers were also identified that stand in the way of transformative change within the education system. The difficulties in addressing the deep-seated structural issues such as those identified above, and the potential of applying a care-based approach such as the DSIS model for transformative change, will now be addressed in the final section of the article.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article has presented a research-policy engagement between senior policymakers in education and scholars working on transformative futures research. The engagement explored whether future-oriented conceptual frameworks, such as those from the DSIS literature, could meaningfully inform reflection on long-term educational transformation. Three interrelated ideas were introduced and discussed: (a) the polycrisis, (b) a generative framework for transformation, and (c) social duality and the sacred ordinary.

Rather than treating these concepts as abstract theoretical constructs, the dialogue revealed their capacity to resonate with policymakers’ lived policy challenges. Policymakers engaged with the DSIS ideas as sense-making lenses that helped articulate systemic pressures facing education, surface implicit values and tensions within existing approaches, and broaden understandings of what educational success might entail beyond narrowly defined academic outcomes. The dialogue highlighted the interpretive and strategic value of DSIS’ future-oriented concepts in opening space for reflective policy imagination.

The research-policy engagement also illuminated a wide range of opportunities for further development. Participants identified avenues for practical application of the DSIS concepts including: using the frameworks presented to shape future curriculum and assessment reforms; to inform updates to inspection/quality frameworks; to scaffold policy development and evaluation questions; to inform initial

teacher education and continual professional development; to inform values-based leadership practices; to identify aspects of the system which contribute to exclusion and inequality; and to create shared language and communities of practice that help different actors co-design systemic responses.

Fostering inclusive communities of transformation as a vehicle for deep systemic change emerged as a key challenge and opportunity for policymakers. In this regard, the ongoing national Convention on Education and the Department of Education and Youth's newly established "Fíorú" educational research network, which brings together policymakers, researchers and practitioners (teachers and school principals) to focus on future-oriented research and knowledge mobilisation, were both highlighted as opportunities to progress such potentially transformative conversations.

This study links care as an ontological a priori of human nature; vulnerability, interdependency and mutual responsibility as fundamental features of human and other-than-human relations; and the recognition of care, compassion and empathy as fundamental principles in redesigning social institutions. This vision of compassionate futures as a new paradigm for addressing the myriad challenges that human societies face is a core feature of the DSIS model, which has formed the basis for the present research-policy engagement. DSIS aims at reimagining social institutions with care as a core redesign principle. It places an absence of care as the root cause of the contemporary polycrisis, includes ethical directionality centrally within its conceptual framing, and has developed the concept of the sacred ordinary as highlighting those things we humans care deeply about and towards which social institutions must be reoriented.

This study's vision of compassionate futures is also central to education in the context of the contemporary polycrisis. Education has the potential to protect and promote greater social cohesion, address deeply entrenched social stratification and persistent inequalities, overcome the exclusion of marginalised social groups, promote greater gender equality, and play a part in promoting awareness of the need for and enhancement of social inclusion worldwide.

In its present form, education is, of course, addressing all of these issues to a greater or lesser extent. The challenge for education, in the context of the polycrisis, is to make this reimagining systemic, multisystemic, global, and purposeful. These are also challenges for the DSIS model as to how these crucial elements can be better incorporated into its conceptual framing.

With regard to systemic response, the research-policy engagement presented here has highlighted the awareness of policymakers for joined-up and coherent policies aimed at addressing the myriad challenges faced. Addressing social inclusion in its multiple dimensions, for example, requires changes in teaching methodologies, curriculum, workforce composition, initial teacher education and ongoing professional development, as well as policies regarding school meals, school transportation, and resource allocation, among other policy areas, that align with the overall goal. Policymakers in the present study reported that the DSIS model assisted them in gaining such a systemic view. Using the model as an input into future stakeholder engagements could increase awareness among actors of their agency within the system and how more holistic responses could be designed and implemented.

The present study also highlights how the issues that education is tasked with—from addressing entrenched hierarchies and persistent inequalities to greater gender equality, protecting democracy, responding to

health emergencies, and playing a role in mitigating climate change (to name just a few)—are not within the sole purview of education. They are also greatly impacted by issues beyond the classroom and require multisystemic responses. The embedded nature of education within all other social institutions has been demonstrated multiple times in recent years when the education system has had to respond to crisis, for example, in economics (the 2008 financial crisis), geopolitics (the Russian invasion of Ukraine), global health (the Covid-19 pandemic), and technological disruption (social media and AI). Understanding and articulating the need for, and dynamics of, multisystem change (Lawrence et al., 2024) is a key area where further development of the DSIS framing could help inform future development of strategy and policy in education.

As the root causes of the polycrisis are global, so too must be our responses. Our contemporary planetary crises require both planetary solutions and planetary ethics. Hanusch and Leggewie (2026), for example, describe how existing framings of planetary thinking range from a “Planet First” anti-anthropocentrism (Hayward et al., 2019) to “interaction first” demands for humans to take responsibility for their relations with the planet (Dryzek & Pickering, 2019), to “humans first” calls for placing the planet entirely at the disposal of humans (Servigne & Stevens, 2020) to, finally, a “technology first” posthumanism (Lovelock, 2020). In response to such radical normative divergence, they point to the twin principles of planetary habitability and planetary citizenship, both of which are predicated upon principles of care, as the basis for planetary thinking that can enable human, more-than-human, and planetary flourishing. Such discourse finds resonance, of course, in the curricula of global citizenship education being taught in many education systems, including in Ireland. The DSIS ideas could potentially be applied in this context to further encourage global responses.

Finally, the polycrisis imbues education with existential purpose. The polycrisis presents a threat to the lives of billions of people and to non-human life and is degrading the life support systems of planet Earth. The purpose of education in this context is increasingly being vocalized in ways both secular and spiritual. Such articulations include, for example, “education for survival” (Aldrich, 2010), education for “moral imagination” (Bristow et al., 2024), education for “future-building” (Facer, 2011), and education for dignity, meaning, and purpose (Vatican.va, 2026). The present study demonstrates that the DSIS care-driven model can facilitate just such policy discussions focused on education for purpose and care in the polycrisis.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

LLMs Disclosure

No LLM tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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Com-Passionate Composting: Excrement Management as Matter of Care

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Abstract

This article examines composting toilets as multispecies infrastructures composed of relations among excrement, microbes, worms, plants, water, air, people, things, and politics, and as matters of care. It inquires into how people reimagine naturecultural relations through composting their excrement, arguing that this practice can be understood as com-passionate care insofar as it involves feeling with others through doings, affections, and sensibilities. Drawing on autoethnographic and ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2026 in Chile, and complemented by fieldwork in France and Austria in 2024, the article discusses how people rework relationships to excrement amid persistent social inequalities that reinforce the disposability and denial ethos characterizing modern subjectivities and waste practices. It concludes that caring for and taking care of one's excrement involve profound affective and ethical transformations when not experienced as reinforcing social inequalities. The embodied experience of integration into metabolic cycles that this care entails remains fragile in the absence of political collectives capable of deciding which forms of care and technologies sustain collective flourishing for com-passionate presents and futures.

Keywords

care; composting toilets; human waste; infrastructural justice; more-than-human worlds

1. Introduction

I write these lines with soil under my fingernails. Moments ago, my family and I harvested this year's potatoes. As in previous years, the *pilme*—a typical insect in this area—forced us to harvest early at Christmas. Once again, we were unable to spread diluted urine over the leaves every morning. “That's what my mother used to do, and it worked,” echoes the voice of one of my most trusted agricultural advisors. There are barely enough potatoes to last the winter and serve as seed for the next season. Now, sitting behind my computer,

I regret not having cared for them better; yet moments ago, while earthing them up, it was all joy and gratitude. The harvest was not bad considering that—for the first time—the soil was prepared using only compost made from our excrement. The soil beneath my fingernails came from our guts.

This article is about composting excrement, indeterminacy, and future horizons. “Composting toilets” (CTs) refer broadly to infrastructures that refrain from using water to transport excrement and process it so it returns to the earth as organic matter. I examine CTs as matters of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) and inquire into how people reimagine naturecultural relations through composting their excrement. The argument is that this practice can be understood as com-passionate care—as it involves feeling with more-than-human entities through doings, affections, and sensibilities—and commits to a renewed relation with excrement through everyday practices within affective interdependent care entanglements.

I write from the standpoint of a mother, migrant, and work-overloaded anthropologist in Chilean neoliberal academia who has designed, used, and cared for CTs for six years, and leads an ethnographic research project on non-conventional sanitation (2024–2027). I am deeply involved in the argument I advance. I learn about composting human excrement through my own experiences and others’. I am not commercially involved with CTs nor am I an activist—although I organize activities in the academia and beyond, and support others in developing CTs when asked, since I am convinced that changing how we manage human excrement is urgent.

Drawing on six years of autoethnographic and over two years of ethnographic research, I examine how people reimagine naturecultural relations through composting their excrement. I move from theoretical and methodological framing to empirical analyses of CTs as matters of care and as potentially convivial infrastructures for com-passionate presents and futures.

2. Theoretical Framing

2.1. Care and Human Waste

Self-care and caring for the environment have become central to neoliberal ideologies. Neoliberal appropriations of care reinforce the dualistic nature–culture divide and stress self-responsibility as an individual endeavor, thereby legitimizing extractive and exploitative economies. Reclaiming care as a critical concept can help unsettle these tendencies. In Latin America, this reappropriation spans from liberation theologian Boff’s (1999) understanding of care for both humans and the planet as essential to life on Earth, to critical, indigenous, and community feminisms which—while questioning gender as a colonial legacy—ground life in collective care for the relations among everything that exists (Batthyány, 2020; Gabbert & Lang, 2019). The concept of conviviality, developed by Ivan Illich and collaborators in the 1970s, has also been recently revisited (Mecila, 2022). For Illich (1973), conviviality denotes an egalitarian being-with in shared action—“individual freedom realized in personal interdependence” (p. 11)—and depends on the creation of convivial tools that “give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision” (p. 21). This perspective situates care within political collectives capable of deciding which forms of care and technologies contribute to collective flourishing.

Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) notes that care has been central to social sciences as it is indispensable to life. Drawing on classic feminist work, she proposes “a triptych vision of care—doings/practice, affectivity, and

ethics–politics” (p. 60)—where care is inseparably practical labor, a vital affective state, and an ethical obligation. Care is a non-normative necessity and a non-moralistic obligation, inherent to interdependency relations, since “for life to even be, it needs to be fostered in some way” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 60). She proposes thinking with care through the concept of “matters of care,” emphasizing the importance of exhibiting matters of care precisely where care appears absent or out of place. This is the case with waste, and specifically with excrement; caring for it is to engage through doings, affectivity, and ethics with neglected things and devalued doings. This framing is useful as it highlights how domination rationales are reproduced in everyday practices, while also opening possibilities for reclaiming relations to excrement as matters of care in more-than-human worlds. Thus, care is acknowledged as an organizing social life principle while advancing a vision of life centered on care and naturecultural interdependencies.

An understanding of waste as a matter of care has recently gained attention in waste studies. Lau (2023) suggests that it helps recognize affections and intimate knowledge involved in working and living with waste. Studying food waste practices in Hong Kong, Leung (2025) proposes a waste care continuum ranging from auditing care—characterized by technocratic governance and the marginalization of community waste practices—to embodied care, which refers to operational, embodied knowledge generated through direct engagement in community-based waste recovery initiatives. This framework offers a conceptual bridge between grassroots waste knowledge and formal policymaking, and foregrounds the interactions among different modalities of response-ability (Haraway, 2016). In this study, it helps illuminate the uneasy relations among global and local sanitation politics and self-sustained, situated infrastructures.

Despite their centrality to life, excrement and defecation have been largely avoided in academia, particularly in anthropology (van der Geest, 2007). In her explorations of the ethics of waste, Hawkins (2006) suggests that because relations to waste are dynamic, “the ethical and political question is, how might new waste practices emerge?” (p. 3). Relations to excrement were central to the emergence and maintenance of the ethos of disposability and denial characterizing modern subjectivities and practices. Waste mediates relations to our bodies through repeated practices, habits, and disciplines, as well as the thoughts and feelings that render these actions meaningful. In this way, waste orders relations between the self and the world through embodied sensibilities.

2.2. Flush Toilets as Expressions of Modernity

The now-dominant notion that excrement is a dangerous, inherently dirty waste product that needs to be flushed away as quickly as possible developed gradually. From the 16th century onward, shit became a semiotic element enabling contrasts between the countryside and the city, and between social and racial others (Laporte, 1980). State and colonial projects subsequently invested heavily in disciplining defecation and excrement management (Anderson, 2024). With the convergence of industrial capitalism and urbanization in Europe and North America in the late 19th century, water-based sanitation came to be seen as the most effective solution. This model was widely contested: The reuse of human excrement as fertilizer through composting had been a well-established practice, and early sewerage systems initially resulted in negative health and environmental effects (Koumparou et al., 2019). The sanitary revolution—often celebrated as a medical and technological achievement—was driven largely by social factors. As Inglis (2001) suggests, the flush toilet became “the *sine qua non* of a society that denies the existence of the human body’s excreta-making capacities” (p. 243). In colonized and later “underdeveloped” countries, sewerage

infrastructures remained aspirational rather than factual (Borowy, 2021; Jewitt, 2011). Norms of private, enclosed defecation and rapid waste disposal spread across social groups and geographies, propelled by the desire to appear modern, civilized, and developed, while the capacity to enact these norms remained uneven. The management of bodily excretion operates as a site of class, gendered, and other forms of othering (Pickering & Wiseman, 2019).

2.3. CTs: Infrastructures Between Counterculture and Conviviality

Following Star (1999, pp. 380–383), infrastructures are formed through relations, embedded in broader structural arrangements, defined by their scope, shaped through situated learning and adaptation, and sustained by shared social conventions. I understand CTs as multispecies infrastructures composed of relations among excrement, microbes, worms, plants, water, air, people, things, and politics. In the 20th century, CTs were promoted as appropriate technologies for the poor (Morgan, 2007), eccentric countercultural artefacts (Hundertwasser, 2022), and even advanced technologies for nationwide living condition improvements in Mao's China (Leung, 2024). Today, CTs appear as viable sanitation options across diverse contexts. Classified as safely managed sanitation services, they are promoted as forms of circular, sustainable, or ecological sanitation by actors advancing distinct sociotechnical imaginaries and future horizons. Contemporary human excrement composting practices may draw on long-standing agricultural traditions (Leung, 2024) or on recent revaluations of precolonial practices (Bezerra et al., 2019).

In this research, CTs are predominantly non-commercial, DIY infrastructures that transport excrement without water, and can be considered innovative insofar as they bring “past doings into a context in which they become new” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 428). Other ethnographic studies of comparable CTs include Pickering's (2010) research with US “hippies” and “drop-outs” living in Hawai'i—where she explores embodiment as a site of generative action and social critique and conceives CTs as countercultural artifacts—and Vetter's (2023) analysis of CTs in German festivals and permaculture projects, considering them as convivial technologies defined by five dimensions: connectedness, accessibility, adaptability and repairability, responsible interaction with living beings and ecological cycles, and proportional use of energy, materials, and resources. The CTs examined here express these five dimensions and may constitute sites of generative action and social critique, while being built, repaired, and maintained in the search for viable domestic sanitation options in the context of social inequalities.

2.4. Composting and Com-Passion

Feminist science and technology studies, environmental humanities, and waste studies often present composting as an exemplary practice that opens alternative horizons. Earthworms, in particular, have become central beings in alternative worlding practices (Abrahamsson & Bertoni, 2014; Hawkins, 2006). For Haraway (2016), compost is an apt metaphor for our troubled times: “We are humus, not Homo; we are compost, not posthuman” (p. 55), she states repeatedly. For Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), practicing composting is an ethical doing through which naturecultural interdependency becomes a matter of care, an “obligation to care for an interdependent earthy other” (p. 194). Accordingly, “composting is our part of the collaborative and ongoing work” of co-creating soil (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014, p. 35). This co-creative dimension, together with the affective involvement in composting, is what I highlight with the term com-passionate composting.

Etymologically connected to suffering, “passion” has come to mean strong feeling, affection, or emotion towards someone or something (Passion, n.d.). I understand compassion as “feeling with”: com-passion. Gronemeyer (2015) notes that the preposition “com” (with) has increasingly come to describe sharp opposition in struggles over advantage, power, or influence, as reflected in dominant notions of competition, consent, consumption, and conformity. This observation warns against overly straightforward claims of togetherness and commoning in the study of composting. That said, I use com-passion to foreground the possibility of being-with in shared doing, akin to conviviality, implied in composting our excrement, while also highlighting the capacity to feel-with and be affected by nonhuman soil co-creators and other CT-related entities. My use of com-passionate stresses the affective, interdependent entanglements involved in these practices. It is a theoretical innovation in the same sense that CTs are innovative: new in this context, yet deeply connected to existing work on care and alternative social practices.

3. Methodological Framing: A Dirty Ethnography

This article draws on ethnographic materials produced between 2019 and 2026, including interviews, field notes, photographs, videos, and artistic productions. The research combines an autoethnographic phase centered on the implementation of CTs in my household (2019–2023), with an ethnography of non-conventional domestic sanitation (2024–2027). The materials produced during the first phase include my family’s experience in CT design and use, as well as accounts by over 100 users from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, spanning ages 2 to 92, 10 nationalities, nine countries of residence, and differing levels of experience that range from first-time use to long-term CT caretaking.

In the ongoing multimodal ethnography, I work with a research assistant—first anthropologist José Saavedra and subsequently Felipe Cecchi—who had no prior experience with CTs, counterbalancing my long-standing involvement. I also work occasionally with my long-term audiovisual collaborator and partner, filmmaker Cristóbal García. The research is centered in the Los Lagos Region, Chile, spanning the mainland from Lake Llanquihue to the Pacific Ocean and including the Chiloé Archipelago. Fieldwork includes approximately 60 hours of walk-alongs, informal conversations, field notes on everyday sanitation practices, visits to wastewater treatment plants, and interviews with 15 public officials across water management, public health, environmental oversight, travel, and agricultural research; one entrepreneur in the alternative sanitation sector; and six non-conventional sanitation promoters in the construction, education, and travel fields. The topics include local sanitation conditions, perceived strengths and challenges, and potential future developments. Through walk-alongs and snowball sampling, we identified, visited, and documented the experiences of 20 households implementing CTs.

Complementarily, we conducted two weeks of intensive audiovisual research in France and Austria during July–August 2024 to address the topic’s transnational dimension. On the one hand, the European CT scene is a key reference for Chilean counterparts: More than half of CTs in Chile were inspired by European experiences accessed online, through personal travel, or via third parties. On the other hand, CTs have been regulated by the European sanitation sector for much longer than in Chile. In France and Austria, CTs have become standard at festivals and public events, effectively replacing chemical toilets and becoming increasingly familiar to the general population, while they remain rare in Chile. In Occitanie, southern France, we documented one composting cooperative supplying toilets for events, three households, and a municipal collective garden; and in Vienna and surroundings, one company that supplies public and event toilets. This

material includes approximately 10 hours of interviews and nine hours of additional footage, covering an event, everyday domestic use and work, and conversations with occasional users. Commercial cases were selected out of convenience and interest, and contacted in advance by email; households and the municipal garden were contacted in the field.

All these methodological steps frame my approach and inform my arguments, focusing on people's experiences composting human excrement and reimagining naturecultural relations in two contexts: one marked by severely deficient conventional sanitation and limited recognition of alternatives in Chile, and another by generalized conventional sanitation alongside growing awareness of its ecological limits in France and Austria. Conversations and interviews were conducted in Spanish, English, French, and German; the English translations are mine. I use fictional names, as required by my university's ethics committee. Fieldwork materials were analyzed using constant comparison and situational analysis.

4. Excrement Management as a Matter of Care

In this section, I think about CTs as doings/practices, affectivity, and ethics–politics; introduce the key features of the CTs used in this study and their contexts; situate excrement management within a waste care continuum; and foreground transformations in naturecultural relations through com-passionate composting.

4.1. *Situated CTs*

A CT varies widely in terms of shape, operation, and maintenance. Table 1 summarizes the key characteristics of the CTs in the study.

Except for CT24—an autonomous commercial vermicomposting model installed by a municipality in a collective garden and maintained by the supplying company—all CTs are designed, implemented, used, and maintained by people I refer to as “caretakers,” emphasizing their direct involvement in everyday care practices. A shared characteristic among them is that they have completed secondary education, and most have professional or university training; the most common backgrounds are agronomy (six), forestry (four), and the arts (four).

Design choices affect care practices. Whether urine is separated and the size and number of collection containers impact the frequency of container change (ranging from once a week to once every six months) and emptying (from once a month to once every one or two years). Differences in materials lead to considerable variations in use and labor. Design choices also result in marked sensory differences, including whether users see feces, feel their temperature, hear urine pouring onto a solid surface, and experience different odors depending on how fully the excrement is covered.

A shorter distance between the toilet seat and the container improves coverage and largely confines odors to the act of defecation. Connecting the container to the outside simplifies changing and emptying, but allows mice or other small animals to enter, requiring the caretakers' attention. When the container is not connected to the outside, such entries are avoided; however, it must be carried over longer distances and through the house.

Table 1. Characteristics of CTs in the study.

Code	Since	Location			No. of CTs	Only CT	Urine Diversion	Container Size	Compost Use	Regular Users			
		HH/NH	R/U/PU	Country						No.	Ages Adults	Ages Children	Gender
CT1	2023	HH	R	CL	1	yes	no	20 L	left on site	1	41–50		W
CT2	2024	HH	R	CL	1	yes	no	20 L	left on site	2	31–40		W/M
CT3	2023	HH	R	CL	1	yes	no	25 L	left on site	4	31–40	6–15	W/M
CT4	2023	HH	R	CL	1	yes	no	20 L	left on site	1	41–50		M
CT5	2023	HH	PU	CL	1	yes	no	20 L	left on site	5	41–50	6–15	W/M
CT6	2020	HH	R	CL	1	yes	yes	200 L	ornamental	2	31–40	6–10	W
CT7	2019	HH	R	CL	1	yes	yes	50 L	ornamental	2	31–40		W/M
CT8	2019	HH	R	CL	1	yes	yes	100 L	fruit trees	2	41–50	0–5	W
CT9	2021	HH	PU	CL	1	yes	yes	20 L	fruit trees	5	51–60	6–15	W/M
CT10	2018	NH	R	CL	2	no	yes	200 L	fruit trees	4	51–60	6–10	W/M
CT11	2010	NH	R	CL	4	yes	yes	80 L	left on site	25	30–50	11–15	W/M
CT12	2019	HH	PU	CL	1	yes	yes	20 L	left on site	3	51–60	11–15	W/M
CT13	2020	HH	PU	CL	1	yes	yes	200 L	fruit trees	2	61–70		W/M
CT14	2020	HH	PU	CL	1	yes	yes	200 L	fruit trees	2	41–50		W
CT15	2022	HH	R	CL	1	yes	yes	200 L	fruit trees	2	31–40	0–5	W
CT16	2020	HH	PU	CL	1	yes	yes	25 L	fruit trees	2	41–50		W/M
CT17	2023	HH	PU	CL	2	no	no	25 L	fruit trees	2	20–30		W/M
CT18	2023	HH	PU	CL	1	yes	yes	25 L	fruit trees	1	61–70		W/M
CT19	2023	HH	PU	CL	2	yes	no	20 L	fruit trees	4	51–60	11–15	W/M
CT20	2020	HH	R	CL	3	yes	no	20 L	agriculture	3	41–50	6–10	W/M
CT21	2001	HH	R	FR	1	yes	no	80 L	ornamental	2	61–70		W/M
CT22	2003	HH	R	FR	2	yes	no	80 L	ornamental	2	61–70		W/M
CT23	2020	HH	R	FR	1	yes	no	80 L	ornamental	4	31–40	0–10	W/M
CT24	2023	NH	PU	FR	1	yes	no	none	left on site	50	n/a	n/a	W/M
CT25	2020	NH	U	FR	1	yes	yes	80 L	left on site	5	20–40		W/M
CT26	2017	NH	U	AT	1	no	yes	80 L	left on site	22	31–50		W/M

CT = Composting Toilet; HH = Household; NH = Non-Household; R = Rural; U = Urban; PU = Periurban; CL = Chile; FR = France; AT = Austria; W = Women; M = Men.
Source: Author's fieldwork (2024–2026).

Composting methods range from prior dehydration and subsequent leaving of material on site in piles above the soil surface, to thermophilic aerobic composting with kitchen waste in the presence of rainwater. In both cases, microbes, fungi, worms, plants, rain, air, and sun take part in the process of co-creating soil. When urine is separated, it may be applied to fruit trees, infiltrated into the soil, or used in vegetable gardens. The resulting solid material is either left on site, used ornamentally, applied to fruit trees, or used in vegetable gardens. Carrying urine—either with solids or separately—requires greater physical engagement than infiltration through pipes. Similarly, transferring material to a compost pile entails more frequent and physically demanding labor than dehydration and emptying alone.

Most CTs in this study are in the Los Lagos Region, the southwestern Mapuche territory, a Chilean region with particularly high poverty rates and inequalities in access to health care, education, and basic services, and whose integration into global capitalism operates between neo-extractivism and luxury conservationism (Mondaca, 2017). During the first decade of the 21st century, the Chilean government declared near-universal urban sanitation coverage and wastewater treatment (Nazer Ahumada & Llorca-Jaña, 2023) and recent reports state that 100% of rural inhabitants have at least one basic service (United Nations, 2025). Regional, municipal, and health care authorities interviewed during this research are aware of an urgent but largely unspoken problem: the widespread use of pit latrines, cesspits, and malfunctioning septic tanks that contaminate surface and groundwater, alongside sewage networks discharging directly into lakes, rivers, and seas. Simultaneously, an increasing number of areas face summer water shortages and depend on trucked water. Even Puerto Varas, the region's wealthiest city, has repeatedly suffered sewage overflows in recent years, drawing media attention. In sparsely populated areas, the situation is described by a municipal official as “a silent pain” (Interview, October 2, 2025) that gets only exceptional media attention, as in the case reported on March 5, 2025, of a 79-year-old woman found dead inside her overflowing septic tank (Tapia, 2025). According to media reports—confirmed by the local neighborhood association—unable to afford maintenance, she attempted to empty the tank herself. In this context, CTs are officially framed as solutions for exceptional cases, such as remote or heavily polluted areas (Polivalente, 2018).

In southern France and the Austrian capital, in turn, after a century of expansion and consolidation of the flush toilet-sewer-treatment plant triad, the model is reaching a turning point driven not so much by present failure as by growing global critique concerning its ecological and economic sustainability (Öberg et al., 2020). The very idea of using water to flush excrement is increasingly questioned within circular economy imaginaries. Legrand (2020) notes that CT prototypes were constantly developed during the 20th century and, since the 1990s, have become central to the development of ecological sanitation. National and later Europe-wide organizations have given visibility to CTs in France since the mid-2000s, enabling dialogue with public authorities and leading to the legalization of domestic human excrement composting in 2009 through a revision of non-collective sanitation regulations. Austria lacks unified national regulations for CTs; their status is shaped by construction, water, and waste laws, and their domestic implementation is assessed on a case-by-case basis. CTs for public use expanded rapidly over the last decade: Vienna registered over 250 public CTs in use in the summer of 2024, and in 2026, there are over 450 CTs in use nationwide.

4.2. Auditing Care and Its Limits

Auditing care is typical of technocratic waste governance as it builds a particular form of response-ability by privileging audit compliance and technological solutions (Leung, 2025, p. 11). The ethnographic approach shows how complex and fragmented sanitation governance is. Responsibilities cut across sectors, offices, and administrative levels; oversight and action are claimed from diverse actors at different stages. None of the stakeholders interviewed in this research feels fully able to respond either to the challenges identified as priorities by their offices or to the expectations of others involved in sanitation governance.

Sanitation efforts in the Los Lagos Region focus primarily on drinking water supply, understood as the population's main demand. Unsewered areas are referred to by local officials as "sanitation marginality" areas. Residents are expected to install septic tanks, considered within local technocratic imaginaries as safe and unproblematic, although officials are aware of serious challenges related to final disposal and frequent installation and maintenance failures due to topography, shallow groundwater, and limited vacuum truck access. Nevertheless, sanitary permits for residential projects consider almost exclusively septic tanks. Social housing relies on septic tanks, which tend to be the only known off-grid sanitation option for residents, and are also promoted for informal settlements, rural travel facilities, and remote areas. Overflowing tanks have environmental and domestic consequences; persistent smells, flies, and the inability to use toilets disrupt everyday life, turning the expectation of a modern home with a flush toilet into a nightmare. The "forget" in the "flush and forget" ideal remains, at best, aspirational.

In this context, CTs are framed as solutions for exceptional cases. A water official states that domestic CTs can obtain sanitary permits based on an existing regulatory framework (Polivalente, 2018), yet no such requests have been made, as most people are unaware of this possibility (Interview, February 2, 2025). Local authorities and officials express concerns about supporting CTs, viewing them as risky and highly dependent on users. They question people's willingness and capacity to manage CTs safely. The CTs in this research lack sanitary permits and their caretakers—as well as local architects, builders, and engineers promoting CTs—actually ignored that sanitary permits were available. Some have contacted the responsible office and were told that no mechanism was in place for authorizing CTs. Inspections, however, are extremely rare; none of the households has been inspected. In the absence of regulations and oversight, experimenting with low-cost, simple solutions is an option, but this limits broader CT adoption and promotes uncertainty among caretakers.

These local sanitation entanglements sustain a model that provides unequal and limited comfort at high social and environmental costs while remaining norm-compliant. Thus, in Chile, technocratic governance and the marginalization of community waste practices perpetuate the ethos of disposability and denial of modern sanitation practices. Internationally, CTs have also existed in a grey zone developing through oral transmission and practice-based learning for decades.

The 2009 legalization of domestic composting materials from CTs in France marks the culmination of a longer trajectory rooted in practice-based collectives (Legrand, 2020). Paul (CT21 caretaker), who has lived with CTs in rural France for 25 years, explains:

Back then, nobody talked about dry toilets: They were neither authorized nor prohibited. A regulatory provision now allows the setup of dry toilets in private homes, but remains ambiguous. I had two

inspection visits. The first reported, “No issues identified, no need for short-term work”; five years later, the report stated, “Admitted with reservations,” without specifying which. I know that any time someone might show up and tell me, “That’s not how it should be,” and try to impose something on us. (Interview, July 31, 2024)

While regulations can improve visibility and expand the perception of CTs as a viable sanitation option, it does not necessarily reduce uncertainty. Norm-compliance remains a contested terrain, and community waste practices remain marginal in this form of care within prevalent capitalist-technocratic narratives for addressing socioenvironmental damage (Svampa, 2018).

4.3. Embodied Care and Its Limits

The CTs examined here rely on personal networks, prior exposure to similar infrastructures, and self-taught experimentation, thus on embodied knowledge generated through ongoing engagement. Main motivations for CT adoption, as shown by research on CTs in Europe (Guyader et al., 2022; Vetter, 2023), include abstract ecological values such as “not wasting water,” “not polluting,” “recycling,” and “giving back to the soil what once came from the soil.” While these values also play a role in the Chilean research context, the decision to install a CT here stems first from specific everyday challenges, including protecting local water sources, maintaining household habitability, and caring for the humans, animals, and plants that are domestic worlds in the context of sanitation marginality. Lower installation costs compared to septic tanks or market-oriented alternative infrastructures also play a role, both in Chile and France. Table 2 presents an overview of the perceived strengths and shortcomings of living with CTs.

Table 2. Strengths and shortcomings of living with CTs (caretakers’ perspective).

Characteristic	Strengths	Shortcomings
Dry-composting infrastructures	Reduces water use Prevents pollution Produces valuable outputs Psychological and emotional well-being Inspires others	Limited prior information and technical guidance Unclear institutional status Social stigma Legal obstacles for valorization Uncertainty about output uses
Self-built	Lower setup and maintenance costs Adaptable to specific needs Allows for quick or simple modifications	Design depends on users’ networks and abilities Requires study, time, and physical effort
Self-maintained	Foster ecological awareness, responsibility, competence, and self-esteem	May increase domestic labor Requires physical effort and ability Uncertain long-term care capacity Responsibility for failures

Source: Author’s fieldwork (2019–2026).

Stigmatization related to non-water-based sanitation has been central to the expansion of conventional sanitation as a material reality or aspiration. The flush toilet remains a synecdoche for modernity, and the management of bodily excretion functions as a site for class and other forms of othering. CTs, at first glance, do not seem to challenge this.

CT caretakers in Chile emphasize that CTs are commonly associated with pit latrines, thus with poverty and marginality. Gloria, CT9 caretaker, recalls:

When my husband first suggested that we have a dry toilet, I said, “Are you crazy? I’m not going to have a pit latrine in the house.” It’s a rather small house, so I thought, “Just imagine the smell in here. No, no, not in my house!” (Interview, April 15, 2025)

This was five years ago. She later visited a friend, a European migrant who had one, and did some research. She found an online course, took it, and together with her husband, adapted their friend’s model:

Actually, it’s a perfectly normal toilet—a nice one, the kind you actually want to use. It’s not a horrible latrine. It’s comfortable, close to the living area, the dining room, the kitchen, and the house doesn’t smell at all. This needs to be demystified right away: A dry toilet is not something awful! (Interview, April 15, 2025)

In a context where CTs remain little known, she is able to overcome her class anxieties largely due to her social privileges. The need to show how contemporary CTs look is also shared by other CT caretakers (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Four contemporary CTs: (a) CT22; (b) CT9; (c) CT1; (d) CT20. Source: Author’s fieldwork (2024–2026).

Although CTs are increasingly visible in Europe, Ivonne, who manages a French composting cooperative (CT25), also sees the need to clarify that not only the comfort, aesthetic, and sensory experiences are important while using the toilet, but also how CTs process excrement:

Digging a hole in the ground and relieving ourselves is not a dry toilet. A dry toilet—or what I prefer to call a composting toilet—means organizing urine and feces so that they compost. We use containers (80-liter construction buckets) into which people deposit their excreta and then cover them with

wood chips. Composting requires moisture and oxygen, and the wood chips allow oxygen to circulate. We are not just dealing with human excrement; we are genuinely dealing with compost. (Interview, August 1, 2024)

My household (CT20) is the only example in this study that uses CT compost in vegetable gardens. Two others (CT2 and CT10) intend to do so but have not yet produced sufficient mature compost, while CT21–23 reported no need for this organic input; they would use it if required. Our composting process involves layering fermented urine, excrement, and cover material (sawdust mixed with wood shavings) with kitchen waste and other organic matter in a composter, covering it with straw, and allowing microbes, fungi, worms, rain, air, and sun to decompose and recompose the material. Temperatures reach up to 70 °C for about four days and remain above 55 °C for periods ranging from two weeks to over a month. Once no further material is added, the composter rests for two years (see Figure 2). We then use the compost even for tuber crops, a practice strongly discouraged by local permaculturalists, as Rocio, CT6 caretaker, told me.



Figure 2. Two thermophilic composters: (a) CT20; (b) CT1. Source: Author's fieldwork (2024–2025).

Rocio is one of three counterparts in this study who learned about CTs through permaculture courses. Her model's operation and maintenance involve urine diversion through pipes and feces dehydration using sawdust and grass as cover materials (see Figure 3). She is very satisfied with it but has begun to regret not using the output for vegetables:

I would have much more organic fertilizer if I were 100% sure that I could use it, but I remember that there was an issue with temperature to promote compost fermentation, and as far as I know, my system does not ensure that. (Interview, December 30, 2025)

She deposits her CT content after a six-month resting period around flowers, some of which she eats, and when Swiss chard grew in the place where she deposits her CT content, she ate it, experimenting with herself beyond the limits of her advisors.

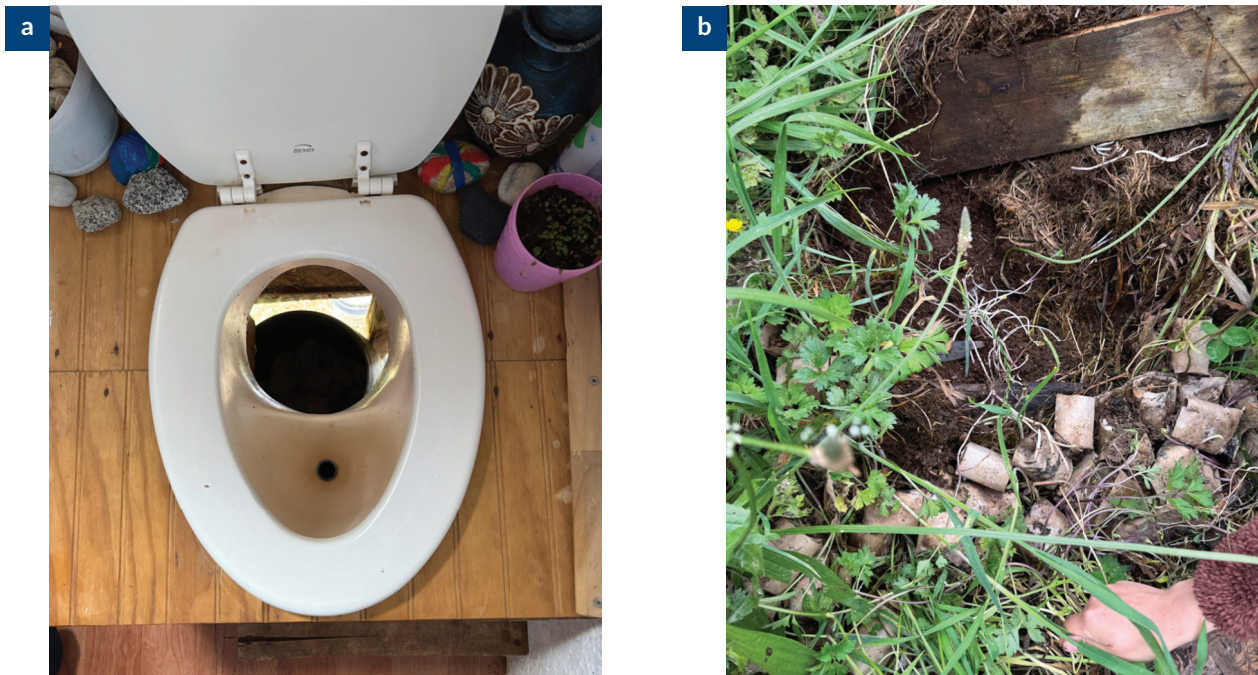


Figure 3. CT6: (a) Toilet with urine diversion; (b) container contents after six months on site. Source: Author's fieldwork (2025).

As Gloria's and Rocio's experiences show, ongoing embodied engagement with CTs transforms how we feel, think, and engage with personal and collective ideas about them. Anxiety about smells, flies, or other perceived nuisances tends to dissipate quickly. Most caretakers report a simpler and more comfortable experience than anticipated, both in using their toilets and composting their contents. A visual, tactile, olfactory, and auditory retraining takes place, varying by design. For example, a greater distance between toilet seat and container means users do not see their excrement, sometimes experienced as a loss, since it can be one's health indicator. A shorter distance intensifies visual and tactile contact, such as sensing temperature. Smell often requires the most significant retraining. While some caretakers remain uncomfortable even after years and continue adapting their systems, others "really like" the smell, describing it as earthy, fresh, or fermenting. However, hesitation regarding the safety of CT outputs persists, pointing both to potential risks awareness and the enduring status of human excrement as dangerous.

CTs change over time; people adapt materials and processes based on experience, advice, and the possibilities and limitations "shown" by other beings which actively affect CTs. CT materiality is changed, including the materiality of containers and other parts of the infrastructure, and, more obviously, that of excrement. Through material and affective engagement with the compost pile—viewing, smelling, touching, measuring, or feeling its temperature—people aim at creating the best possible conditions for the life of soil co-creators to thrive, while seeking to suppress potentially hazardous beings. They experiment with different cover materials and mixtures, additives, times, and spaces for composting. In this way, they cultivate response-ability—the ability to respond—grounded in an affective understanding of themselves as part of a web of naturecultural interdependencies.

Repeated practices shape how our bodies feel and the forms of reason that make actions and affects meaningful (Hawkins, 2006). Excrement-care relations develop through direct material engagement, social

learning, and place-based adaptation, generating knowledge through bodily involvement and a gradual sensory retraining toward a “more nuanced understanding of material transformation and ecological continuity” (Leung, 2025, p. 15). Yet the forms of reason shaped through this embodied care do not fully counter prevailing rationalities. In the next section, I explore how embodied knowledge shapes a renewed relation to excrement as matters of care.

4.4. Com-Passionate Composting: Towards a Renewed Relation to Excrement

If care is the ethics and politics concomitant to life’s everyday materiality, as Puig de la Bellacasa suggests (p. 255), from a processual perspective it can be practiced individually but remains connected to collective endeavors. Thus, CTs as ethic-socio-technical everyday assemblages could counter neoliberal self-care hegemony. In the cases explored here, however, CT setup depends on social privilege—material resources, formal education, and access to information—so CTs may reinforce rather than question neoliberal self-care and self-responsibility. Especially in Chile, where social housing and state subsidies remain constrained to septic tanks, more privileged people may be able to implement CTs, while the most marginalized remain excluded and constrained to conventional infrastructures.

For most research counterparts, the initial motivation to set up a CT was pragmatic. Nick (CT22 caretaker) installed a CT with his wife 24 years ago, when they moved to rural France, after seeing his first CT at his neighbor’s (CT21): “It just seemed logical not to pay to install a water-based toilet—much cheaper,” he recalls. Reflecting on the difference between flush and composting toilets, he explains:

It seems absolutely crazy to flush your toilet with fresh, drinkable water and then have to clean it. That’s the first thing you realize when you see there are other solutions. From that moment on it just seems absurd. You feel the same when you go to other people’s places or into town and realize that is what’s happening. It’s obviously easier to have a water toilet with a septic tank or sewage. You do your business and don’t have to worry about it anymore—you’re no longer responsible. But environmentally and morally, that seems crazy too. Here, we have to deal with it—when the bins need emptying, they have to go somewhere. That’s the big difference: You are responsible for your actions, for your natural actions. (Interview, July 31, 2024)

Although for CT caretakers in Chile it may not be “obviously easier” to have a flush toilet—and some even describe CTs as simplifying everyday life after years of dealing with poorly installed septic tanks—living with CTs entails a profound shift in terms of the relations to excrement: from perceiving it as dangerous or disturbing, to be ideally flushed and forgotten, to acknowledging it as a generative and valuable material one is entitled to care for.

Hawkins (2006) notes that “while the rich may have always been able to outsource management of their shit, the poor had to deal with their own portable containers” until the introduction of mass plumbing made distance from one’s own excrement widely accessible (p. 57). Distance from one’s own excrement has never been so wide in the Los Lagos Region; in other parts of the world, people still have “to deal with their own portable containers,” an experience that shapes social and racial inequality (Dube et al., 2023). This study includes people whose social position would exempt them from such labor, yet who choose to engage in it. Under these circumstances, even when initially compelled by infrastructural constraints, many find in CTs more than anticipated. Aurora, manager of an outdoor educational site (CT11), explains:

We came to dry toilets because we were forced by reality—there is no water and no sewage system here. We thought it was a good opportunity for education in ecology, in the traces we leave, and in taking responsibility for our waste. But it also became an opportunity for learning how to approach everyday issues like the poop and pee we all produce but nobody talks about. It opens conversations about shared emotions, thoughts, and processes that social life usually silences. (Interview, April 3, 2025)

When not experienced as reinforcing social inequality, taking care of one's excrement has significant affective and ethical transformational power. Marcela, CT1 caretaker, recalls carrying buckets with urine, feces, and cover material to the composter:

Through that exercise of care—moving things, emptying the buckets, washing them, letting them dry in the sun so they don't absorb too much smell—I began to understand not only what others had told me, but what came from intuition, from letting myself go. It's like a dance, reconnecting with something so human and so forgotten, as if we pretend "this part isn't mine," "I'm human, but I don't poop." It's absurd; I laughed a lot: "I'm human and I poop." I loved that exercise. And here I am, composting. (Interview, December 4, 2025)

Composting excrement situates humans in a "web of living co-vulnerabilities" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 293) and can be grasped as a com-passionate act of care insofar as it requires feeling with many other beings and being attentive and attuned to relations with and among them—not only in the compost pile but also in the entire composting infrastructure. This includes one's own body, the bodies of diverse macro- and microscopic beings, things, and other elements with which soil is co-created (see Figure 4). It is a dance requiring feeling with human and more-than-human others, and involves interdependency as well as communication through doings, affections, and sensibilities.

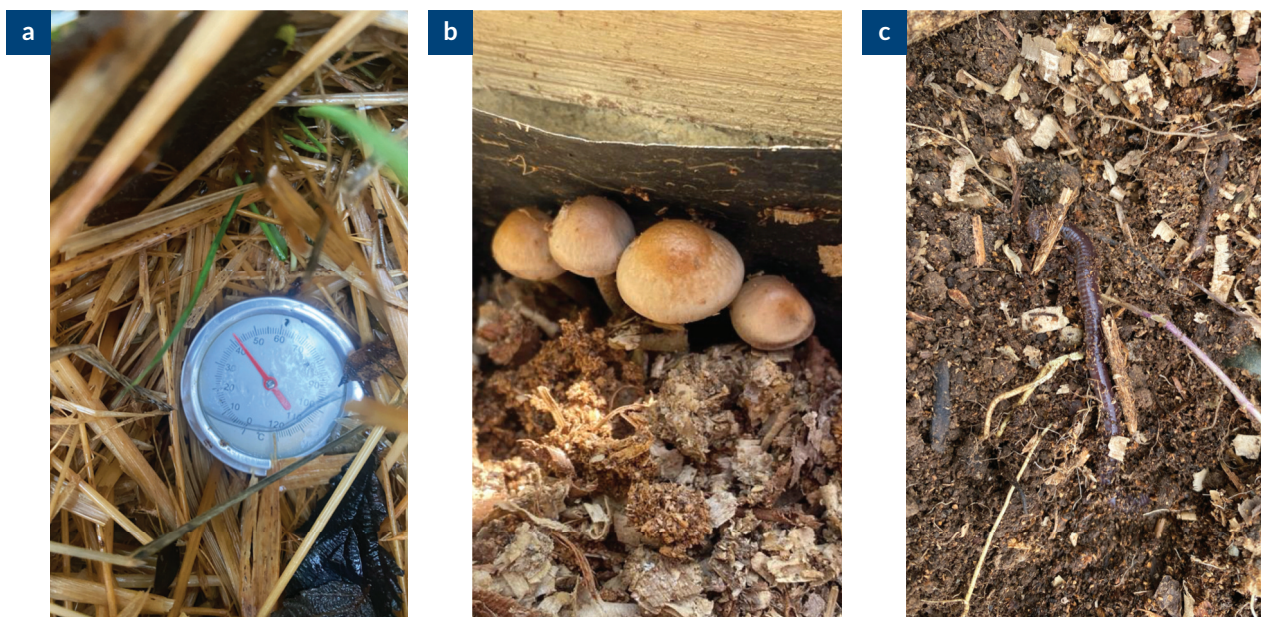


Figure 4. Soil co-creators (CT20): (a) straw cover of the composter with thermometer showing descending temperature, tree leaves, and emerging sprouts; (b) fungi in the "open" composter (first cover removed); (c) earthworms exposed during composter emptying. Source: Author's fieldwork (2024–2026).

In everyday practices, when taking care of excrement an ethical obligation is performed; excrement management can be understood as a matter of care to be engaged in through composting as an ethical doing. As Marcela says, this “literal and metaphorical exercise in taking responsibility for your own shit”:

Connects you with the whole process of what your shit means, ultimately with what you feed on and what it means to be human. It connected me deeply with all of that. It's like rooting oneself in the earth; it's like becoming embodied again. (Interview, December 4, 2025)

If ethics are embodied and emerge out of experiential networks of obligation (Hawkins, 2006), com-passionate care, performed through composting one's excrement, involves fostering a caring relation to excrement situated within affective interdependent entanglements. The affective dimension of the com-passionate entanglement becomes evident in different ways. CT caretakers report physical and psychological discomfort when using flush toilets through expressions like: “It hurts to flush 20 liters of water away,” “I feel guilty,” “I feel misaligned with the world.” This misalignment reveals what is missing from the picture of com-passionate composting outlined here.

The embodied experience of being integrated into metabolic cycles remains fragile when unsupported by political collectives able to decide which forms of care and which technologies sustain collective flourishing: i.e., to collectively choose convivial infrastructures.

5. Closing: Com-Passionate Composting as a Future Horizon

I have examined CTs as matters of care—intertwining practical labor, affections, and ethical obligations—and explored how the everyday practice of composting one's excrement reconfigures naturecultural relations among bodies, environments, and other beings. I have argued that this practice constitutes a com-passionate form of care within affective interdependent entanglements. Composting one's excrement implies com-passion as being-with in shared doing and feeling with nonhuman soil co-creators and other entities that constitute CTs. It opens fragile yet meaningful horizons for collective well-being in contexts of infrastructural neglect and socioenvironmental injustice.

Amid persistent inequality, racism, and the normalization of extreme forms of extractive and exploitative relations in human and more-than-human worlds, CTs may transform subjectivities and advance another ethos in human-waste relations. They may even be understood as personal-collective doings, as composting is a collective endeavor. However, this ethos remains largely confined to individual response-ability and risks producing new forms of social exclusion insofar as norm compliance remains prevalent within sanitation governance, even when the empirical performance of promoted technologies is deficient and exclusionary.

To conclude, I return to the story with which I began: this year's potato harvest, brought forward due to the *pilme*. The compost we produce is not enough to prepare the soil. August, when sowing takes place, was as busy as December. Just as we could not spread urine each morning to protect the growing potato plants from the *pilme*, we also lacked time to prepare the soil by adding sheep manure from a neighbor and seaweed from the shore, an ancient practice that has served us well in the past.

No matter how passionately we care, no matter how much help comes from our com-passionate more-than-human collaborators, another “com” is missing. Although it is not quite here yet, it is a future horizon that pushes us forward while demanding more care. It is the “com”—the with—of many other humans. A society where excrement management becomes a shared matter of care, and where people, through the diverse labors they undertake, can fulfill their obligations to care for an interdependent earthly other—not in haste, but with the time, attention, and affection it needs and deserves—a society that truly values everyone’s contribution to the flourishing of collective life.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data can be shared upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to institutional ethics and confidentiality protocols.

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Inclusive Cities for All Beings: Urban Animal Governance From a “One Welfare” Perspective

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Abstract

Urban environments are predominantly designed and governed from a human-centred perspective, largely overlooking the experiences and welfare of animals. Yet cities are shared spaces in which animals live in environments profoundly shaped by human activity. Because of global urbanisation, interspecies interactions will intensify, becoming more frequent and complex. This development raises pressing questions about the welfare of animals in urban contexts and the human responsibility for these animals. While humans hold direct responsibility for domestic animals under their care, such as cats and dogs, we argue that they also bear indirect obligations toward commensal species, such as rats, foxes, and pigeons, whose lives depend on human-modified habitats. Situating urban animal welfare alongside human wellbeing aligns with the One Welfare framework, which recognises the interdependence of human, animal, and environmental welfare. In contrast to narrower One Health approaches that primarily focus on health risks and biosecurity, One Welfare foregrounds welfare and relationality across species. This article argues that animal welfare should be understood as a constitutive element of urban governance rather than a secondary concern. Drawing on illustrative examples from Belgian cities, the study demonstrates that, to date, animal welfare considerations remain insufficiently integrated into urban governance practices. Therefore, we call for the systematic integration of scientific animal welfare knowledge into urban governance to advance animal welfare. Building on the One Welfare framework, the article advances the concept of “multispecies cities” as part of a broader vision of compassionate urban futures grounded in care and coexistence between humans and animals.

Keywords

animal welfare; biopolitics; commensal species; domestic species; inclusive cities; more-than-human; multispecies urbanism; One Welfare; urban governance

1. Introduction

For the first time in human history, more than half the human world's population lives within cities. By 2050, an estimated 68% of the world's population will live in urban areas (United Nations, 2019). This demographic transformation entails not only increasing human density but also a shrinking of the space for nonhuman animals (hereafter referred to as "animals") and, consequently, a growing presence of animals in cities. This leads to intensified interactions across species. Yet these encounters do not necessarily imply greater legitimacy for their presence or a more welcoming attitude from citizens. Some citizens are unsettled by the proximity of animals, while others relish encounters with animals nearby (Arcari et al., 2020). Cities are increasingly conceptualised as sites of diversity, inclusion, and coexistence. Urban policy discourses emphasise social inclusion, wellbeing, participation, and justice, particularly in relation to marginalised human populations. However, the lives and experiences of animal species remain largely absent from these discussions. While animals inhabit cities in significant numbers, their existence is often treated as an environmental problem or nuisance issue rather than a matter of inclusive and sustainable urban governance.

To a certain extent, the abovementioned ideas are rooted in a more anthropocentric worldview in which humans consider themselves as the centre of the universe. However, this position is currently challenged by more contemporary ontological frameworks such as the posthuman (Braidotti, 2013), new materialism (Bennett, 2016), Indigenous perspectives (Deloria, 1979), and deep ecology (Morton, 2016). Each of these ontological frameworks questions the notion of human supremacy, prompting a re-evaluation of humanity's self-conception and place in the world. These foundations inspire the development of urban environments as biophilic cities, more-than-human spaces, or multispecies entanglements (Franklin, 2017; Houston et al., 2018; Kone, 2022; Panlasigui et al., 2021). In these contexts, anthropocentrism is challenged by recognizing animal subjecthood and agency, positioning animals as active agents in shaping and co-constructing cities. However, in the urban policy discourse, taking animals into account for urban development purposes remains a low priority. In addition, urban development is often handled by multiple municipal authorities with conflicting missions and messages regarding the place of animals.

Although the scientific literature on animal welfare has expanded considerably, it remains primarily focused on farm and laboratory animals, while studies on animal welfare in urban environments remain comparatively less developed. However, there is a growing interest in urban animal welfare, driven by rising public interest, media coverage, and stakeholder engagement. Animals are more frequently recognised as subjects in their own right and as neighbours in urban environments. Governance policies, however, have mainly focused on the development of tools to reduce the suffering of domestic animals and promote their welfare, such as animal protection laws, urban animal policies (e.g., the trap-neuter-return of stray cats [TNR], off-leash zones for dogs), and structural arrangements (e.g., subsidies for NGOs). Animals in cities are furthermore subjected to various governance practices, including identification and spatial zoning that regulates where and how animals can be present and in which numbers. Moreover, while cities manage animals for diverse reasons, the animal welfare implications of these practices remain under-examined. This suggests that the anthropocentric worldview

slips through in how animal governance practices are operationalised. Policies are mainly responding to how humans actually respond to certain animals, thereby failing to capture the needs of different species and individual animals in relation to humans.

1.1. Objective of the Study

In this study, we aim to conceptualize inclusivity as a relational framework to examine how urban governance systems currently distribute recognition, access, and protection among animals in urban space and how they could be changed to accommodate humans and other animal species sharing the same urban space. We understand that inclusive cities are, as urban spaces, designed and governed to accommodate the needs, interests, and well-being of all inhabitants. Extending beyond human populations, an inclusive city can be conceived as a multispecies city—recognising that humans coexist with a wide range of animals who actively inhabit, shape, and are affected by urban environments.

Our research illustrates how urban planning, regulatory practices, and dominant urban discourses reproduce species-based inclusion and exclusion mechanisms by legitimising certain animals as co-inhabitants while framing others as nuisances. We position urban animal welfare within broader debates on inclusive governance, biopolitics, and urban futures. Drawing on empirical research conducted in Belgium, it adopts a One Welfare perspective to argue for systematic attention to animal welfare in urban policy.

This article first outlines the development of animal welfare science in relation to the One Welfare framework. Next, it introduces seven model species for the Western European urban context. It subsequently presents governance cases from Belgium and reflects on the insights gained for the development of multispecies urban ecosystems. The primary aim of this manuscript is to place the emphasis on reflecting upon the welfare of animals in urban contexts, rather than on animal rights in the city, as these represent distinct approaches within the broader field of animal governance. In addition, the detailed overview of the Belgian context may serve as a useful basis and point of reference for future studies examining urban animal governance and the integration of animal welfare science in other national and municipal settings.

2. Theoretical Framework: One Welfare

In this article, we start from the interdisciplinary One Welfare framework, emphasising that the wellbeing of humans, animals, and ecosystems is interdependent. Ontological frameworks such as posthumanism, new materialism, and Indigenous, ecological approaches have all challenged anthropocentrism and provide the philosophical grounding that facilitates a One Welfare governance perspective. It shifts the perspective from the worldview “humans at the centre” to “relational, multispecies entanglements” as the relational basis for liveable eco-systems for all. In this sense, One Welfare resonates with emerging theories of compassionate futures and care ethics that position interdependency, vulnerability, and mutual responsibility—not autonomy or utility—as the basis for organising social and ecological life.

3. Animal Welfare

3.1. The Early 20th Century

Animal sentience and welfare have been highlighted throughout centuries of European Western history by various thinkers and artists, including Aristotle, Plutarch, Charles Darwin, Michel de Montaigne, William Hogarth, Humphrey Primatt, Jeremy Bentham, and Henry Salt (De Ruyver, 2021). Before the science of animal welfare arose, there was the study of animal behaviour. Animal behaviour research took shape in the 20th century, albeit initially from two different perspectives. On the one hand, it developed from psychology, scholars, such as Wolfgang Köhler and Burrhus Frederic Skinner, who argued that the development of animal behaviour occurs essentially through learning processes (behaviourism). On the other hand, it developed from the branch of biology. Ethologists, such as Niko Tinbergen, Konrad Lorenz, and Karl von Frisch, assumed that behaviour is determined primarily through genes. The disagreement between the two perspectives lasted for about half a century, until they finally agreed that behaviour is the result of the interaction between genes and environment. In 1973, the pioneers of ethology—the biological study of behaviour—Karl von Frisch, Konrad Lorenz, and Nikolaas Tinbergen received international recognition with the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for their research on the behaviour of social animals, including the “dance language” of bees and the imprinting process in young birds.

Ruth Harrison described in the book *Animal Machines*, published in 1964, the practice of intensive livestock and poultry farming. She denounced the large-scale production and considered the lifestyle it entails for the animals as inhumane. Following this publication, the British government appointed a committee in 1965 to examine the welfare of farm animals. The committee made a report to inquire into the welfare of animals kept under intensive farming systems, which became known as Brambell’s “five freedoms” (Brambell, 1965). This was further refined by the 1979 Farm Animal Welfare Council, which defined a framework for how to evaluate animal welfare in practice as follows: “Animals are free from: hunger, thirst or improper feeding; thermal and physical distress; injury or disease; fear and chronic stress; and animals are free to exhibit normal, species-specific behaviour patterns.” Since then, the field of animal welfare science has undergone significant development. The scientific roots of animal welfare are multi-disciplinary and include fields such as ethology, cognitive-neural science, veterinary medicine, nutrition, ecology, environment, and design studies.

3.2. Individuals and Positive Welfare

Welfare concepts have now been expanded to encompass more than the resources an animal has available or the stressors to which it is exposed. The subjective experience of animals has become a crucial factor, as first proposed by Ian Duncan and colleagues in the 1980s. Today, a commonly used framework is the Five Domains model by David Mellor, which emphasises the mental state of the animal, as a result of its physical conditions (Mellor, 2017). Consequently, contemporary animal welfare science has introduced the notion of individuality and personality. This recognition extends beyond vertebrate animals to include invertebrates, which are also now believed to possess distinct personalities (Crespi-Abril & Rubilar, 2023). Another important shift is that not only negative experiences should be avoided, but positive ones should also be included. Moreover, different concepts for welfare assessment have been developed, such as the “quality of life and the dynamic animal welfare” concept, which aims to include lifespan (Arndt et al., 2022; Browning, 2022; Green & Mellor, 2011; Hecht, 2021). Arndt et al.’s (2022) proposal also takes into consideration the

changing environmental conditions: “The proposed animal welfare concept considers the dynamics of the animal’s environment over time, of the animal’s behaviour in response to changing environmental conditions, and the resulting interactions” (p. 3). The relevance of such approaches lies in the potential to make adaptations in welfare assessments. Animal welfare science is continually evolving and actively seeking paradigms to build upon. However, there is currently a strong consensus that the integration of positive welfare and an emphasis on the individual level should be central to the definitions of animal welfare. Therefore, for this article, the animal welfare definition developed by ANSES (2018) is used; it is one of the concepts integrating positive welfare and the individual animal: “The welfare of an animal is its positive mental and physical state as related to the fulfilment of its physiological and behavioural needs in addition to its expectations. This state can vary depending on the animal’s perception of a given situation” (ANSES, 2018).

Historically, animal welfare research has primarily focused on welfare issues in contexts devoid of ecosystem interactions. Animal welfare research predominantly emphasised laboratory animals, livestock, zoo animals, and companion animals. Accustomed to working within human-controlled environments, animal welfare science may struggle to address how animals interact within ecosystems. This gap underscores the need for animal welfare research that considers the unique challenges and dynamics of urban ecosystems.

3.3. One Medicine, One Health, and One Welfare

The upsurge of the One-concept, such as One Medicine, One Health, and One Welfare at the beginning of the 21st century, illustrates the growing recognition of the interrelatedness and the interdependence of life on earth. These concepts are intended to integrate diverse perspectives and are sometimes understood as a holistic ideal of coexistence with and respect for all life on earth. Originating with Calvin Schwabe’s concept of One Medicine, which bridged human and veterinary medicine, these ideas gained momentum following the H5N1 outbreaks and the articulation of One Health in the 2004 Manhattan Principles. Since then, One Health has been institutionalised by organisations such as WHO. While defined in various ways, the concept consistently highlights the inseparable relationship between humans, animals, and the environment and the need for interdisciplinary collaboration across local, national, and global levels. Figure 1 presents an adapted version of Lehmann’s original “ego-eco” diagram, as modified by Rosén et al. (2022), to illustrate this shift.

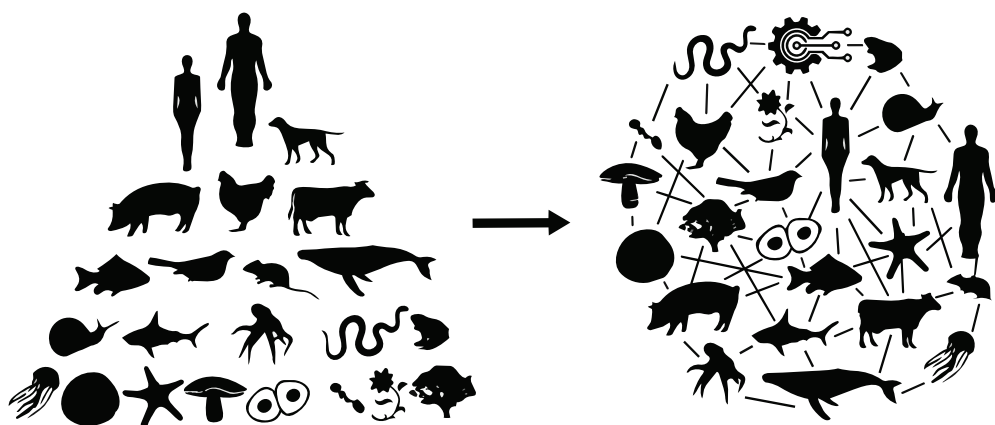


Figure 1. The move from human-centred design to more-than-human-centred design. Source: Figure adapted from Lehmann, as reproduced in Rosén et al. (2022).

One Welfare, advanced by Pinillos et al. (2016), extends One Health by linking animal welfare with human well-being and sustainability, stressing that improvements in animal welfare translate into broader societal and environmental benefits, and vice versa (Pinillos, 2018; Pinillos et al., 2016). This concept emphasises the importance of incorporating animal welfare science in transdisciplinary scientific collaboration and highlights the essential interconnection among diverse forms of life. As Yeates (2024) states:

Animal behaviour and welfare research are part of a wider endeavour to optimize the health and wellbeing of humans, animals and ecosystems....These principles entail that animal behaviour and welfare research should be valued equitably alongside other research in transdisciplinary and multisectoral collaboration. It should include and promote a multiplicity of marginalized voices, including those of animals, and it should apply and describe a harmonious balance between human-animal-environment interactions. (p. 1)

While One Health emerged primarily from the fields of public health and veterinary medicine to address interconnected health risks between humans, animals, and ecosystems, One Welfare developed from animal welfare science and ethics to emphasise the interconnections between animal welfare, human wellbeing, and the environment; this distinction is particularly relevant in urban animal welfare, where animals may be physically healthy from a One Health perspective, yet still experience compromised welfare due to stress, unsuitable urban environments, social conflict, or inadequate human-animal interactions.

4. Conceptual Framework: Urban Animals

Urban animals can be classified into domestic, commensal/liminal, and wild (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011). Both domestic animals and commensal animals live in urban environments. The selected model species—cats, dogs, brown rats, black rats, house mice, foxes, pigeons—are prevalent in urban environments across Western European cities and present marked differences, as well as distinct challenges, in terms of urban coexistence and animal welfare. The critical distinction between those species lies in the fact that domestic animals have owners, whereas commensal animals do not. For this article, the definition of O'Connor (2013) is adhered to:

Commensal is taken to refer to those animal species that utilize the modified or constructed environment of human habitations for living space and food....The key attribute is that habitats constructed or heavily modified by people either provide the majority of living space and sustenance, or provide those resources at a critical point in the animals' lives, without which their populations would not be viable. (p. 8)

Wild animals may pass through or fly over urban areas, yet they do not rely on these environments in the same way as the domestic and commensal animals that inhabit them. Therefore, wild animals fall outside the scope of this article. The distinction between domestic, commensal, and wild is, however, not always clear-cut. These classifications are not fixed attributes of species, but rather historically contingent relationships that emerge between human and animal populations, such as the city pigeon, which is a descendant of the domesticated rock pigeon. Moreover, the very act of defining animals raises biopolitical challenges, as noted by Tian et al. (2023, p. 1): "The ways in which 'wildlife' and related terms are legally defined go beyond mere semantics; they are significant in shaping decisions, policies, and discourses."

4.1. Urban Domestic Animals

In Western European cities, cats and dogs are the most prevalent domestic animals, often considered companions and even family members (Sandøe et al., 2023). Urban governance of domestic cats and dogs varies across states, regions, cities, and municipalities.

4.1.1. Cats

The management of cats (*Felis sylvestris catus*) in urban space has garnered significant public and academic attention, particularly concerning issues related to stray cats (Vasileva & McCulloch, 2023). However, how cities deal with unowned free-roaming cats differs and is subject to public polarisation. These cats, either lost or abandoned domestic cats, or unowned litters, roam freely in urban areas and are often not neutered (De Ruyver, Hannes, et al., 2024). Some cities manage stray cats via TNR interventions, designating healthy but unsocialised cats as community cats cared for by certified caretakers, while socialised cats may be adopted through shelters, and stray cats in poor health may be euthanised. Views on stray animals reflect societal attitudes, legal frameworks, and ethical considerations (Jaroš, 2021). Changing attitudes towards stray animals stem from historical shifts in human-animal relationships that, since the 1950s, have driven their exclusion from cities and their framing as surplus populations or threats to human health and biodiversity. For example, ongoing debates around indoor-only cats focus on biodiversity protection while neglecting the welfare implications for cats themselves.

4.1.2. Dogs

Dogs (*Canis familiaris*) are among the most visible domestic animals in urban spaces. Urban dog-walking often provokes polarised reactions, with some residents advocating for more space for dogs and others expressing concerns about safety and injuries. As a result, dog behaviour and dog parks are frequent sources of governance questions and public debate. Dogs identified as prohibited types, such as in the UK's Dangerous Dogs Act of 1991, are still being debated, particularly regarding the effectiveness of breed-specific legislation in reducing dog attacks and improving public safety. Factors such as owner behaviour, training, socialisation, and environmental conditions are often predictors of aggression than breed alone. Although the importance of dog training in cities is widely acknowledged, both local governments and owners face structural challenges, including a shortage of dog training schools and off-leash zones. Urban living requires dog owners to reach a balance between discipline and freedom, enabling dogs to thrive within spatial and social constraints. This entails sustained investment in training and structure, alongside opportunities for exploration, socialisation, and physical activity. Shelter intake rates for dogs are high in urban areas, potentially reflecting unrealistic ownership expectations. Dogs can be simultaneously viewed as beloved companions and commercial commodities, a tension captured by Wolfe's (2012) characterisation of misbehaving or injured dogs as financial liabilities:

If your dog is injured or misbehaving, it is a financial liability—it has a negative value because it will cost more to restore its health or retrain than it will cost you to simply replace it with a new companion animal. (p. 152)

4.2. Commensal Animals

Brown rats, black rats, mice, foxes, and pigeons have a long history of living with humans in urban areas, exemplifying the concept of commensalism (O'Connor, 2013). Commensal species occupy a precarious position in urban governance, as they are oftentimes framed as pests, legitimizing management practices that often entail significant animal suffering.

4.2.1. Brown Rats, Black Rats, and Mice

Brown rats (*Rattus norvegicus*), black rats (*Rattus rattus*), and mice (*Mus musculus*) are among the most common urban animals and frequently provoke negative public reactions. Their widespread portrayal as disease carriers reflects not only concerns about public health but also human sanitation practices that frame rodents as “out of place” in cities. Yet many nuisances attributed to rodents are based more on belief than empirical evidence (Delahaye, 2021). These representations shape the biopolitical framing of rats and mice and legitimise specific killing practices. Urban rodents are therefore widely perceived as legitimate for culling, and population control through poisoning—particularly the use of anticoagulants—remains common practice worldwide. Anticoagulant rodenticides cause severe internal bleeding and are associated with very poor welfare outcomes for all poisoned animals. In Western Europe, opposition to anticoagulants and glue boards is increasing, contributing to the acceptance of Integrated Pest Management (van Gerwen et al., 2024). Integrated pest management comprises successive phases—identifying potential pest species, determining nuisance or population thresholds, preventing and monitoring pest presence, and implementing control measures—with monitoring and prevention as core components.

Rats and mice are likely to remain permanent inhabitants of urban environments. Developing urban ecological strategies that combine historical insight with current scientific knowledge can support more effective planning and management (Guiry et al., 2024). Public outreach, particularly around waste management, will be increasingly important, as community practices strongly influence rodent habitats. Improved understanding of rodent ecology and welfare can further inform policies that promote coexistence. Some scholars even highlight rodents' functional roles as urban cleaners and ecological indicators, while citizen science initiatives, such as the Helsinki Urban Rat Project, demonstrate how research engagement can reduce negative public attitudes toward urban rodents (Aivelo & Huovelin, 2020; University of Helsinki, 2020).

4.2.2. Foxes

Foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) are increasingly prevalent in Western European cities. The red fox can survive in urban environments while also exploiting anthropogenic food sources and shelter to its significant advantage. This has resulted in higher population densities than those found in natural conditions. Battermann (2021) observes that, unlike for rodents and pigeons, public attitudes toward foxes in the UK have become much more positive since 1950. Nevertheless, negative perceptions and conflicts persist, particularly when foxes are viewed as potential disease carriers or bold. Moreover, urban welfare issues, including intentional feeding, citizen-led culling, and mortality from traffic collisions, necessitate attention. Scholars argue that effective assessment of conflict risks and management strategies for urban foxes depends on a comprehensive understanding of their ecology. As with urban rodents, studying fox ecology and welfare helps us understand how we can coexist in cities.

4.2.3. Pigeons

Urban pigeons are domesticated rock pigeons (*Columba livia domestica*) that have subsequently rewilded and established themselves in cities. In contemporary urban contexts, pigeons are often portrayed as polluters of human spaces, and their removal has become a significant component of urban sanitation policies (Jerolmack, 2008). Public attitudes toward pigeons are largely negative, and population control through culling remains a common management practice. In response to these perceptions, Mosco (2021) authored *A Pocket Guide to Pigeon Watching: Getting to Know the World's Most Misunderstood Bird*, which seeks to challenge prevailing negative views of pigeons in urban environments. Mosco frames pigeons as a flagship species for promoting awareness of urban biodiversity and fostering biophilia. In recent years, urban governments have increasingly explored more humane approaches to pigeon population management. These strategies typically include limiting intentional feeding and installing deterrent devices, such as bird spikes, to reduce pigeon densities in specific areas. At the same time, pigeons are themselves exposed to a range of anthropogenic hazards, including malnutrition, toe mutilation, and others. Against this backdrop of evolving management practices and contested public attitudes, issues of governance, public communication, and animal welfare in relation to urban pigeon management have become matters of increasing concern for cities.

5. Urban Animal Governance in Practice: Empirical Insights From the Belgian Case

5.1. The Case of Belgium

Belgium is a federal constitutional monarchy within the European Union, composed of three regions—the Brussels Capital Region (BCR), Flanders, and Wallonia—each with its own government, parliament, and administrative competences. These regions enjoy substantial autonomy in several policy domains, including animal welfare, making Belgium the first EU member state to appoint regional ministers specifically responsible for animal welfare (Hus & McCulloch, 2023). The progressive institutionalisation of animal welfare is further reinforced by the constitutional recognition of animals as sentient beings on 2 May 2024, through the addition of a paragraph 7bis to Article 7 of the Constitution, which obliges the Federal State, Communities, and Regions to ensure the protection and welfare of animals within their respective competences. This constitutional change is expected to shape policy development across all levels of governance. At the same time, Belgium's highly urbanised context presents distinct challenges for animal welfare governance: since the 1970s, major land-use changes in Flanders and the BCR have involved the large-scale conversion of arable land and grassland into built-up areas, placing these regions among the most urbanised in Europe. The combination of rising animal welfare governance structures and intense urbanisation makes Belgium a particularly relevant case for examining urban animal welfare, as densely populated and rapidly transforming cities generate specific human–animal relations and welfare concerns.

5.2. Urban Animal Governance

Animal-related governance in Belgian cities is driven by a plurality of policy domains and levels and rationales that reflect differing biopolitical frameworks.

5.2.1. Domestic Animals: Cats and Dogs

Animal welfare legislation in the three regions sets out obligations for domestic animal owners, including requirements related to appropriate feeding, housing, and overall care of animals. A key component is the mandatory microchipping and registration of cats and dogs in the national databases DogID and CatID, which facilitates identification and the efficient return of lost animals to their owners. Some cities impose limits on the number of domestic animals an individual may keep; while these restrictions are primarily motivated by environmental considerations, they also contribute to the prevention of animal hoarding and the improvement of domestic animal welfare.

All cities implement regulations requiring dogs to be leashed in public spaces, based on the public health concern related to dog injuries and human health. The establishment of designated dog areas where they can run off leash indicates growing attention to animal welfare. However, these zones are mostly designed from a human-centred perspective. For example, off-leash zones for dogs are not evaluated in terms of dogs' stress levels, intradog and extradog dynamics, or behavioural needs. High rental costs for dog training grounds, growing dog populations, and increasing competition over public space further complicate the urban dog-human coexistence. The absence of free-roaming dog populations in Belgium eliminates many of the management challenges typically associated with stray dogs.

Mandatory neutering policies for domestic cats are implemented across all three regions, alongside management measures targeting stray cat populations (De Ruyver, Hannes, et al., 2024). The recent provisions in Flemish animal welfare legislation concerning stray cat welfare assign explicit responsibility to municipalities for the management of stray cats within their jurisdictions (see Flemish Government, 2024). This legislative development has been positively received by citizens (De Ruyver et al., 2021). By contrast, regulatory frameworks in the BCR differentiate between stray and domestic cats based on their relationship with humans, resulting in a division of responsibility between the environmental and animal-welfare policy domains. This has resulted in negative welfare outcomes for stray cats, despite substantial efforts by NGOs to address the issue (De Ruyver, Hannes, et al., 2024).

The management of domestic animals in urban space in Belgium reflects evolving governance structures, characterised by differing governance rationales and degrees of institutional inclusion. While policies for managing dogs in urban space are in place, they insufficiently account for dogs' welfare, and the governance of cats as domestic, colony, or stray leads to varying welfare outcomes. These examples underscore the importance of incorporating urban animal welfare knowledge, and thus animal perspectives, into urban animal governance

5.2.2. Commensal Animals: Rodents, Foxes, and Pigeons

Although debates on humane rodent management are ongoing in the three regions and cities, the rodent control methods currently permitted under Belgian law have significant negative welfare consequences for animals, humans, and the environment, as demonstrated by De Ruyver et al. (2023). Their study shows that rodents are not afforded protection based on their sentience, nor are the harmful effects of anticoagulant rodenticides on human health and the environment adequately considered. The prevailing public health rationale thus overlooks broader impacts from a One Welfare perspective. Integrated Pest Management

provides a more humane and effective alternative when explicit animal welfare criteria are incorporated. However, the absence of binding welfare standards for control methods, combined with limited public awareness, currently constrains its potential.

Foxes, although unprotected in Flanders and Wallonia, are subject to fluctuating levels of public tolerance. Only in the BCR are foxes a legally protected species, enabling their continued coexistence with citizens (De Ruyver, Hannes, et al., 2024). Foxes, as native mammals, have been under strict protection in the BCR since 1991, prohibiting hunting, den destruction (particularly during breeding seasons), and feeding. Nonetheless, citizen practices such as feeding or disturbing dens and corridors may undermine fox welfare and lead to arbitrary domination (Altrudi & Kelty, 2022). While some residents intentionally feed foxes to encourage proximity and visibility, others cull them, exposing foxes to heightened welfare risks.

Despite their historical and cultural significance in Belgium, rooted in long-standing domestication, wartime communication, and racing traditions, pigeons do not benefit from any legal welfare protection. Across Flanders and Wallonia, explicit policies addressing their welfare have so far been absent; moreover, many Belgian cities have introduced feeding bans for pigeons. Only in the BCR, the capture and killing of pigeons was prohibited by the Ordonnance of 10 February 2022 because such practices are cruel, inefficient, and costly. As aerial animals that do not conform to legal territorial boundaries, pigeons fall into a governance gap in which responsibility for their welfare remains diffuse within the Belgian institutional context (De Ruyver, Hannes, et al., 2024).

In conclusion, the five commensal species examined in this study are subject to fewer governance frameworks than domestic animals and, in the case of rodents, to no welfare-driven policy at all.

5.3. Governance and Knowledge

5.3.1. Institutional Fragmentation

In Belgian cities, governance of cats, dogs, rodents, foxes, and pigeons is marked by institutional fragmentation, as responsibilities impacting urban animals are distributed across multiple policy domains—such as animal welfare, environmental protection, biodiversity, and public health—each operating with distinct rationales, legal instruments, and administrative actors (De Ruyver, Hannes, et al., 2024). Consequently, welfare outcomes are shaped less by a coherent urban animal welfare policy vision than by the interaction of disconnected institutional mandates, producing governance gaps and uneven forms of welfare inclusion for different species. This underscores the importance of institutionalising cross-sectoral collaboration informed by urban animal welfare science. It also emphasises the need to engage the abovementioned policy domains in the design and implementation of urban animal public-space interventions, as animal welfare outcomes depend on such collaboration.

5.3.2. The Role of Local Governance

In Belgium, urban animal governance is shaped by a multi-level regulatory framework in which municipal, regional, and federal authorities each exercise distinct competencies. Federal regulations, such as those governing the use of biocides (cf. anticoagulantia), exert significant influence on the welfare of rodents and

non-target species. While animal welfare legislation is a regional responsibility, cities and municipalities are charged with enforcing these norms and addressing species-specific challenges within their jurisdictions. Moreover, research demonstrates that public acceptance of urban cat management strategies varies according to demographic characteristics, area of residence, and cultural values (De Ruyver et al., 2021). Therefore, cities play a crucial role in shaping animal welfare outcomes, as municipal authorities are tasked with implementing higher-level legislation while responding to local ecological conditions and citizen attitudes.

5.3.3. Knowledge Gaps and Capacity Building

A key barrier was the lack of animal welfare knowledge among policymakers, enforcement officers, and citizens (De Ruyver, Hannes, et al., 2024). Animal welfare legislation at the regional level is relatively recent (approximately a decade old), necessitating adequate information and training for policymakers, enforcement officers, and citizens. Moreover, animal welfare regulations are often formulated in vague prescriptive terms. They frequently rely on the assumption that trained officers can assess welfare on a case-by-case basis through the application of general principles. This may entail risks of inconsistent enforcement and unequal welfare outcomes. Educational initiatives, training programs, and public outreach—such as exhibitions on urban rodents—demonstrate potential for leveraging knowledge, reshaping perceptions, and behaviours. These interventions contribute to shifting narratives from eradication to coexistence (De Ruyver, Hannes, et al., 2024).

6. Reconfiguring Urban Animal Governance: Multispecies Cities and the One Welfare Paradigm

To date, studies on the integration of animal welfare science into governance have primarily focused on the political and legislative dimensions of animal welfare, while paying limited attention to the uptake and use of animal welfare science within urban animal governance. This makes the present contribution particularly relevant. As noted by Mitchell (2025), the integration of scientific evidence in urban animal governance remains uneven, as policy outcomes are shaped not only by evidence but also by political priorities, advocacy groups, public opinion, administrative capacity, and moral values.

Drawing on the One Welfare framework and on illustrative empirical insights from Belgian cities, the analysis shows that urban animal governance remains predominantly organised around human-centred priorities and fragmented institutional mandates. As a result, animal welfare is unevenly recognised across species and weakly integrated into governance practices, especially where animals are framed as nuisances or fall between policy domains.

6.1. Core Governance Tensions Emerging From the Belgian Case

Across the governance of domestic animals (cats and dogs) and commensal animals (rodents, foxes, pigeons), three interrelated tensions are particularly important.

First, our findings point to unequal inclusion of animal welfare for the different animal species. Domestic animals are governed through explicit welfare-oriented legislation that assigns responsibilities to owners and defines minimum care requirements, while commensal species are commonly governed through nuisance,

sanitation, biodiversity, or public health rationales. This difference produces substantially different welfare outcomes. For cats and dogs, governance instruments exist that can—at least in principle—be evaluated and improved in welfare terms (e.g., off-leash zones, stray cat management). For commensal animals, by contrast, welfare is often not the primary evaluative criterion at all, despite the fact that governance practices can entail significant suffering (e.g., anticoagulant rodenticides; see De Ruyver et al., 2023). Pigeons illustrate how welfare may be structurally neglected when animals do not fit clearly within existing legal and territorial arrangements, resulting in diffuse responsibility (De Ruyver, Hannes, et al., 2024).

Second, institutional fragmentation is a constitutive yet problematic feature of urban animal governance. Responsibilities shaping animal welfare outcomes are distributed across policy domains and levels—animal welfare, public health, biodiversity, environmental protection, municipalities, regions, and federal regulation. These mandates carry distinct rationales and often operate without systematic coordination (De Ruyver, Hannes, et al., 2024). Consequently, welfare outcomes are shaped less by a coherent vision of urban animal welfare than by the interaction of disconnected governance logics, producing gaps and inconsistencies.

Third, the empirical material shows that governance interventions tend to be reactive to human perceptions of animals and the conflicts they experience, rather than being anchored in species-specific and individual welfare needs. For example, dog governance in public space is typically justified through public safety concerns, while spatial interventions such as off-leash zones are rarely evaluated in relation to dogs' stress, behavioural needs, or social dynamics. For commensal species, representations as disease carriers or polluters legitimise eradication-oriented responses even where nuisances are partially rooted in belief, stigma, or sanitation practices (Delahaye, 2021; Jerolmack, 2008). These patterns exemplify the biopolitical character of urban animal governance: Decisions about which lives are protected, tolerated, controlled, or eliminated are shaped by classification, legitimacy, and thresholds of acceptability (Tian et al., 2023).

6.2. Interpreting the Findings Through a One Welfare Framework

Situated within One Welfare, these tensions are not merely administrative or technical problems; they reflect a deeper challenge of governing interdependent welfare relations across humans, animals, and urban ecosystems. One Welfare means that animal welfare, human wellbeing, and environmental sustainability are interconnected (Pinillos, 2018; Pinillos et al., 2016). The Belgian case illustrates how governance frequently treats these domains as separate responsibilities. Rodent control through anticoagulants, for example, is justified primarily through public health or sanitation logics, while welfare harms and broader environmental impacts remain insufficiently integrated into governance (De Ruyver et al., 2023). Similarly, feeding bans, deterrence infrastructures, and lethal control practices often prioritise human comfort and urban cleanliness without systematic consideration of how animals experience and adapt to urban conditions.

This underscores the article's central claim that animal welfare must be understood as a constitutive element of urban governance rather than a secondary concern. welfare cannot be added afterward as an extra consideration but must serve as a core principle for assessing trade-offs, designing interventions, and coordinating policy areas. At the same time, the analysis aligns with existing critiques that One-concepts risk being interpreted through anthropocentric self-protection rationales (Capps, 2024; Lerner & Berg, 2017), with human-oriented priorities dominating research and governance (Rai et al., 2024; Rodriguez, 2024). The Belgian case demonstrates precisely how such anthropocentric slippage occurs in practice: Welfare

becomes more robust where animals are owned and socially valued, and becomes marginal where animals are framed as surplus populations, pests, or ecological threats. A One Welfare interpretation, therefore, strengthens the argument for developing governance approaches that explicitly resist this by institutionalising welfare considerations across species categories and policy domains.

6.3. Multispecies Cities as a Relational Concept

In this article, the concept of multispecies cities is not proposed as a descriptive claim that cities already function inclusively for all beings, but as a governance framework that operationalises the relational commitments underlying One Welfare and beyond-anthropocentric ontologies (Franklin, 2017; Houston et al., 2018). It offers a way to organise the empirical findings into a coherent direction for “what next” by providing a relational guide for how humans ought to govern the shared conditions of urban life.

A multispecies cities perspective has three implications that directly respond to the empirical tensions identified above.

First, it reframes inclusivity as relational and situated, rather than as an abstract universal ideal. In urban contexts, animals’ dependence on human-modified habitats varies by species and by individual life histories, which generates different forms of responsibility. While responsibility is direct and legally codified for domestic animals, the governance of commensal species raises indirect obligations precisely because their populations depend on anthropogenic infrastructure, food systems, and spatial constraints (O’Connor, 2013). Recognising these relations does not erase conflict, but it shifts the question from whether animals “belong” to how shared urban systems can be governed to reduce harm and enable welfare.

Second, multispecies cities provide a way to reinterpret the biopolitical framing of “legitimate” versus “problem” animals (Jerolmack, 2008) by making visible how these classifications are produced through governance and discourse rather than by animals’ needs. This matters because it exposes the normative stakes of policy choices. If the category “nuisance” functions as a shorthand that suspends welfare evaluation, moving toward One Welfare requires undoing that suspension. It also requires reintroducing welfare as an explicit criterion, even in conflict governance.

Third, multispecies cities underscore our core argument about knowledge and capacity. If cities are shared socio-ecological spaces in which animals are active agents shaping and being shaped by urban infrastructures, then governance requires species-specific and context-specific welfare knowledge. This aligns with the observation that animal welfare science historically developed in controlled environments and may struggle to address welfare in ecosystems and dynamic urban contexts. The Belgian case illustrates the practical consequence: Vague welfare norms and limited training produce uneven enforcement and inconsistent outcomes. A multispecies approach, therefore, demands urban-specific animal welfare science capable of assessing how animals experience urban environments and how governance interventions shape welfare over time (ANSES, 2018; Arndt et al., 2022; Mellor, 2017).

The concept of multispecies cities raises another question—one that could be addressed in a separate paper; namely, whether genuinely greener cities can be realised when animals remain overlooked, excluded from, or problematised within urban governance (Konijnendijk, 2023). Urban greening initiatives will inevitably attract

new and different commensal species. Their presence raises a broader question about how greener cities can be pursued through more inclusive modes of governance. In this context, the One Welfare framework provides a useful conceptual lens for seeing urban greening as a multispecies project.

6.4. Governance Implications: Moving Beyond Fragmentation and Reactivity

Drawing on the empirical findings and the multispecies One Welfare framing, the article outlines governance-oriented implications.

Institutional coordination and responsibility are key in the governance of urban animal welfare. The Belgian case shows that fragmentation is not incidental but systemic. A One Welfare approach implies that cross-domain collaboration is not optional: It is required for welfare-relevant decisions that currently fall between animal welfare, environment, biodiversity, and public health (De Ruyver, Hannes, et al., 2024). For cities, this means recognising urban animal governance as a shared responsibility spanning multiple mandates and designing coordination mechanisms capable of aligning trade-off evaluation across domains.

Welfare assessments need to be incorporated as an evaluative criterion in urban interventions. For domestic animals, existing initiatives—such as off-leash zones and stray cat management—should be evaluated against animals' welfare needs rather than only human convenience or risk minimisation. For commensal species, the key shift is to treat welfare not as irrelevant but as part of the governance calculus, particularly where management methods entail severe welfare harms (De Ruyver et al., 2023). Integrated Pest Management demonstrates the possibility of governance strategies that can combine effectiveness with improved welfare outcomes when welfare criteria are explicitly incorporated.

Capacity building and public communication are essential components of urban animal welfare governance. The knowledge gaps identified in Belgian cities indicate that welfare-oriented governance depends on informing and training policymakers, enforcement officers, and citizens. Educational initiatives can reshape perceptions and behaviours, contributing to a shift from eradication narratives to coexistence-oriented approaches (De Ruyver, Moons, et al., 2024). A multispecies framing strengthens the rationale for such initiatives by promoting a broader reorientation towards the inclusion of multiple species in the ways cities conceptualise and govern shared urban life.

Urban animal governance is embedded in broader political dynamics, in which NGOs and animal welfare advocacy groups play important roles. However, this study focused specifically on the role and uptake of animal welfare science in urban governance, rather than on stakeholder or political analysis. Future research could therefore examine the perspectives, strategies, and governance roles of NGOs and advocacy groups in shaping urban animal welfare policy.

7. Conclusion

This article argued that animal welfare science should be understood as a constitutive element of urban governance rather than a secondary concern. Drawing on the One Welfare framework and empirical insights from Belgian cities, the analysis showed that urban animal welfare remains unevenly recognised and weakly integrated into governance practices, with substantial differences between the governance of domestic

animals (cats and dogs) and commensal species (rodents, foxes, pigeons). These differences are shaped by species-based inclusion and exclusion mechanisms, by institutional fragmentation across policy domains and governance levels, and by governance approaches that remain predominantly human-centred.

Achieving One Welfare in urban contexts requires more than isolated welfare interventions. Urban animal governance depends on coordinated, knowledge-driven approaches that embed animal welfare science into governance and planning as a foundational lens for evaluating trade-offs and shaping multispecies coexistence in cities—benefiting both animals and human urban dwellers alike. Such an approach calls for a relational and compassionate mode of governance that recognises humans and other animals as interdependent participants in shared urban ecosystems. In response, this article advanced the concept of multispecies cities as a governance framework that operationalises the relational commitments of One Welfare and offers a way to rethink how cities distribute recognition, protection, and responsibility across species.

Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen).

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted (ChatGPT and Claude) language editing tools exclusively for proofreading and improving the clarity of the English text. All intellectual content, interpretations, analyses, and conclusions remain entirely the responsibility of the authors.

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