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QUEERNESS AND COLLECTIVE CARE WITHIN UNIVERSITY: INSIGHTS FROM MEMORY WORK WITH STUDENT GROUPS

by Micol Pizzolati[*]

Abstract

Drawing on Memory Work workshops facilitated at three Italian universities, this article explores how queer students create and inhabit spaces of collective care and belonging within academic contexts. By linking scholarship on queer student experiences with those on the politics of care, this work examines participants' desires and motivations for fostering mutual and circular support. The approach involved engaging participants in writing autobiographical memories, which were then discussed collectively, allowing complex meanings and tensions to surface. By reweaving these narratives, the article highlights how queerness, care, and commitment intersect in university life, offering insights into transformative forms of belonging.

Keywords

Collaborative care practices; Memory Work; Queer student experiences in higher education; Transformative belonging

[*] MICOL PIZZOLATI is an Associate Professor of Sociology in the Department of Letters, Philosophy, Communication at the University of Bergamo, where she is Co-Chair of the Creative Methods Open Lab research group.

E-mail: micol.pizzolati@unibg.it

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1. INTRODUCTION

Queerness is more visible in society than perhaps ever before, which offers a need for social research across a wide range of issues. Despite the long history of queer people being excluded from and pushed out of social and educational institutions, queer studies and some queer lives are now incorporated into universities (Taylor et al., 2023). This calls for exploring what inclusivity means, looks like, and feels like within these institutions (Black, 2024). University can be a pivotal time for queer-identifying youth, who attempt to navigate new relationships in a predominantly heteronormative and sometimes hostile environment (Woodford et al., 2024). This period presents a tension of choosing between remaining hidden and invisible or striving to transform the context (Ferfolja et al., 2020).

Experiencing difference, as in exploring non-normative gender and sexuality, can make individuals vulnerable to isolation and loneliness, preventing them from feeling a sense of belonging, particularly among young people (Batsleer and Duggan, 2021). Involvement in queer student groups is one strategy to develop protective mechanisms (Joy and Numer, 2017). Youth-led activist groups, working towards their vision of safe and inclusive societies, create a culture of care (Furman et al., 2019; Sligo et al., 2022; Sotevik, 2024), including within universities, and sustain the ability to enact change (Black, 2024). As Waling and Roffee (2019) highlight, while there is a wealth of research on the individual experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in universities, such as mental well-being and academic progress, there is a lack of research on their interactions and forms of togetherness, including activism activities.

The dialogue between academics, activists, and university bodies regarding practices related to creating queer-welcoming institutional spaces is growing in Italy, involving visible and recognized student advocacy. This dynamic both creates and demands a sense of community that is important to explore through biographical and emotional perspectives. This framework challenged me first as a person whose daily life unfolds in these contexts and then as a scholar.

My research aims to provide insights into how students feel welcome and collectively care for relational spaces within queer activist groups organised at Italian universities. It builds on the trajectory of queer research in higher education in recent years (Lange et al., 2019), while also drawing on an epistemology that centres queer languages and practices, validating the inherent worth and value of queerness, and acknowledging the tension of using *queerness* as a categorising concept without limiting its power as a site of contestation and deconstruction (Winters and Ningard, 2023).

This work integrates care both as a crucial theme for academic contexts (Legassic, 2024) and as a research approach (Brannelly and Barnes, 2022).

Inspired by Black (2024), for the purposes of this research, I consider queer university activism to encompass a broad range of actions and relationships, not limited to vocal protests by individuals or groups expressing their desire for systemic change, but also including forms of community that offer support, information, friendship, and a sense of belonging— vital for well-being. Given the challenges in accurately representing the everyday experience of queerness within the university milieu, I recognised the need to adopt an approach that allowed for embodied, flexible, non-intrusive, and careful research encounters. I chose Memory Work as it aligns with this purpose and the context of the research. This method engages the participants through the interweaving of personal writing and shared discussion (Widerberg, 2020), thus grounding the research process in participatory work by and within the group.

In the following sections, I begin by outlining how the research question that guided the development of this project emerged. I then describe the method, my encounter and relationship with the participants, and the way I connected the narratives they shared, also weighing their experiences of writing memories and listening to those of others. Through an interweaving of written memories and the discussions they provoked, I explore layers of participants' needs, desires and motivations to engage in collective care practices, highlighting their varied and complex meanings.

While participants identified as non-binary, lesbian, gay, or trans during the research workshops, they all self-selected to join the study and used *queer* to describe themselves, their experiences, and their activist practices. For clarity and in respect of their self-identification, I use *queer* throughout this article to refer to all participants, as it encompasses diverse expressions of sex, gender, and sexuality, allowing for an expansive self-definition while leaving room for interpretation (Black, 2024). Although I use the term *activist*—commonly employed in literature on student engagement in higher education—the participants did not explicitly identify with it or label their practices as such. I use *activism* to describe their collective efforts to pursue and generate transformation.

2. MATURING A RESEARCH DEMAND: A MAPPING OF QUEER STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND THE POLITICS OF COLLECTIVE CARE

A growing body of literature explores the complex interplay between identifying as an LGBTQIA+ person and navigating the everyday experience of university life. These studies, emerging across diverse global contexts, continue to evolve, expanding the range of research questions and theoretical approaches. They underscore the necessity of investigating the transformative

actions within the environments where lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer students engage and commit themselves (Sharp et al., 2022).

Building on these foundational themes, several studies have examined the nuanced ways in which queer students experience safety, inclusion, and solidarity within university settings. In this regard, Allen et al. (2020) discovered that while participants reported a general sense of safety on campus, their narratives simultaneously revealed multiple instances of unsafety—suggesting an ongoing, intertwined relationship between these two perceptions. Noreiga and Burkholder (2022) further this discussion by highlighting the challenges queer students face when their sense of safety is confined to specific areas of the campus, rather than being felt universally across the university. These challenges include difficulties in locating supportive educators, feeling tolerated rather than genuinely included, and encountering explicit discrimination from peers. Waling and Roffee (2019) examined how university environments can shape students' reluctance to engage with others who share their LGBTQIA+ identity. Their participants expressed feelings of being not queer enough in relation to homonormative expectations, or conversely, too queer when measured against transnormative frameworks.

In contrast, Garcia et al. (2023) document the various strategies queer students employ to cope with their unique challenges and make sense of their university experience. These strategies include finding supportive communities, building social connections, advocating for themselves and others, and fostering a sense of agency. Similarly, Joy and Numer (2017) explore the experience of a student-led queer advocacy group, showing how participation in such a group generates a sense of accomplishment, pride, emotional bonding and social connectedness.

In their exploration of resistance practices against the marginalization of queer identity and scholarship, Winters and Ningard (2023) propose a redefinition of care that transcends narrow gendered and neoliberal frameworks. They conceptualize care as a form of mutual aid, suggesting that the creation of reimagined university spaces requires a shift away from a transactional approach—I care for you, and you care for me in return—towards a more radical, collaborative practice of social solidarity. This form of care, rooted in mutual aid, materializes through collective and participatory actions.

This redefinition of care resonates with Gusmano's (2022) concept of a politics of complicity, in which networks of care and friendship among queer individuals are not only emotionally sustaining but also politically significant. Rather than being grounded in obligation or reciprocity, these relationships create spaces of belonging and resistance, both within and beyond institutional settings. Research on university activism has also shown that students with minoritised identities who are actively engaged in activism

often experience feelings of missing out on creative or life-giving opportunities, and may face emotional and mental exhaustion or alienation (Linder et al., 2019; Conner et al., 2023). Simultaneously, these students often feel responsible for caring for their activist peers (Vaccaro and Mena, 2011).

The intersection of the literature on queer student experiences and collective care has prompted me to ask, within the specific context of Italian universities, how collective care practices emerge among queer students, and how these practices are shaped by their needs, desires, and motivations, ultimately contributing to the creation of spaces of belonging, solidarity, and mutual support.

3. CO-CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE: APPROACH, PARTICIPANTS, AND SENSE OF THINGS

Doing research with young queer students as a cisgender adult and privileged outsider made me reflect on the possible ethical challenges (Levy, 2013) and the need for conducting research through a social justice lens (Parson, 2019). Alongside the research question itself, it was equally important to me to create an inclusive (Fang et al., 2024) and safe space (Pizzolati, 2025). I also drew on Batsleer and Duggan's (2021) emphasis on the need to question the individual gaze when exploring the entanglement of loneliness and belonging in young people's everyday contexts.

Jourian and Nicolazzo (2016) called for further queering of LGBTQIA+ research in higher education by adopting collaborative methodologies to enhance both the practices and knowledge of queer communities, and to collectively imagine new realities. The design of my project was thus shaped by the intersection of challenges and opportunities: to involve groups of queer university activists through a participatory method capable of eliciting, in their own words, narratives of everyday university life—both its difficulties and moments of joy—how they wish or need their lives to be, and their constrained capacities for change. I also felt it important to engage participants in a creative and intellectual activity that could serve as enriching educational experience.

I followed these directions, offering the groups involved the opportunity to engage with an approach developed for self-study within activist groups, such as Memory Work (Haug, 1992). This method favours reciprocal and collective exchange and contribution (Widerberg, 2020), in alignment with the way university activist groups work and engage. I felt it was important to challenge the convention of academic research as an individual endeavour, and I am comfortable with methods that involve the interaction of groups of people in the creation of narratives and the construction of knowledge. At the same time,

I embraced Brown and Leigh's (2018) emphasis on the use of new methodological approaches in social research around university pathways.

Memory Work is distinctive in that it creates a context for exploring the folds of everyday life by problematising what is often taken for granted. Through recalling and writing stories of experiences, both participants and researchers are invited to search for varied layers of meaning and interpretation—within their own stories and in those of others (Widerberg, 2020). The approach has been applied across different contexts and themes, including with university students (Mogensen and Stigemo, 2021) and with queer adults and youth (Coes et al., 2018). It has also been adapted to suit the aims of specific projects, as well as the relationships among those involved (Simovska et al., 2019). By passing personal experience through multiple filters—writing it down in the third person, reading each other's memories, discussing, comparing, questioning, and looking at the story from different angles—this method can create the conditions for participants to become aware of their active contribution to the social world (Vlachou, 2020).

Building on these premises, and drawing on previous experience with the method, I designed a Memory Work workshop in which autobiographical stories prompted by the theme of 'a time when I felt welcome at university' would be discussed in relation to the themes of loneliness, change, and care. I contacted six university LGBTQIA+ collectives from different Italian regions by sending a message through social media platforms—WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram and Facebook—introducing myself and inviting the group to participate in a workshop. In the message, I explained why I was developing the research and how I wanted to involve them, as follows:

> I've been at university for a long time: first as a student, then a PhD candidate, a temporary researcher, and for the past few years a lecturer in sociology and (visual and creative) methods for social research—always in different, often distant cities. Moving through so many university spaces and contexts has made me reflect on how relationships shape the student experience, and vice versa—a topic I've been researching for some time. I would therefore like to invite a small group from your collective to take part in a closed-door workshop to explore how being part of it makes the university feel emotionally welcoming to you.

Within a short period, three groups from three areas of Italy—the north-west, north-east and centre—based in two medium-sized universities and one large university—responded. To ensure anonymity in this article, I have assigned each group a fictional name, as shown in Table 1 and will refer to them as Collective(s) throughout. I then sent a more detailed flyer about the workshop, including the title/theme «Collective care for the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people in the university environment» and an overview of the method we would

use, namely writing autobiographical stories and discussing them together. With one or a few members of each group, I arranged short video calls and chats to explore whether the proposed topic resonated with their activism.

After receiving confirmation, I scheduled appointments with each group. The three workshop sessions were held in autumn 2024 and lasted approximately two and a half hours each. Each group chose the most suitable and accessible venue. Eleven young people participated in the research, including on-site, commuter, and off-site students. Participants included both undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as one person who had temporarily suspended their enrolment. One participant was of African descent. Transgender people were present in each of the three groups.

I provided the participants with a handout containing all the necessary information about the research, including a request for consent to photograph the story sheets and record the discussion. The handout also included instructions for writing the memory to be shared:

> Write a memory of a situation in which you felt welcomed at university.
> - It must be an autobiographical story, but written in the third person, as if recounting the experience of someone else, using a name other than your own.
> - Try to complete it in about twenty minutes.
> - Write in capital letters to help me read it more easily. :)

The handout also offered prompts for the group discussion:

> What does this story say:
> - About loneliness?
> - About change?
> - About caring?
> What else is this story about?

In the first part of the workshop, each participant received an erasable pen and a bamboo sheet—slightly thicker and warmer in tone than standard printer paper—taken from a drawing pad. This choice aimed to subtly mark the writing activity as distinct from routine academic work. I set a timer for twenty minutes, although the groups organically extended the writing time by ten to twenty additional minutes. At the end of the memory-writing activity, participants were asked to sign their story with a pseudonym, which I use throughout this article to refer to them (see Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of research project participants.

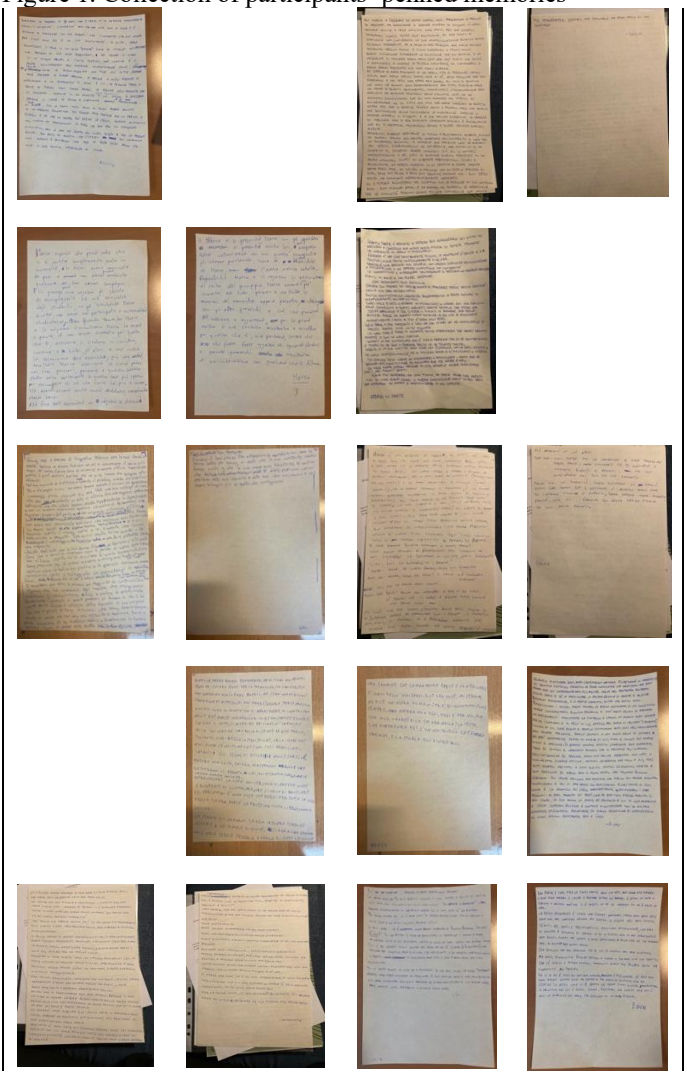
Participant pseudonym	Fictional name of respective Collective
Andrew	*Iris*
Antonietta	*Sound*
Balda	*Sound*
Eden	*Iris*
Giulia	*Sound*
Marco	*Iris*
Marte	*Sound*
Nab	*Crystal*
Orfeo	*Crystal*
Ricky	*Iris*
~S	*Iris*

In the second part of the workshop, which was audio-recorded and later transcribed by me, I read each story aloud and initiated a discussion around it. The short autobiographical texts were addressed one by one, primarily through the lens of three aspects of everyday university life that I had proposed as a starting point for exploration—while leaving space for any other themes and reflections that the stories might evoke. The outputs of the process are, therefore, both the individual stories and the collective discussions they generated and became entangled with. In the following paragraphs, excerpts from the written memoirs are presented in italics, to distinguish them from those drawn from the discussions.

The first part of the workshop naturally fostered an atmosphere of silence and concentration. The subsequent discussion evolved in continuity with the sodality that characterises the ways of belonging and being an activist in the Collective, particularly the explicit expression of mutual understanding and sharing of experiences. At times, the discussion tended to take the form of an explanation directed towards me, which gradually positioned me as a more active participant in the discussion. This process offered participants time and space to reflect on how they wanted to express their own experiences and to highlight one another's stories, conveying emotions in a manner that felt appropriate and comprehensible to them.

The approach facilitated the creation of a setting in which the hierarchies inherent in social research were softened, despite the differences in age and role. This was something the participants themselves noticed and expressed to me at the end of the discussion. For example, Balda stated: «You didn't break anything, there was no weight of 'there's a researcher', there was no interview thing, from above, from an outsider, it was just a very informal chat, but no less profound».

Figure 1. Collection of participants' penned memories



In the three workshops, the groups spontaneously developed their own ways of analysing the stories. I noticed, for example, that in the Iris Collective, participants always used the pseudonym to refer to the author of the story, or indirect forms such as «in this story ... »—thus regulating expression of their

emotions. On the other hand, members of Sound and Crystal more often used their companion's real name, expressing emotion both verbally and bodily.

Memory Work resonates with creative methods (Giorgi et al., 2021) in that participants produced artefacts—their stories (see Figure 1)—which were treated as such during the workshops. After I read each story aloud, we discussed its visual features, such as handwriting and erasures. Once I photographed the sheets, everyone kept their own. This suggested to me that each story was experienced as a form of self-representation (Holtby et al., 2015).

The analysis of materials from workshop-based collective work varies according to the subject explored, the context in which the inquiry is developed, and the uses and purposes of the resulting data. I was, therefore, prompted to develop an approach for this article that captured and made sense of written memories, collective discussions, and their entanglement. I sought to give space to the participants' ways of talking about themselves and their practices, so the analysis emerged both following their reasoning and using their words as much as possible. I have also chosen to interweave expressions and excerpts from activists who were not members of the same group and therefore not participants in the same workshop.

4. AN EMBODIED EFFORT AND ENJOYMENT: PARTICIPANTS GOING THROUGH THE MEMORY WORK PROCESS

The approach I proposed for the workshops required participants to engage in relatively everyday activities, such as remembering, writing, listening and speaking, but in decidedly unusual ways. At the end of each of the three sessions, the students, with varying degrees of prompting from me, shared their reflections on their experience of doing Memory Work. I outline them here in order to inform researchers and activists who may be interested in using the method in turn.

Orfeo is categorical about his relationship with remembering and confides: «I have a terrible short-term memory, but I remember everything that has happened to me in life; that is, I have memories that I shouldn't have, in the sense that there is no explanation of how I have them». For his companion Nab, however, remembering required a more intense—or at least different—effort. When asked about the memory she wrote, she said:

> Then I have a memory problem, which is that I don't remember much. It's generally difficult for me to recall specific moments, especially when I'm asked like this, in reality. [On that day] my memories overlap a bit, that's certainly the idea; the general thing is actually this, but I didn't put in too many details because I wasn't sure what

> day it was, so I included the things that I was actually sure of then, gradually, as I wrote, I deleted things and added others later, also because, while writing, I remembered things that had happened and everything.

Yet, when approached collectively, writing can acquire new meanings and unexpected forms of pleasure. Writing down a memory is neither natural nor spontaneous, and doing so in company—whether about memories or not—is even less common. During a Memory Work session, «the act of writing with others triggers your own writing» (Widerberg, 2020: 55). For some participants, the setting brought the pleasure of having a moment «of our own, in private, to jot down what we feel and lay it out in a beautiful form, in the sense that when a person writes, they are more careful they package it, exactly, and so there was this more personal moment, you in front of the paper», as Marco described his sense of comfort.

In certain cases, participants reflected on their infrequent engagement with writing. For example, Balda remarked, «I actually realise that after at least four years of not writing argumentative texts, I have many gaps in fully expressing what I wanted to express», while Nab reflected, «I'm not very used to writing down what happens to me, my thoughts, and things».

Writing also offered a chance for enjoyment. Ricky, for instance, shared his feelings:

> Writing is something that comes easily to me; I haven't practised it that much lately, but when I do, it feels natural, I feel comfortable with it. The memory that we were asked to recount was a pleasant experience, a welcoming event, and this contributed to creating a sense of tranquillity within me, not [exactly] nostalgia, but the feeling of something good that has happened, that has passed.

Beyond comfort and enjoyment, writing also opened up deeper processes of transformation. In this regard, Orfeo observes that «paradoxically, [writing] has taken attention away from the situation [and by writing] I have effectively given this perspective, which isn't the perspective, that is, of my actual memory; basically, my actual memory is more specific».

I felt it was important to create a writing experience that contrasted with the usual practice of typing on technological devices. Marco was pleased to write by hand, not because it is something he usually does but because it reminded him of composing essays, which he used to enjoy at school. For Ricky, writing by hand is something he is «no longer accustomed to», and he found «nice» that his hand «hurt». «I think it's useful to write by hand because you are actually more attuned to your body», Nab remarked.

Writing in the third person involves transforming a memory into something new—and, in doing so, transforming one's own sense of self. On the matter of how one views themselves, Giulia put it this way:

> You always think about your life in the first person, but it's a good exercise to write it in the third person, to depersonalise your own experiences a little bit, so you get a really different perspective, to rethink and rework them. It's something I think about a lot, but I think in some ways we tend to be a little bit nicer to others than we are to ourselves. So, I think writing in the third person, as if it were someone else's story, also helps us to write it, maybe with a bit more gentleness, and to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt a bit more than maybe we usually do.

Writing in the third person, Marco suggests with a different nuance, «creates a certain distance, but somehow it brings you closer, because when you tell something, you become the narrator of a story that you've lived and therefore you're able to analyse it in a different way». For Antonietta, this perspective not only helped her «to write the story much more without a filter», but also «made it easier for us to interpret it».

Just as writing from a shifted perspective offered new insights, listening to others' stories also evoked strong emotional responses. Balda was moved as he stepped into the shoes of the protagonist in Giulia's story, which took place at a turning point in her life: *«Several weeks of tentative and frustrating research passed, until one day a link to an anonymous survey appeared on the university's WhatsApp group: at the initiative of a queer student collective called [Sound], LGBT people were asked if they had ever experienced discrimination at university».* Nab was also touched by Orfeo's story, set during an event organised by the Collective that she also attended:

> *Chiara dresses up, puts glitter on her face and goes to the university. A crowd was waiting for her, colourful, lively. She held up the banner and shouted the songs she had never heard, but which were so familiar. She meets the gaze of her new sisters, she does not know it yet, Chiara, but they will be the ones standing there, next to her, then next to him (although Chiara does not know it yet).*

«We're talking about an environment that we all know well, so knowing how others perceived it the first time is very, very sweet» says Marco. Reflecting on hearing his friends' reactions to his own story, he adds: «you see different points of view, details that you hadn't noticed before, so your perception changes too, and something is added».

This multiplicity of engagements—cognitive, affective, embodied—reveals how the Memory Work process, as developed in these workshops, fostered both personal insight and a renewed sense of connection among participants. These dynamics were reflected in the welcoming and supportive

atmosphere that permeated our interactions throughout the sessions □ a theme that becomes even more apparent as I explore the stories of how participants experienced being welcomed.

5. WELCOMING ENCOUNTERS: FROM MY FIELDWORK TO THEIR WRITING

Welcoming weaves through this project in multiple ways. It not only serves as the underlying theme of the participants' memories but also, in hindsight, became a defining feature of my brief yet intimate relationship with them. Each group chose spaces where I felt welcomed, despite their diversity: the kitchen of an apartment, a room in a self-managed collective space, and a classroom shared by various university associations. In addition to the physical setting, the exchange of small gestures and casual conversation further facilitated our mutual welcoming: leaving work early to greet me, offering me coffee, talking to me about their academic challenges, sharing the coconut-milk chocolate bar I had brought, and hugging each other as we said our goodbyes at the end of the session.

When designing the project and approaching a university collective, I never assumed that my differences would not be seen as problematic. From the moment I sent my request to generate interest, the distance in status was immediately clear: I was a university lecturer wanting to ask students questions. While my cisgender identity was perceived at times during our interactions, I did not sense that it provoked perplexity, curiosity, or created distance. Rather, the difference most often acknowledged was my institutional role. In the final moments of each session, this dynamic was made explicit. Giulia, for example, commented on this aspect:

> As a Collective, we always try to create a more horizontal dialogue, where we're all on the same level. It's strange and very curious, but also very interesting to see this being done by a person who objectively has more knowledge than us, who is more experienced than us, and who is also a professor. I mean, you're also a professor too, so in that sense, meeting you in this environment makes it hard for me to imagine, for example, taking a class with you.

As part of my role during the sessions, I choose to read the stories aloud. Not asking participants to read their own stories made them feel more at ease: «I liked the fact that I didn't have to read it myself because it was something that was very intimidating for me», said Andrew. Reading aloud also allowed me to connect with the group in a different way - through my voice, as an outsider - and to do more than simply facilitate the activity. For instance, I used tone and emphasis to highlight certain words. While I occasionally commented on their calligraphies, I deliberately avoided offering remarks on the stories themselves,

so as not to come across as condescending. I did, however, intervene at times during the discussion, speaking sincerely when I was struck by a particular episode or by the way it was told.

In line, in some respects, with findings from other studies (Silver and Krietzberg, 2023), the stories written by participants reflect a context in which feeling welcomed emerges as the result of effort - an intentional and, at times, strenuous search for community and connection (Garcia et al., 2023). These narratives describe both moments directly linked to their belonging to the Collective and more casual interactions in university life, such as exchanges with peers or lecturers during classes. Eden, for example, recalled their first assembly:

> *The first meeting was very confusing, they didn't understand half the things, they didn't know anyone, but they felt they were in the right place. Sitting in the university courtyard, listening carefully, trying to understand the discourse, they felt a little at fault, as if they didn't belong, at least not yet. But they knew they wanted to belong, to do what they were doing, to help as much as they could.*

Before that episode, the protagonist of Orfeo's story *«was perhaps afraid to come out of her torpor and live»*. In these stories, vivid terms are used to describe the contexts created through the supportive relationships among queer university students—similarly to what emerges, for example, in Noreiga and Burkholder's (2022) research, in which participants speak of emotional spaces as havens. In Giulia's memory, the welcome she received on this occasion is described as something very tangible and soft:

> *Eli immediately contacted them and within a few days attended his first meeting, discovering a wonderful environment: safe and welcoming, a soft carpet to fall on without hurting yourself, a group of people with whom you could talk about everything - about fears and identity - people who shared the same values as Eli, but who were still wonderfully multicoloured.*

The stories also convey moments when participants felt truly seen, often *«for the first time»*, as in Nab's story. This feeling can be surprising: Marco experiences *«relief and lightness»*, Balda gains *«the confidence he needed»*, and Andrew *«watches fear and anxiety fade away»*. Ricky compares this feeling to *«someone wrapping his heart, his soul, the deepest part of him, in a soft, warm blanket»*.

Such moments also describe the sensation of being taken into account: Andrew, for instance, shares that his peers *«do not ignore him, they ask his opinion in discussions and he feels the fear and anguish disappear»*. Anna, the protagonist of Antonietta's story, no longer hears *«the voices in her head telling*

her that she was not enough, that others were better than her». In Marte's story, the act of doing things for others becomes a way of feeling welcomed:

> *A few months ago, Marte started collecting clothes that people no longer use and giving them to friends. He enjoys hosting people at his house and watching them leave happy with their 'new' clothes. While it may seem like a small thing, Marte finds this exchange and sharing a meaningful way to explore himself and feel part of a community.*

«Every time she feels like she's doing politics and building something important within the university, with people who are unique, strong, creative, loud, angry and joyful about being queer» is an occasion where the protagonist of ~S's story feels welcomed and connected. These memories of feeling welcomed and recognised highlight how participants craft belonging through small, meaningful encounters. So far, I have focused on the stories they wrote - stories that convey connection, care, and the desire to find one's place. Yet these narratives also opened space for group conversations that brought to the surface more complex and ambivalent experiences. In what follows, I turn to the folds of feeling lonely as a queer student.

6. IN THE FOLDS OF FEELING LONELY AS A QUEER STUDENT

Participants confronted each other with their written memories, finding words to express how loneliness is embedded at different levels in the folds of their everyday university experiences. This exploration allows various nuances to emerge, which resonate with findings from other research, such as the feeling of being both invisible and targeted (Sotevik, 2024) and of entering a void (Noreiga and Burkholder, 2022).

As doubts about one's sexual identity arise and mature, one experiences what Orfeo describes as «detachment, not belonging, and torpor a feeling of vagueness, where you feel something inside, but you don't know how to throw it out». In these moments, one often finds themselves in «solitude or isolation, in one's own head», explains Marco while commenting on Eden's and Ricky's memories.

Reflecting on the similarities between Giulia's memory and his own experience, Marte shares that he recognised himself «a lot, both in the loneliness of discovering gender and looking online for support and tools to better understand yourself, and also in the sense of isolation when you're looking around at university and see a reality that you don't like». One aspect of loneliness experienced as a queer person at university, as discussed in the three workshops, is its persistence. In this regard, Balda notes that one way to cope is «to look for and find peace in the little things».

The loneliness of being «the only queer in a sea of completely different people» is described by Marte, who explains that you feel this part of yourself is the only one noticed by others: «Even with people I might get along with, who share common interests, there's always this thing where they might make an inappropriate comment or joke, that makes you realise that, in reality, you're not seen as normal, you're seen as different».

Further reflecting on the intertwining of diversity and loneliness, Marco points out that this feeling arises from the «gaze that objectifies you, identifies you as other, different». He adds, commenting on Ricky's story: «If you don't feel accepted, you feel lonely even when you're among many people». Nab also reflects on the sense that no one can understand how you and what kind of person you are: «Maybe you're always around others, but in reality, if no one sees things the way you do, you're always a bit lonely». Feeling isolated, Marco observes in his discussion of Andrew's story, leads to discomfort, even a sense of «danger» in expressing oneself:

> Our thinking is very much shaped by who we are, by our identity. On certain issues, we have a specific perspective because we live them differently than others. So, when someone talks about something and you, a queer person, have a thought shaped by your identity, you may find it hard to express it because you don't know how it would be received, or because there's no one like you who can understand. Even in a context of interaction, in a setting of conviviality and sharing, you can still feel isolated.

Building on this, Ricky draws a distinction between two types of loneliness he has experienced. Reflecting on Andrew's story, he describes one type as «almost atavistic, initial, where you feel lonely because you're in a new context and don't know anyone». However, commenting on Eden's memory and then ~S's story, he highlights a different experience. In the early moments of joining the university Collective, loneliness doesn't easily dissipate because you are «in a new context and with people for whom it's no longer new. Some things are taken for granted and it's easy to feel that you don't belong, like you're arriving in the middle of something that has already taken shape».

Through reflection on these memories, it is also possible to identify moments that push back against loneliness. For example, Ricky notes how the protagonist of Marco's story feels «seen in the most general sense» and «valued for one's opinions» when a girl invites him to his first student assembly. Being and acting within the Collective means, for the participants, «being able to see yourself reflected in those around you, through shared ideals and identities» (Black, 2024: 52). Breaking through the oppressive cloak of loneliness can offer comfort (Coes et al., 2018), helping one to move through and provoke change - something I will explore in more detail in the next section.

7. CHANGING AND MAKING THINGS CHANGE

In the reflections shared by participants while listening to their comrades' stories, I observed various connections between the desire to seek each other out as queer people at university and the mutual recognition of shared needs to transform this context. Being open about one's queer identity emerged as neither easy nor something that could be assumed as given. The words Ricky used to describe his discovery of self (*«he had in the meantime discovered new parts of himself, in particular his gender identity and some psychiatric diagnoses, and he felt changed, as well as very lonely»*) provoked ~S to observe that «he brings to the university […] his authenticity», underscoring the value of his choice to be visible.

The opportunity to attend a queer-only group at university for the first time in one's life is described by Antonietta as «a hope for all queer people who haven't been able to experience their queerness [before], [to] put themselves in a queer perspective in all relationships, whether sentimental, friendly or sexual». In this respect, engagement intertwines the feelings of excitement, relief and joy (Noreiga and Burkholder, 2022) and is a way of trying to be in the best possible place to express one's needs as a person with a minorised identity (Linder et al., 2019). This trait is disclosed in other parts of the discussions as well. While coming into contact during university life with people with whom one connects well, «let's say I like them and all», Nab points out, being part of a Collective—which in her case uses intersectionality to highlight the intertwining of identities and marginalisations—responded to her «need to [get together with] certain kinds of people to actually start getting to know a bit of the real me, the real me».

To describe the feeling of the protagonist in Eden's story as he begins to reconnect and share moments with his comrades in the Collective, Marco uses the expressions «feeling lighter» and «finding a peace, at least momentary», while what strikes Andrew is the effort it took:

> He finds himself in front of an assembly, something he had never done before and knew absolutely nothing about, how it worked, the rules, and he finds himself trying to understand the mechanism; the fact that he tries to understand the mechanism in my opinion, as [Ricky] said, shows how he actually cares about this kind of thing, how he sees this thing as something important, that can actually help you in this, which is for him, in my opinion, the change.

~S adds further nuance to the sensations she felt in her initial encounters with the Collective. Reflecting on the similarities between her personal experience and that of the protagonist of Andrew's story, she describes «the attraction to this world, still a bit foreign» in which there are «people who talk about so

many interesting things who know things I don't know, who use words I don't know».

Stimulated by Orfeo's memory, Nab reflects on how joining the Collective reshapes one's outlook and future vision of the university, revealing that «the university could be a different place, because there are people with a hopeful perspective on how the world—and we—could change it». The incongruity between how one is and how one would like to be represented within the university environment leads to attempts to change its institutional practices (Linder et al., 2019).

A change consists in starting to share one's ideas, which you could not do before because, as Orfeo points out, «you always had things in your head, but you didn't have the tools to voice them, to express them in some way». This transformation «comes naturally when you meet people» who, for Marco, have «the need to fight, to be political» and, for Orfeo, the means «to express that same discontent that you also feel», and who know how to use them. Change then becomes stronger, according to Orfeo, when you are able, guided and supported by your comrades, to express «your anger».

Ricky and Nab also dwell on the expression of anger as a spark for change. They both explain, in different words, how the need to engage in practices of struggle can only be felt «up to a certain point if you're alone», whereas within the Collective it is «your way of feeling, of saying OK, I can change something, let's change it, let's fight and unite together with our anger, our experience». Commitment to change is an expression of engagement in practices of resistance (Robinson and Schmitz, 2021), which are not detached from, but rather sustained by, collective care, as I highlight in the next section.

8. RECEIVING AND PROVIDING: CREATING CARE TOGETHER

The participants' reflections illuminate the multiple meanings and practices of care embedded in their experience of belonging to the Collective, which take on different contours across various spaces—within the university (such as group-assigned classrooms and outdoor areas) and in the city (homes, squares).

One recurring theme is the feeling of being cared for. Reflecting on this need with a touch of melancholy, Antonietta remarks: «it's a bit sad to think that we always have, that is, that we need someone to take care of us because we always have something missing or wrong». Nab also refers to a sense of care experienced beyond formal activities, describing the Collective as «a group of people you can share everything with and who will help you on every single occasion, [who] maybe know you much more than your real family knows you».

One feels «safer», as Andrew notes, when participating in group meetings brings you «into something bigger». In this regard, the terms *relief* and *tranquillity* also came up during the discussions. For example, Eden, to describe the emotion of the protagonist of ~S's story, says she takes a «breath of relief by joining the Collective». Orfeo explains the same feeling in these words:

> the relief of saying 'I've actually found my people, that is, I'm starting, I'm starting to find my people and I don't have to think these things alone anymore, wondering if I'm the only one thinking them, if I'm crazy or if maybe I've read a book and it's just me and the author thinking that way'; [it's] the tranquillity and relief of having found a situation in which you actually feel good.

Nab adds a nuance to the meaning of feeling calm in the Collective, saying that to participate is «to have a moment of quietness where one thinks nothing, of lightness, yes, total lightness». Feeling cared for is intertwined with the theme of identity in the participants' thoughts. For example, ~S expresses it by saying: «I don't have to explain my identity, I just exist», and Ricky says, paraphrasing the experience of the protagonist of one of the stories: «the guy who introduced himself to me, introduced himself to me without seeing my real identity, just seeing me as a person». Marco defines himself as an agentic person in relation to this aspect: «you're not an object, you claim your own identity». Being «free to be who you want to be, who you are» (Nab), «feeling involved» (Marco) and «feeling valued, not just validated» (Ricky) are other nuances of feeling care that participants expressed.

A second theme very much emerging with different meanings and nuances in the reflections of the young activists is that of caring. «Committing oneself to come to one another» is, for example, what strikes Marte in Giulia's story, and «not [having] a judgmental behaviour» is what stands out according to Eden in Marco's story. Two stories of his companions remind Ricky of two other practices of caring, namely «going to the person and explaining» and «actively including pulling in». About the importance of being asked to express one's opinion, Marco is keen to explain, especially to me:

> Maybe for a queer person, that is a person who is generally perceived as different, it's very easy that your opinion, your thought, either you keep it to yourself or if you make it explicit it can cause a strong reaction and therefore you don't always feel totally legitimate to speak in a context where there are people who aren't, let's say, in your bubble. And instead, there's the fact that in this new place this person's opinion counted, that is, his opinion, his presence counted, he wasn't only, let's say, treated well or not disturbed, he was also, let's say, seen.

A third theme that emerged from the discussions is the circularity of care, of receiving and giving back. For example, for ~S, care is «being part of this Collective, doing something within it and then giving that thing back». Again, referring to the episode when someone asked the protagonist of a story about his name and pronouns, Ricky noted that in the group «nobody questioned it». He added that it was also this way of approaching things that made him «want to contribute» to the life of the Collective: as «a need for recognition» was satisfied, the need to «then take care of it in return» arose.

The reflections shared by participants reveal a rich, relational understanding of care as both a deeply personal and a collective practice. Within the spaces of the Collective care is experienced as emotional relief, identity affirmation, and the grounding sense of not being alone. Yet care is not only received; it is also actively given, through gestures of inclusion, listening, and mutual responsibility. What emerges is a circular dynamic in which feeling safe and seen becomes the ground for wanting to contribute, reinforcing a shared ethic of solidarity and belonging. These practices of care challenge normative ideas of support, highlighting how queer communities build transformative relationships through everyday attentiveness.

9. CONCLUSION

As Denton and Cain (2023) highlighted, many methodological roads can lead to socially just outcomes in research with, about, and for queer students. With the project recounted in this article, I aimed to create and facilitate a process based on a queer epistemology—eliciting from the young participants a shared narrative of how they see and do academic life as queer activists. The Memory Work workshops provided the participants with a new context in which to develop a nuanced perspective on their experiences and articulate their unique ways of emotionally supporting one another, sharing—enacting collective care (Winters and Ningard, 2023) through discussion rooted in memory and emotion.

The feeling of being cared for is what they most associate with activism in their university Collective. And feeling this way is the starting point and nourishment for practices that are intertwined with changing relational and social contexts. These insights resonate with the point Black (2024) made about the fact that a queer ethic of self-care is not just about individual well-being but also about social justice, from which self-care is framed as relational. Although based on the analysis of past experiences, the workshops allowed the participants' reflections on care practices to be projected into the future as well, when, for example, they expressed their intention – arguing its importance – to

continue to offer their time and commitment to the activities curated and promoted by their group.

By generating collective reflections from the unveiling of individual stories, the project created spaces of authentic care (Owis, 2024) as well as generating knowledge about the everyday lives of queer university students in Italy. Within these spaces, and drawing on their lived experiences, the activists reasoned and spoke as a means of opening up possibilities and conceptualising desired relational environments within the university.

I am deeply grateful to the participants who animated and shaped this project, and whose stories and reflections are expressions of their strength and commitment. Because this work is rooted in writing as a relational practice, I also want to warmly acknowledge the collective energy and encouragement of the writing group I am part of and help to run, where much of this article took shape: www.szwg.co.uk.

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