

DEVELOPING AND CHANGING WITH COMPASSION AT WORK

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ABSTRACT

Compassion is helpful in the processes of organizing, leadership coaching, prosocial behavior, and other dynamics vital to organization development and change. However, little is known how exactly these processes benefit from the individual and collective compassion. We review recent research and theory on compassion in organizations with an eye on how this scholarship might align with the research in organization development and change. We outline the various definitions of compassion and the different approaches to studying compassion in organizations and then offer some insights on the possible synergies in developing and changing with compassion at work.

INTRODUCTION

Compassion in organizations has been recently seen as a process requiring action [29], and it is in this light that we see compassion as important for the study of organization development and change. Peter Frost [18] issued a call for incorporating compassion into management research, and Frost, Dutton, Worline, and Wilson's treated compassion as going "beyond an individual feeling of empathy and [being] expressed through action of some sort" [20, p. 27]. This approach to compassion has evolved into the currently prevalent understanding of compassion in the organization and management literature. Compassion in organizations is thus conceptualized as a three-part process of noticing someone's suffering, experiencing an empathic concern for the sufferer, and trying to alleviate the sufferer's plight via an action [27]. The final (i.e., action) part of such conceptualization distinguishes compassion at work from the psychologists' perspective on compassion as an emotion developed through evolution [22], a perspective that considers compassion complete at the point of emotional experience. Philosophers [38] also posited that compassion has been treated historically as a social emotion connected to the suffering of another, and the dictionary definitions of compassion support a linguistic construct ascribed the meaning of "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it" (Merriam-Webster, 2012). Distress in general, and suffering in particular, are a common ground in these varied conceptualizations of compassion, but it is important to point out that some management scholars view compassion differently.

Boyatzis and colleagues, for example, see compassion in a necessary combination of "three components: (1) empathy or understanding the feelings of others; (2) caring for the other person (e.g., affiliative arousal); and (3) willingness to act in response to the person's feelings"—a combination also absent of "an expectation of present or future benefits to be received in return from that individual," but one where "the experience of pain or suffering on the part of others is not a necessary condition for the demonstration of compassion" [6, p. 13]. Compassion, per [6], can be experienced in the acts of leadership coaching, for instance, where the beneficiary does not appear in pain needing alleviation. While the scholarly definitions of compassion constructed by [6] or [27] were successfully adopted in

most organizational compassion studies, a theoretical and practical gap remained in understanding how these constructions aligned with those of organizational members. This gap is particularly important to bridge for the students of organization development and change, because the scholar-practitioner collaboration in general, and the congruence between scholarly and practice-based definitions of phenomena in particular, are at the heart of the field's ideals for making its research relevant and meaningful for all participants involved. Limiting the study of compassion within the confines of a particular scholarly definition composed from a certain tradition of historical accounts (e.g., with a necessary presence of suffering) might not account for the currently robust and forward-looking conceptualizations of compassion in the modern organizational practice.

COMPASSION IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL LITERATURE

Recent organizational scholarship points to the importance of influences and perceptions of compassion in the workplace. Influences of compassion related to organization development and change can be found in organizational coaching and leadership development [6] as well as in steady mitigation of emotionally toxic workplace settings [19] and decision making [37]. Positive impact of compassion is also said to be in the foundation of transitioning organizations to more thriving workplaces, where employees perceive genuine care on part of the employers and experience deeper engagement and commitment [13]. Compassion has been additionally documented to initiate change by activating ad hoc, and speeding up, some ordinary work processes in response to organizational members' plight [14] and to develop a lasting capability at work [30]. Harnessing that capability for predicting, planning, and successfully proceeding with an organizational transformation is one of the important next challenges for the change scholars wishing to incorporate and benefit from the study of compassion.

Perceptions of compassion at work are not without controversy. Even though compassion is considered a social emotion innate to all humans [9] [38], organizational leaders displaying compassion, for example, sometimes risk being perceived as inauthentic by their followers [26] [34]. Boyatzis and McKee, however, insist that great leaders face "sacrifice, difficulties, and challenges, as well as opportunities, with empathy and *compassion* [original emphasis] for the people they lead and those they serve" [5, p. 3]. As skepticism around leaders' stated motives has heightened in recent periods of economic turmoil and corporate downsizing, authentic leadership [1] (e.g., communicating, relating) becomes more salient alongside organization development and change processes. Change leaders therefore need to, at least, be aware of the "dual-edged sword" of emotional appeals with which they promote their programs, and change researchers can particularly assist in delineating practice-specific implications of compassion's emotionality.

Even with the emerging variety of scholarly portraits of compassion in organizational life, there is still a paucity of research and theory about compassion's influences in organization development and change across settings and cultures. Frost et al. created a "compassion portrait [that is] neater, tidier and more coherent than in fact it is," where "differences and variations [were] brushed over," even though they recognized that "it was often the variation or the anomalies that were most ... informative" [20, p. 39]. They noted that there was "no doubt compassion [varied] across cultures, organizations and industries" and hoped that "other researchers [would] repaint differences that exist between individuals engaging in compassionate action in different national and organizational contexts" [20, p. 39]. Change and development projects usually rely on a contextualized plan and execution of action appropriate for the local work settings [40]. However, most organizational change initiatives fail to achieve their objectives, and organizational scholarship has yet to articulate how any one, prevalent understanding of compassion helps the diverse change efforts across geographies, industries, and cultures. If compassion has any

positive influence on the success of change, then adopting a pluralistic view—assuming the existence of a plethora of compassion portraits—might help the change leaders and agents focus on specific influences of compassion most likely to be found in the contextual settings of the change they try to design or implement. In other words, we argue that it is precisely the variations in understanding, perceiving, and defining compassion at work that illuminate contextual dynamics and paths leading to the development and change associated by organizational actors with compassion.

Organizational members—including change leaders—influence each other through emotional experiences and expressions [3]. In the execution of organizational duties, they either make deliberate decisions to express or suppress emotions, or they are being compelled by emotions to decide or act. Fox and Amichai-Hamburger [16], for example, highlighted the power that the induced emotional appeals of organizational leaders have in the promotion of change. Barsade and Gibson [3], however, questioned whether leaders lose authenticity when deciding to overregulate their emotions or, in other words, engaging to a large degree in emotional labor. The question of authenticity is important to researching compassion in connection with change in organizations, in part because, as we previously noted, change leaders or communicators expressing compassion may be perceived as inauthentic by their fellow organizational members. In cases when such perceptions are unfounded, this may present a challenge to researchers studying compassion from the perceptions of those who did not participate directly in compassion episodes but relied on coworkers to recall the leader’s deed or message. Leaders may also psychologically withdraw in difficult situations where their identities are associated with negative corporate changes such as layoffs or downsizing [28], and they can appear inauthentic when navigating the bind of compassionate urges under the heavy load of skewed identity. Even as compassionate communication routinely takes place in organizations [19], the change leaders’ genuine compassion may be misunderstood, or their displays of compassion may not be perceived as authentic.

RESEARCHING COMPASSION IN ORGANIZATIONS

Compassion scholars have provided some fertile ground for change researchers. Miller and colleagues proposed that compassion as a “prosocial motive” might “encourage the choice to engage in social entrepreneurship” [36, p. 633], and Grant [24] reexamined work design theories to show how employees sustain participation in corporate volunteering programs that help them express compassion. Fehr and Gelfand [15] elaborated how forgiveness at the organizational level can emerge through cultivating certain values and practices and foster compassionate responses to conflict. Madden, Duchon, Madden, and Plowman [32] went as far as to model how organizations develop a capacity for compassion through system conditions and without a formal direction. We see these proposals as holding the light over developing new organizational change pathways toward social responsibility and employee thriving.

Exploratory phases of empirical compassion research have been conducted via in-depth interviews, rich narratives, and mostly qualitative case studies. Frost and colleagues [19] [20] provided episodes of compassion in organizations through the participants’ stories, potentially sprouting ideas for interventions during tough times at work or for leadership development. [20] narrated compassion in university settings, citing examples gathered from interviews with 22 students, faculty, and staff with whom they were personally connected. They also introduced a notion of compassion ecology, which might find some resonance with change scholars employing Appreciative Inquiry and other culturally embedded research methods. Dutton et al. [14] induced an explanation of compassion organizing from interviews, among other data sources, in a case study. Lilius et al. [31] used one hospital’s employee stories to delineate the boundaries of compassion at work, Avramchuk [2] composed two streams of compassion accounts after interviewing 39 healthcare executives, and Lilius et al. [30] studied the

medical billing agents' descriptions of work practices to show how compassion capability developed in their work unit. Regardless of the procedural means, the examination of compassion in organizations appears to usually take into account the research participants' perceptions and interpretations and places them in the foundation of inductive coding, grounded theorizing, or case results.

Studying Compassion through a Positive Lens

Most compassion studies to date have been undertaken under the umbrella of positive organizational scholarship (POS) [8]. Focusing on the qualities of abundance and thriving, as opposed to deficit and languishing, POS studies decidedly aim at improving human condition at and around work while asking questions about what is right with the organizations, as opposed to what is wrong. As academics wish their scholarship to be inspiring and more closely related to benefiting workplace realities [12], practitioners lose patience for theories and research they do not find useful or enriching. Ghoshal [21] held scholars directly accountable for management theories that sugarcoated organizational discourse, led to corruptive practices, or resembled out-of-touch, self-fulfilling prophecies; and most such theories usually focused on finding deficiencies and working around a problem. The general goal of POS may be seen as to research, advance, and share how the authentically and positively generative phenomena are proliferated in organizational settings, and studies of compassion are treated in POS as opportunities for tapping the restorative and other positive potentials of compassion at work. From the importance of compassionate management [19] and executive action [5] to the prescriptions for positive leadership development [6] [7] and handling disenfranchised grief [25], compassion's ammunition from which change researchers can draw is diverse and transforming. Methodologically, the unconditional positive questions in the Appreciative Inquiry tradition of change research, for example, are fitting within the POS agenda. Appreciative Inquiry methods also serve as an antidote to the "negativity bias that pervades our investigations into organizational life" [10, p. 740], and action research in compassion studies might be a novel and important unifier for compassion and change.

Seeing Compassion, Development, and Change Together

Bartunek [4] insightfully portrayed how one group's identity development and focus on member empowerment contributed to organizational change dynamics in a professional network of teachers. The passion, disillusionment, and tenacity with which the teachers worked over the years for the betterment of their peers prompted us to wonder about the role of care and compassion in their group work. After investigating the work practices in one group of medical billing agents, Lilius et al. [30] revealed a process of building compassion capability and invited other researchers to follow on with exploration of such capability in different contexts or for different research purposes. With envisioning a common ground for compassion and change research, we see a possible similarity, for example, in how both the teachers in Bartunek's study and the billing agents in Lilius et al.'s study appeared to have acted as agents of change in their settings. While Bartunek specified and exhaustively studied the role of the group as a collective change agent, Lilius et al. provided contextual descriptions and some telling quotes that illuminated the efforts of group members toward purposefully developing and sustaining the compassionate dynamics for which the group succeeded in being known throughout the organization. Both studies revealed personal and organizational identity narratives related to deep care for the fellow professionals and genuine desire for them to thrive in their work environments. We therefore propose that the study of dynamics in positive identity building across levels of analysis, for example, might be found to bridge the research streams in compassion and organization development and change.

CONCLUSION

POS as a discipline created an intellectual home for the studies of compassion at work, because POS draws on positive psychology [39], and “compassion is a form of positive emotion” [11, p. 109]. From recasting processes of organizing to viewing corporate communication through new lenses, compassion research and theory development are both multifaceted and inspiring. POS further shifted scholarly foci from identifying deficiencies and solving problems of pathological limitations to researching cases of flourishing abundance and building theories of organizational thriving. Healing pain and suffering in organizations through compassion improves human condition of organizational members and, therefore, contributes to broadening their emotional and cognitive repertoires and building their capacity for success [17] [18] [19]. Given positive influences of compassion, scholars call for research and theory exploration to deepen the understanding of compassion and its developmental effects in a variety of organizational contexts, cultures, and groups. Studying compassion in connection with change directly answers that call, and adding the inquiry into emergent and transformative work-related processes to the body of compassion research provides a novel edge for the compassion and change literatures.

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