

The Evolution of Research on Organizational Compassion Capacity: A Systematic Review and Research Agenda

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Abstract

The study of compassion at the organizational context is gaining momentum as the need for other-serving behavior increases in today's global crises and social trauma environment. Compassion, which is commonly defined as a social process consisting of noticing, feeling, and responding to the suffering of others, is a concept that is as ancient as the history of humanity. Today, compassion is a promising and timely research area attracting researchers as well as practitioners from a wide range of disciplines including philosophy, psychology, neuropsychology, social policy, and health care. However, despite the awakening interest in compassion particularly after Frost's call in 1999 to bring a "compassion lens" to organizational studies, the importance of compassion is still underemphasized in organization research. Specifically the literature on organizational compassion capacity lacks a systematic and extended review which sheds lights on its roots, evolution, influential avenues and underexplored issues in order to build a platform for the future development of the field. Based on this, our purpose is 1) to provide a systematic and extensive literature review on compassion covering various research streams, 2) to conceptualize organizational capacity for compassion on the grounds of compassion theories from different disciplines, and 3) to provide a research agenda for future research avenues related to both theoretical and methodological issues. This systematic review provides valuable insight into the conceptualization and operationalization of organizational compassion as a collective, dynamic and interpersonal process, which in turn contributes highly to the agenda of organization studies.

Keywords: Compassion, Organizational Compassion Capacity, Literature Review, Evolution of Compassion Research

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Introduction

As Buddha says “pain is inevitable, suffering is optional”, we all unavoidably fall heartbroken several times for different traumas during our lives. Traumas may be caused by suffering from a serious disease, loss of a loved one, dismissal from a job, or getting materially or morally harmed as a result of an accident or a natural disaster. Grief, regardless of arising in which form, is unavoidable but its negative implications can become tolerable. This is the time when the concept of compassion comes into stage as a significant actor for helping us to overcome traumas we experience in our personal as well as professional lives.

The word compassion, originated from Latin roots *pati* (to suffer) and *com* (together with), has a meaning of “suffering together with another, participation in suffering” (Oxford English Dictionary, www.oed.com). Compassion, often named as *care* or *pity* in ancient studies, has a historical background as long as the history of humanity. It has religious and spiritual roots, notably involved in holy texts of major religions including Muslim, Christian, and Judaism and taking an important place in Buddhist philosophy. Compassion, called as care or pity interchangeably, is also frequently encountered in ancient Greek debates (Nussbaum, 1996).

As an academic research area, compassion has been studied in a wide range of research streams to date, from philosophy to nursing, with a particular focus in positive psychology area. Researchers from different disciplines have focused on different aspects of compassion. In psychology and medicine, researchers use different assessment tools for measuring compassion. Despite the predominant interest in compassion as a research area in a variety of research streams, systematic literature reviews to date are restricted within the boundaries of psychology area and there is a need for a capstone theoretical framework for compassion, integrating compassion theories explained by different disciplines. In addition, although compassion at the workplace has started to gain awakening interest in organization studies, particularly after Frost’s call in 1999 for organization researchers to bring a “compassion lens” to their studies, the number of organizational studies on compassion is very few and most of them are conceptual analyses.

This study provides a systematic and extended literature review, and demonstrates how an evolution the concept of compassion has had over time. On the grounds of compassion theories from different research streams, at the both individual and organizational level, we intend to conceptualize organizational capacity for compassion. In addition to providing a deeper understanding of organizational compassion, which is a dynamic process in which individuals in an organization collectively notice, feel, and respond to the suffering of others, this study also proposes a theoretical framework for future research to develop a reliable theoretical agenda for organizational compassion capacity.

Theoretical Framework

What Compassion Is

Compassion has been at the interest of researchers from a wide range of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, politics, psychology, neuropsychology, nursing, and eventually management and organization studies, predominantly with the positive organizational scholarship movement. However, there is no common agreement among researchers on what compassion is. Also, literature lacks of a reliable and useful measurement scale for compassion (Strauss, Taylor, Gu, Kuyken, Baer, Jones, and Cavanagh, 2016). This study provides an extended literature review integrating compassion theories from the perspective of different disciplines.

According to the Buddhist philosophy, every person has an innate compassion capacity that can be developed over time. Dalai Lama defines compassion as “openness to the suffering of others with a commitment to relieve it” and highlights that the genuine compassion is based on an individual person’s explicit recognition that others also seek happiness as oneself and they deserve to overcome suffering. On this ground, the person has a kind of interest towards the well-being of others, regardless of how she/he is treated by other people. Even the person at the target of the interest is an enemy, this interest persists. Buddhists philosophy also emphasizes that genuine compassion is different from emotions like pity or mercy felt for the ones that are believed to be in inferior situations. Instead, a person feeling compassion sees others more important than oneself (Dalai Lama, 1995). On the other hand, Aristotle defines compassion as “a painful emotion directed at another person's misfortune or suffering” (Nussbaum, 1996).

Compassion is commonly defined generally as "being attuned and responsive to the suffering of others" in psychology (George, 2014). On the other hand, self-compassion, in psychology, is defined as "being open to and moved by one's own suffering, experiencing feelings of caring and kindness toward oneself, taking an understanding, nonjudgemental attitude toward one's inadequacies and failures, and recognizing that one's own experience is part of the common human experience" (Deniz et al., 2008). In nursing, compassionate care is defined as "respond empathetically to the needs and concerns of clients through comfort, aid, and advice while bringing about behavioral change and eliciting the cooperation of one's client" (Lilius, 2012).

Boyatzis et al. (2006, 2013) explain coaching with compassion from the perspectives of both the coach and the coachee. According to Boyatzis et al. (2013), compassion exists when the coach “empathetically responds to a coachee's a) need for the alleviation of pain or suffering; or b) desire to develop or grow” and when “a coachee perceives that the coach is expressing empathic concern in responding to his or her a) pain or suffering; or b) desire to develop or grow”.

Compassion is frequently associated with some emotions like sympathy, kindness, caring, tenderness, and love. For example, Sprecher and Fehr (2005) define compassionate love as “an attitude toward other(s), either close others or strangers or all of humanity; containing feelings, cognitions, and behaviors that are focused on caring, concern, tenderness, and an orientation toward supporting, helping, and

understanding the other(s), particularly when the other(s) is (are) perceived to be suffering or in need."

Following a similar methodology to Strauss et al. (2016), in Table 1 we examine a broader range of definitions of compassion at the individual level from different research areas, featuring the four common elements of individual compassion.

Definition	Recognizing suffering	Feeling (empathetic concern)	Sense-making	Act to alleviate suffering
"an empathetic action undertaken to alleviate another's pain" (Madden et al., 2012)		✓		✓
"multi-dimensional process of noticing another person's suffering, emphatically feeling that person's pain, and acting in a manner to ease the suffering" (Lilius et al., 2008)	✓	✓		✓
"an interpersonal process involving the noticing, feeling, sensemaking, and acting that alleviates the suffering of another person" (Dutton et al., 2014)	✓	✓	✓	✓
"the feeling that arises in witnessing another's suffering and motivates a subsequent desire to help" (Goetz, Keltner & Simon-Thomas, 2010 in George, 2014)	✓	✓		✓
"the meaning of compassion is that we understand something of what the other person is going through and want to help if possible" (Lazarus, 1999)	✓		✓	✓
"sympathetic consciousness of others' distress, together with a desire to alleviate it" (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary)	✓	✓	✓	✓
"being sensitive to others' suffering, being aware of their grief, having a desire to ease their suffering, and having nonjudgemental understanding for people making mistakes" (Deniz et al., 2008)	✓	✓	✓	✓
"a three-part human experience that does not require a successful outcome. The necessary link is between one's noticing of suffering, feelings of concern, and attempts to help alleviate that suffering" (Frost et al., 2005)	✓	✓		✓
"a relational process that involves noticing another's pain, experiencing an emotional reaction to his or her pain, and acting in some way to help ease or alleviate the pain (Dutton et al., 2005)	✓	✓		✓
"an empathetic emotional response to another person's pain or suffering that moves people to act in a way that will either ease the person's condition or make it more bearable" (Lilius et al., 2003)		✓		✓
"compassion involves "connection" to others (either cognitively through perspective taking or affectively through empathy) and "caring" for those others (often in communicative or behavioral ways) (Miller, 2007)		✓	✓	✓
"other oriented feelings that are most often congruent with the perceived welfare of the other person" (Batson, 1991)		✓	✓	
"the heart's response to the sorrow" (Kornfield, 1993)	✓	✓		

"an emotional presence by displaying warmth, affection, and kindness" (Kahn, 1993)		✓		✓
"some kind of concern about the welfare of others, irrespective of one's attitude to oneself" (The Dalai Lama, 1981).		✓	✓	
"concern for the well-being of others" (Cosley et al., 2010)		✓	✓	
"an emotion that facilitates intimate bonds with others" (Shiota, Keltner, & John, 2006)		✓		
"ability to feel for those less fortunate than oneself" (Solomon, 1998)		✓	✓	
"felt concern for another who is in some serious or grave condition" (Blum, 1980)		✓	✓	

Table 1: Definitions for Individual Compassion

To sum up, although there is no consensus on what compassion is, individual compassion is frequently defined in a variety of research streams, from philosophy to nursing, as a three-part process, in which the suffering of a person is recognized, empathetically felt, and a responsive action is taken towards the suffering person to alleviate his/her pain. Also, some researchers highlight making cognitive evaluations on the perceived welfare and conditions of the suffering person as a feature of compassion process, which we call as sense-making in Table 1.

Compassion in Management and Organization Studies

Previously, dealing with emotions at the workplace seemed to managers unprofessional and problematic. However, starting from the late 1990s, the role of emotions at the workplace started to be perceived as valuable for both the employees and the entire organization. For example, Solomon (1998), criticizing the management literature for considering caring at the workplace as “a luxurious perk for the employee but a dangerously expensive liability for the corporation”, argues that even though bringing emotions into organizational life seems to be unprofessional to managers, care helps a corporation to create “mutual dedication” and a “sense of security”. Additionally, increasing worldwide suffering within the last few decades due to wars, economic and political turbulences, natural disasters and so on, has led managers to deal with employee emotions. Also, with the positive organizational scholarship movement in the beginning of 2000s, management and organization researchers have taken an emotional lens in their studies, and concepts like justice, forgiveness, care, and compassion started to be named as organizational virtues.

Although compassion at the workplace has started to gain awakening interest in organization studies, particularly after Frost’s call in 1999 for organization researchers to bring a “compassion lens” to their studies, the roots of compassion is organizations actually rely on 1930s, as the Taylor’s strategic management conceptualization. September 9/11 crisis in the U.S. has caused compassion to be considered as an organizational virtue in response to employee traumas for a while but organizational compassion still preserved its underemphasized position in organization studies until *AMJ's Special Topic Forum on Understanding and Creating Caring and Compassionate Organizations* in 2012.

In management and organization studies, compassion is mainly considered as either individual responses to a workplace tragedy (Atkins & Parker, 2012) or collective

responses to a single tragedy (Dutton et al., 2006) within a single unit of the organization (Lilius, et al., 2011) or through the entire organization (Lilius et al., 2008). Organizational compassion is commonly defined as a three-part dynamic, interrelated process in which individuals in an organization notice the suffering of a person, empathetically feel his/her pain, and act to alleviate that suffering in a collective manner. (Lilius et al., 2008; Frost, 2005; Dutton et al, 2005; Dutton et al., 2007). Dutton et al., (2014) emphasize sense-making is another sub process of compassion in which both the sufferer and the compassionate party try to recognize the painful situation and their roles in compassion process. Atkins & Parker (2010), in their study on the role of individual compassion process in organizations, also assert that awakening of emotions leading to compassion depends on individual's appraisals on the suffering person and the painful situation.

To sum up, in parallel with the individual compassion, organizational compassion is commonly defined as dynamic and interrelated process, consisting of sub-processes of noticing, feeling and responding. Recent studies, proposing a fourth sub-process which is called sense-making, also highlight that organizational compassion process also consists of a cognitive aspect. In the subsequent section, based on the compassion theories in the literature, both at the individual level and organizational level, we offer an evolutionary analysis of compassion concept starting from a mere emotional state at an individual level towards an organizational capacity.

Evolution of Compassion: From a Vicarious Emotion towards an Organizational Capacity

In their empirical-based literature review on compassion in psychology, Goeltz, Keltner, and Simon Thomas (2010) explain three compassion theories prevailing in psychology field and demonstrate the evolution of compassion towards a distinct emotion having a trait like tendency. First group of researchers conceptualize compassion as a "vicarious emotion" similar to empathic distress and argue that people respond to the suffering of others using their own experience of distress (Batson, 1991; Hoffman, 1981). Second group of researchers consider compassion as a "blend or variant of other emotions like sadness or love", rather than a distinct emotion (Post, 2002; Shaver et al., 1987; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). Finally, the third group of researchers see compassion as an affective state distinct from other emotions (Batson, 1991,; Darwin, 1987, 2004; Lazarus, 1991; Trivers, 1971). Our aim is to expand this evolution of compassion by bringing together all compassion theories in psychology, medicine, and management and organization studies in order to provide an extended evolutionary analysis of compassion.

Earlier studies conceptualize compassion mainly as an emotional state. Batson (1991), for example, defines compassion as "other oriented feelings that are most often congruent with the perceived welfare of the other person". According to Kornfield (1993), compassion is "the heart's response to the sorrow". Similarly, Kahn (1993) argues that compassion is "an emotional presence by displaying warmth, affection, and kindness". On the other hand, Solomon (1998) does not see compassion as merely a "virtue in terms of tendencies and traits of characters", rather focuses on "concrete actions and feelings" as a result of being compassionate. Similarly, Frost (1999) emphasize that compassion is more than empathy, evoking "helpful or merciful action."

Further studies argue that compassion has also a cognitive aspect in addition to its emotional dimension. Nussbaum (1996, 2001) advocates that in order to talk about the existence of compassion, three conditions are required, and also sufficient. First of all, the person having compassion to another must be convinced that suffering is serious, not trivial (seriousness). Secondly, compassionate person must hold a belief that the suffering party is a victim, that is, the suffering is not caused by the sufferers own "culpable actions" (inculpableness). Finally, the compassionate person must believe that s/he has the same possibilities for being in a situation similar to the sufferer's (commonness). Nussbaum explains how a compassionate person makes judgments about the sufferer and suffering situation, in satisfying these conditions. People may feel pity and other related emotions when they witness another person's suffering but they also make personal judgments on how grave the sufferer's sorrow is and whether the painful situation is caused by the sufferer's own fault or by just misfortune. Also, for a person to be able to show compassion in face of a trauma it is important to recognize that s/he or a loved one could be in place of the victim, suffering from a similar sorrow. Eddington (2010) and Whitebrook (2002), arguing the limitations of Nussbaum's discussion on the role of compassion in social policy, assert how compassion is an "intelligent emotion" and provides basis for justice in individuals' perceptions.

Embracing both emotional and cognitive dimension of compassion, Neff (2003) and Deniz et al. (2008) state that compassion is a sequence of events consisting of being aware of and sensitive to the suffering of a person, being connected to and feeling the pain, and having a desire to alleviate the suffering. They also emphasize that compassion also involves "non-judgmental understanding for people making mistakes".

Simpson, Clegg, and Pitsis (2014) criticize compassion studies to date for not going beyond covering the "implicit metaphorical grounding in religious roots" and neglecting the power dynamics inherent in compassion relations and they consider compassion not only a "psychological state" but also a "social construct embedded within power relations in which participants experience both positive and negative outcomes". They also see the mostly accepted definition of organizational compassion as "individual or collective noticing of another's suffering, feeling empathy for their pain, and responding to the suffering in some manner" (Dutton et al., 2007; Frost et al., 2006; Kanov et al., 2004; Lilius et al., 2008) as missing due to its "strong psychological framework in which compassion experience is seen as unidirectionally transactional, neglecting sociological and political dynamics"

In 2011, Lilius and her colleagues conceptualized organizational capability as "the reliable capacity of members of a collective to notice, feel and respond to suffering" while compassion organizing occurs "when individuals in organizations notice, feel, and respond to human pain in a coordinated way" (Dutton et al., 2007). On the other hand, Shzad and Muller (2016), adopting a sense-making framework, point out that both organizational compassion (and organizational justice) has dynamic processes involving both cognitive and emotional dimensions. They consider organizational compassion as having "emotional", "cognitive", and "social-contextual" elements.

Madden et al. (2012) define organizational compassion as "resources, knowledge, and processes used by the organization to achieve its unique mission" and extend the

debate of individual and collective level of compassion at the workplace to a capacity view of organizational compassion. They argue that in order for an act to be organizational, an agent must incorporate it into a role, in which organizational norms and values are embedded, supporting organizational goals. Based on this, organizational capacity for compassion emerges as a result of organizational members' incorporating compassion into their roles as a whole. Stating that is a dynamic process in which organizational members learn the behaviors and emotions of each other in order to collectively notice and feel suffering, respectively, and learn how to coordinate their behaviors in order to collectively respond to the pain. From the complexity science perspective, they also explain how an organizational capacity for compassion can be built based on the study of Lilius et al., 2011.

Based on the studies on compassion, at the both individual and organizational level, we offer an evolutionary path for the concept of compassion from a vicarious emotion towards an organizational capacity as shown in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: The Evolutionary Path of Compassion from a Vicarious Emotion towards an Organizational Capacity

Methodology

Data Collecting

Following the data collection method of Saggese et al. (2016), we reviewed articles published in international journals in English within the scope of databases EBSCO, EBSCOhost, EconLift, Emerald, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest, Sage, Science Direct, Scopus, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, and Wiley. Articles were collected by an Internet search for the word “compassion” and its variants, such as “compassionate” or “organizational compassion” in either topic, abstract or keywords of the articles. Since compassion, especially in the management and organization studies, is a relatively recent research topic, we did not make journal selection in order not to result in any literature loss. Instead, we selected articles by research areas refining and abstract reading. We focused on the articles, both conceptual and empirical, predominantly from areas of psychology, nursing, sociology, and management. For articles in each research stream, we selected the ones of which the primary purpose of the study is to investigate the concept of compassion. When necessary, also full texts of the articles were read. Additionally, references of the articles selected were examined and some of the cited articles were also selected based on the aforementioned selection criteria and the experience of the researchers.

Data Analyzing

In order to investigate influential research areas in which compassion is studied, a Boolean search for compassion-related articles was conducted covering the years

1945-2017 on the web of science database. For this, compassion* is written on the search engine. The search was resulted in 8,982 record, of which 6,229 were articles, having compassion or a related word was included in title, abstract or keywords. Then findings are refined by web of science categorization, including psychology general, social psychology, clinical sociology, nursing, sociology, political science, international relations, public administration, business and management. This refining resulted in 933 articles, majority of which are from psychology and nursing. Then, the articles of which primary purpose was to investigate compassion were determined by abstract, and when necessary, full-text reading. The final result was 193 articles published between 1993 and March 2017 from the research areas aforementioned. Table 2 and Table 3 below show the distribution of selected compassion publications by years and research areas, (web of science categorization) respectively, following the aforementioned searching and selecting procedure.

Publication Years	Number of Articles on Compassion	Percentage (among 193 articles selected)
2017 (Jan-March)	4	2.073%
2016	34	17.617%
2015	33	17.098%
2014	26	13.472%
2013	24	12.435%
2012	15	7.772%
2011	13	6.736%
2010	7	3.627%
2009	5	2.591%
2008	4	2.073%
2007	5	2.591%
2006	2	1.036%
2005	2	1.036%
2003	2	1.036%
2002	3	1.554%
2001	2	1.036%
2000	3	1.554%
1993	2	1.036%

Table 2: Number and Percentage of Published Articles on Compassion by Years

Research Stream (Web of Science Categorization)	Number of Articles on Compassion	Percentage (among 193 articles selected)
Psychology Social	71	36.788%
Nursing	66	34.197%
Psychology Clinical	27	13.990%
Management	19	9.845%
Business	13	6.736%
Political Science	8	4.145%
Sociology	4	2.073%
Psychology	3	1.554%

Table 3: Number and Percentage of Published Articles on Compassion by Research Streams

Concluding Remarks

Discussion

The concept of compassion, having a long historical background, has attracted a number of researchers from a wide range of research streams to date. Compassion is defined in various ways in different research areas and each compassion definition highlights different features of the concept. Although there is no common agreement among researchers on what compassion is, it is commonly accepted that compassion is an interrelated three-part process, including the recognizing the pain of the sufferer, empathetically feeling his/her pain, and responding to relieve or alleviate his/her pain. Recent studies have highlighted that compassion also has a cognitive aspect based on the compassionate person's personal judgments on suffering and the conditions of the sufferer, as well as its emotional dimension.

As a concept previously considered as an emotional state experienced at the individual level, compassion has had an evolution towards an organizational capacity over time. Previously, compassion was not considered as a distinct emotion, but rather a "vicarious emotion" similar to empathetic distress or a "variant of other emotions" like love or sadness. Later studies propose that compassion is a distant emotion, having a cognitive dimension. However, most definitions in the literature indicate that compassion is a three-part process in which individuals notice the suffering of others, feel empathetically what the sufferer feels, and act to ease or alleviate that suffering. Some definitions in the literature also imply a cognitive process, in terms of personal judgments and evaluations on the perceived suffering and sufferer's conditions, individuals pass through in their compassion experience.

Compassion has become an organizational phenomenon since 1999, with the Frost's call to researchers to take a "compassion lens" in their studies but actually, it has gained interest after *AMJ's Special Topic Forum on Understanding and Creating Caring and Compassionate Organizations* in 2012. Most researchers in management and organization studies agree that organizational compassion, like compassion at the individual level, consists of three dynamic, interrelated, and collective sub-processes, which are noticing, feeling, and responding. Few recent studies also highlight that sense-making also included in compassion process taken place at organizations, similar to compassion process experienced at the individual level. Later on, organizational compassion moved to a capability view referring to the collective capacity of organizational members to collectively notice, feel, and respond to suffering. Recently, organizational compassion is conceptualized as an organizational capacity, enabling the members of an organization learn the behaviors and emotions of each other in order to collectively notice and feel suffering, respectively, and learn how to coordinate their behaviors in order to collectively respond to the pain. This capacity view states that members of an organization incorporate organizational contextual elements, which are organizational culture, structure, systems, practices, and routines, into their organizational roles so that an organizational capacity for compassion emerges.

Conceptual Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

Addressing to the particular gap in the literature, this conceptual study provides a comprehensive literature review on compassion, examining studies from different disciplines to provide a deeper understanding what compassion is. Extending the scope of the research conducted by Strauss et al. (2016) in psychology area, this study brings together a number of compassion definitions at the individual level from different research streams, including philosophy, medicine, and management and organization studies, featuring the common elements of the concept. Additionally, we provide an extended review on the phenomenon of organizational compassion, which is rarely addressed in the literature. Also, we reveal the most influential research streams in which compassion has been mostly concentrated as a primary research topic conducting a systematic research. However, perhaps the most important contribution of this study is to propose an evolutionary path, from an emotional state towards an organizational capacity, the concept has had over time.

However, despite a number of conceptual implications, this study also has some limitations. First of all, the extended review we provide may miss literature since the number of databases in which we search international articles in our data collection process is limited and we selected only articles published in English of which primary purpose is to investigate compassion. Based on this, future research should include other data sources, such as books, and should be conducted within more other databases. Second, our study to investigate the influential effect of studies should be extended. We point out influential research streams searching for articles indexed in Web of Science database and refining by particular web of science categorization. Future research may include more research streams and also investigate most influential articles within the Web of Science database, using citation reports of articles. Third, bringing a new view to the evolutionary path of the concept we offer, such as reviewing the evolution of compassion in sub-periods may be in future direction of researchers.

The concept of compassion, either in personal or professional life, has increasingly becoming attracting in today's world full of traumas. It is an appealing research topic for researchers and a workplace phenomenon having implications on practitioners. However, there is still a number of unexplored issues for the concept as an academic research area in general, as an organizational phenomenon in particular. As a result of our methodological research, we found that there is a very few number of studies on organizational compassion, majority of which are conceptual analyses. There is almost no empirical study investigating the antecedents and consequences of compassion. Although there are different measurement scales for individual compassion, literature lacks of a reliable measurement scale for organizational capacity for compassion.

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