

THEory into ACTion

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Compassion in Community Practice

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Does compassion have a role in community practice? Before answering, let's first offer a working definition: Compassion involves concern and empathy for others who are in distress, coupled with a desire to help relieve that distress. Next, using that definition, ask yourself these questions: "Do you consider yourself to be a compassionate person?"; and "Do you think others feel they are compassionate too?"

In the absence of hard data (does anyone have some?), I would venture that most people's answers to both questions would be "Yes," or some form of yes, such as "I hope so," "I try to be," or "most of the time." So far, so good; that's happy news about human nature. To the extent it is true, a key question for us as community psychologists is how we can harness the compassion already lying within us for greater social benefit.

And that's an important topic. It's certainly true that skills, techniques, and an empirical research grounding are integral to effective community practice – they help distinguish us from our colleagues in other disciplines and from everyday citizens. But

community success also rests on our compassion and other inner attributes – the personal qualities we bring to the situation. Successful community work often calls upon all dimensions of our humanity.

Skills, we believe, can be taught – that’s why we go to graduate school. But how about personal qualities, such as compassion? Can these be taught, cultivated, and expanded as well, both individually and societally? The Charter for Compassion says “Yes,” and offers a model for how it can be done.

The Charter for Compassion International, at www.charterforcompassion.org, is a global organization based in Seattle, operating since 2009. The Charter promotes compassion worldwide, largely through a network of nearly 350 communities in 45 countries. Each community signs onto the Charter’s goals, which affirm a common commitment to care about and take responsibility for one another. Then, to demonstrate that commitment in practice, it decides upon its own local actions. Some examples:

- Karachi, Pakistan collected 400,000 supporting signatures and (among many other projects) started a Compassionate Cricket Club.
- Cape Town, in South Africa, began a program to protect young girls living on the street.
- Calgary, Alberta began a Compassion Exchange, linking residents wanting to give helping services with those seeking them.

A particularly compelling example comes from Louisville, Kentucky, whose mayor was elected to office on a platform of making Louisville a compassionate community. How would this be done? Once elected, the mayor – a businessman, not a helping professional – established a ten-year Compassionate Louisville campaign (see <http://compassionatelouisville.org>), including an annual city-wide week of service, a “Heart of Gold” monthly television feature, and a large expansion of mentoring programs. One of a long list of 2015 outcomes: the donation of over 150 bicycles to provide transportation for new refugees.

The Charter for Compassion itself got started through the initiative of Karen Armstrong, a well-known scholar of world religions, who won a global TED prize in 2008. A loose earlier network evolved into the current organization. Today the Charter is both ambitious and impactful, having expanded its work well beyond community membership (individuals can join too). Just a small sample of its current projects includes an online Education Institute; a Global Book Club; ongoing telephone forums and webinars; an Islamophobia Guidebook; an upcoming Compassion Marketplace; its own Charter Tool Box. In partnership with the Community Tool Box, it has also been sponsoring a series of online sections on Spirituality and Community Building. (See a listing at <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/culture/spirituality-and-community-building>, and in particular Section 2, on Being Compassionate.)

Through these combined activities and others, the Charter has catalyzed a global movement, supported by an especially dedicated cadre of volunteers and a small but

equally dedicated staff. The work is always challenging; but part of what makes it doable is that compassion is, as one video puts it, “the world’s most abundant, most powerful, and most under-utilized natural resource.”

Other organizations work to promote compassion as well. A separate affiliated Children’s Charter for Compassion, at <http://www.childrenscharterforcompassion.com>, is based in Canada. Stanford’s Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE), at <http://ccare.stanford.edu>, has the goal of “promoting, supporting, and conducting rigorous scientific studies of compassion and altruistic behavior.” Among its activities are formal training programs in the cultivation of compassion and research into compassion’s physiological correlates. Nearby, Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center, at <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu>, supports and publicizes research on “the science of a meaningful life,” including studies on the interplay between inner strengths and external consequences. A recently publicized study, “How Positive Media Can Make Us Better People,” suggests how media can foster empathy, gratitude, and generosity.

There are lessons for community psychologists from these examples, for the Charter and other organizations have shown that it’s possible to harness and utilize the personal qualities we value – not just on an individual level, but on organizational and community levels as well. More specifically for us, there are opportunities to build discussions of compassion into our graduate classes, our graduate curricula, our training programs, our public presentations, and perhaps also our research. We don’t usually

consider compassion to be a community psychology competency, akin to planning or evaluation, but perhaps it really is. Perhaps its importance is at least comparable to the skills we presently teach.

Cautions are necessary in advocating compassion, for compassion alone will not do the job. Feeling compassion, and even demonstrating individual compassion, are not substitutes for providing tangible resources to help those most in need, nor for systemic change in underlying social structures. Personal compassion must be backed by larger-scale social action.

Imagine, though, if every community were a compassionate community – one that not only professed compassionate values, but also took concrete actions to bring those values to life. Would that not go far in addressing some of our most challenging local and national problems?

This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Tabitha Underwood at underwoodtabitha@gmail.com.
