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SCIENCE FOR A SMARTER WORKPLACE

From Insult to Injury: The Case for Organizational Compassion in Modern Workplaces

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Abstract

Bullying and harassment, alongside other negative acts such as incivility and even violence, have become a stubborn feature of modern workplaces. Their causes are complex and can range from interpersonal conflict and poor management practices to efficiency targets and performance metrics that overly pressurize staff. This is especially the case in large organizations in the global healthcare industry. A case in point is the UK's publicly funded National Health Service (NHS), where decade-long budget cuts, increased workloads brought on by rising demands of an aging population, new ways of working such as telemedicine, and the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic have extended negative acts into the experience of multifaceted violence. We argue that organizational compassion, conceptualized as compassionate leadership, compassionate citizenship, and the fostering of compassionate relationships is much needed in environments where workers are pushed ever closer to the edge and into realms of unreasonable mistreatment.

Introduction

Toxic workplace culture, poor management practices and leadership can give rise to negative acts. Einarsen et al. (2011) describe those as behaviors that cause personal offense, humiliation, or harm, socially excluding a person or a group of people. Further research has identified the distinctive practices falling under the umbrella of negative acts, which in part lead to legislative change, new and more complex organizational policies, internal and external regulations, and codes of practice aimed at preventing them (Rayner & Lewis, 2020). However, to take the research agenda forward, it is necessary to consider not only the physical manifestation of negative behaviors and the organizational contexts in which they occur but also to contemplate on the wider forces and organizing dynamics in workplaces and societies (Costas & Grey, 2019). One such organizing force is violence. Violence is already a tangential part of the bullying and harassment literature, where it is defined in terms of physical behavior, for instance, threatening or confrontational actions by one human being to another.

We extend this understanding, by showing that violence as an insidious yet inalienable facet of human interaction and, thus, a permanent feature of organizational life. This does not remove the need for ongoing employee training, which raises awareness and can help prevent negative acts. Nor does it reduce the need to support targets of abuse, during and after the act (Hershcovis et al., 2015). However, it does suggest that minimizing the incidence of negative acts will not necessarily diminish the overarching violence of modern workplaces, which may be experienced as the pressure of strict deadlines, increased workloads, managerial control, or aggressive service users such as patients and their families. As a result, a more comprehensive framework for policy making is required. We propose that this can be achieved through fostering organizational compassion, or the capacity and willingness for workplace empathy and help (West & Chowla, 2017).

Extending the Negative Acts Framework

Einarsen et al. (2011, p. 9) have summarized negative acts as: "who does what to whom; when, where, why; and with what kinds of consequences for the organization and for those targeted."

The above definition regards negative acts as observable and quantifiable behaviors, which include a perpetrator (or several) and a victim (or several). As such, negative acts take place either in a one-to-one or a one-to-many setting, where the target is often unable to escape frequent oppression and even discrimination from a

figure of authority or from a fellow coworker. However, they can also occur at organizational and even societal levels, in which cases negative acts go beyond individual conflict and become violence.

Violence takes many guises. It can be structural or symbolic, subjective or objective; performed individually or collectively (Costas & Grey, 2019). *Structural* is the violence of oppressive institutions, which can lead, for example, to racial discrimination and prompt widespread protests, such as the riots following the killing of George Floyd in 2020 or the British schoolboy Stephen Lawrence in 1993. *Symbolic* violence may be experienced by marginalized groups who are socially excluded because of possessing characteristics, perhaps related to their gender, sexual identity, race or religion, which differ from those of the dominant in-group. Scholars of bullying and harassment will recognize in these instances of oppression against, for example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual workers (see Lewis et al. 2020) simply because of they do not occupy the space of membership of the in-group. The *subjective* violence label, introduced by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, points to the presence of a subject, an identifiable "who," as a perpetrator of subjective violence. The absence of a perpetrator does not mean that there is no violence but that it may be *objective*, that is, subtle, covert and not easily discernible. Negative uses of humour in organizations may be framed as objective violence when used against colleagues for the purposes of segregation, othering, or social control.

Bullying and harassment scholars typically view violence as an extreme form of negative behavior, describing it as aggression, or the threat of aggression, against an employee. Extending this definition, we propose that *negative acts are the practice of violence in everyday working life*. This proposition can have wide-reaching consequences for the field. Not only is "violence…everywhere" (Costas & Grey, 2018, p. 1575), but it is ever present, both in organizational life and society at large. As an example, the use of subjective and objective violence to subdue enemies and overcome obstacles is recorded in the earliest examples of human sense making (Campbell, 1949). Instruments of violence were used by early sovereign states to prevent their citizens from lapsing into war of all against all (Hobbes, 1651). Philosopher Michel Foucault argues that although modern states have concealed subjective uses of violence, they have not done away with its objective uses, for instance through surveillance and the covert use of power. Judith Butler (2020) places the analytical lens above individuals and their bounded experiences of a life where violence is either present or not. Such binary distinction is not possible when considering human experience at the level of society, Butler argues, because there is no duality between life with/out violence. Taking these arguments to their logical conclusion, we propose that negative acts not only predate modern workplaces but are likely to succeed them. A different and more holistic approach is required, if organizations are to minimize the impact of everyday violence on their employees' working lives.

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Organizational Compassion

An example of such a holistic approach is the drive for compassionate leadership (West & Chowla, 2017) across the UK's National Health Service (NHS) partly as a response to stub-

born claims of cultures of bullying and harassment that are not diminishing despite interventions of policy and process, and interventions described above. De Zulueta (2016) defines compassion as the willingness to empathise with another's suffering, alongside a willingness to help someone's distress. Key among the factors that make workplace compassion possible is compassionate leadership (De Zulueta, 2016).

Unlike poor management practices, compassionate leadership does not rely on "command and control" interventions, reminiscent of our earlier discussion on subjective and objective violence. Furthermore, compassionate leadership does not consider individual needs as subordinate to the goals of the organization. However, is the practice of compassionate leadership enough, given the ubiquitous nature of workplace violence? We have proposed that violence is an ever-present component in any organized human activity, especially entrenched in contexts where workforce relationships are strained by austerity, performativity pressures, and efficiency targets. Consequently, we argue that to be effective, compassionate leadership must be placed in a wider context of organizational compassion (see Figure 1).
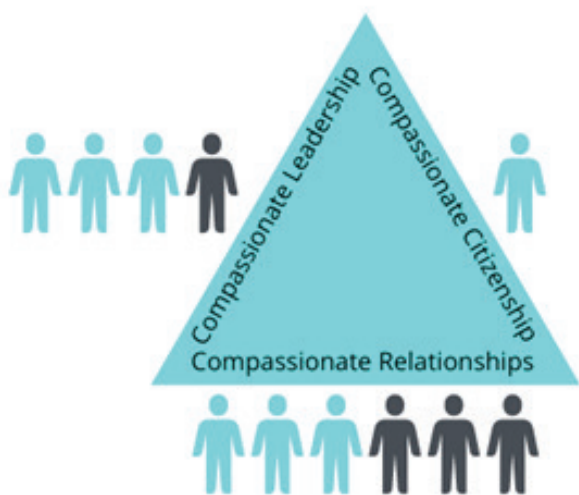

Figure 1: A model of organizational compassion

We conceptualize organizational compassion (see Figure 1) as the nexus of compassionate leadership, compassionate citizenship, and compassionate relationships. In the publicly funded context of the UK's NHS, this may also include compassion among healthcare professionals, patients, and their relatives. We now proceed to discuss each in turn.

Compassionate Leadership

Based on West and Chowla (2017), we regard compassionate leadership as the behavior of those in authority. This goes beyond toxic management practices, which existing policy mechanisms should address. It also accepts the reality of difficult performance targets, the setting of which may lay outside managerial control. An organization operating in a context of market or austerity pressures would be remiss to not monitor worker performance. This is especially so for the NHS, which is required to balance the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic with the needs of an aging and increasingly ailing population (Manolchev & Lewis, 2021). It also faces pressures to innovate and work collaboratively across its departments to manage funding cuts, continually reduce costs, and deliver to stringent government-set targets. In line with such efficiency targets, it is appropriate for managers to carry out regular reviews of their team performance, highlight any development needs that may be pertinent, recommend training or support, and expect improvement. Yet, this need not be done in a way that is dismissive of personal circumstances nor be used to apportion blame, victimize workers, or induce fear (De Zulueta, 2016). Thus, we recommend that organizations enable compassionate leadership by establishing regular review and regular support cycles, occurring in parallel and managing role performance, while supporting the person within it. It must further be supported by organizational policy (and values), empowering employees to speak out through an organizational culture while reassuring workers that their confidentiality is protected and personal circumstances respected.

Compassionate Citizenship

Compassionate citizenship is workplace behavior underpinned by personal resilience and self-compassion. If violence is ever present, then compassionate leaders require the support of resilient employees, empowered by the self-awareness of their own needs, who can participate in compassionate organizational citizenship. From a psychological perspective, there are several barriers in the way of achieving this: from aggression, threats and

everyday working pressures, through the individual need for safety and connection at work, and the elusive human pursuit of satisfaction and fulfilment (De Zulueta, 2016). Accounting for the complexity of such individual needs and aspirations makes it clear why co-opting the workers themselves and not just the leaders as part of the process is critical. Doing so could be done by considering the insights of Hobfoll et al.'s (2018) conservation of resources (CoR) theory, which posits that humans not only exhibit cognitive bias towards the preservation of existing resources (for instance, possessions, status, relationships) but are also resource-loss averse. Resource loss, such as losing colleagues through restructuring or redundancies or losing task autonomy in the face of controlling management styles during periods of change, is likely to have a negative impact on individuals. This points to the value of programs and initiatives focusing on developing self-compassion (West & Chowla, 2017), self-awareness, and building effective habits and coping mechanisms in stressful and challenging situations. This can create the skills to deal with unexpected changes in the working environment and build personal resilience, which employees can also apply in their personal lives.

Compassionate Relationships

Compassionate relationships are practices of mutual care and camaraderie among workers. The personal value of having a support network is made explicit in Hobfoll's CoR theory above, but this third and final proposition highlights the shared benefits of helping others. Ali and Terry (2017) argue that compassionate leaders can help promote "compassionate relationships" at all levels of the organization, which offers a range of organizational benefits. As an example, Lilius et al. (2011) find that the being treated with compassion by colleagues can not only improve the recipient's motivation but encourage a general state of positivity at work. Compassion, and compassionate relationships by extension, can provide a sense of security, fulfilment, and safety both for the recipient and the provider. The shared benefits can be both emotional and physiological, offering joy while improving a person's overall psychophysiological health (Fredrickson et al., 2000). Positive emotions at work, the same study finds, can overturn the negative impact of stressful and anxiety-inducing situations. In the UK, several NHS organizations have developed mental health champions, and these roles operate as a network alongside the government-promoted, employee-voice representatives (Freedom to Speak Up Guardians) to monitor employee well-being. Challenges in the way of fostering an environment of compassion are, nevertheless, manifold, especially as remote working in some shape or form is here to stay for many organizations.

Next Steps

Although undesirable for organizations and unwelcome for those targeted, negative acts are a permanent feature of everyday organizational life. Furthermore, they take place within a wider context of systemic violence, putting pressure on organizations, managers, and workers. To ameliorate its impact on employees, we have proposed a realistic mitigation strategy: the practice of organizational compassion, which we framed as a triadic and mutually enforcing framework. We have identified its components as *compassionate leadership*, which manages workers' performance without overlooking, shaming, stigmatizing, or victimizing the recipient. *Compassionate citizenship*, which allows organizations to build the resilience of their employees and empower them during times of uncertainty and change, and *compassionate relationships*, which create an environment of positivity, are made possible by giving and receiving support.

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