

Essay

Transcending Organizational Compassion Paradoxes
By Enacting Wise Compassion Courageously

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Abstract

While organizational compassion has attracted increased scholarly interest over the past two decades, inherent paradoxical tensions have been largely overlooked. Transcendence of oppositions is widely recognized as a most effective paradox response. To gain insight about the transcendence of the paradoxical tensions in organizational compassion, we turn to the cultural context of Bhutan, where for centuries compassion has been held as a central virtue informing governance and daily life. Our analysis contributes to the literature on organizational compassion and on organizational paradoxes by: (1) theorizing the application of Bhutan's compassion transcendence strategies to the organizational context; (2) thereby engaging in cross-cultural analysis hereto overlooked in the organizational compassion literature; (3) highlighting paradoxes in compassion relations; and (4) providing a generalizable sociomaterial model for studying paradox transcendence.

Keywords: organizational compassion, wisdom, power, paradox, transcendence.

Transcending Organizational Compassion Paradoxes: Enacting Wise Compassion Courageously

Since the turn of the century, compassion has emerged as a focus of serious academic theorizing in organizational studies (for overviews see Dutton, Workman, & Hardin, 2014; Lilius, Kanov, Dutton, Worline, & Maitlis, 2012; Rynes, Bartunek, Dutton, & Margolis, 2012; Simpson, Clegg, Lopez, et al., 2014; Worline & Dutton, 2017). Organizational compassion is a process that unfolds through efforts to alleviate the suffering of an employee or co-worker. More specifically, Dutton et al. (2014) define organizational compassion as “an interpersonal process involving noticing, feeling, sense-making, and acting that alleviates the suffering of another person” (p. 277). Interest in organizational compassion has been bolstered by findings that compassionate responses to employee suffering provide significant organizational benefits. These benefits include facilitating post-traumatic healing (Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002; Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov, & Maitlis, 2011; Powley & Cameron, 2006); boosting organizational trust, pride, connection, motivation, and commitment (Dutton, Lilius, & Kanov, 2007; Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000; Lilius et al., 2008); enhancing creativity (Zabelina & Robinson, 2010) and organizational performance (Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004); and contributing to perceived effectiveness in leadership and decision making (Boyatzis, Smith, & Blaize, 2006; Cameron, Mora, Leutscher, & Calarco, 2011; Crossan, Mazutis, & Seijts, 2013; Dutton et al., 2002; Sutton, 2009, 2010). At the individual level, compassionate social networks provide considerable health benefits, such as lower blood pressure, lower mortality, and improved immunity (Boyatzis et al., 2006).

By focusing on the positive aspects of compassion, however, the organizational compassion literature tends to gloss over an extensive body of work in philosophy, literature,

and academic research indicating the limits and complexity of compassion (Simpson, Clegg, Lopez, et al., 2014; Simpson, Clegg, & Pitsis, 2014a, 2014b). In this essay, we offer a complementary perspective highlighting organizational compassion not merely as a positive virtue, but also as a tension and contradiction laden social phenomenon. Applying the lens of paradox theory, we show that the exercise of compassion requires an agent to balance tensions, such as those between sympathy and sentimentality, care and control, empathy and emotional fatigue.

Paradoxes, characterized as persistent interdependent contradictions, are inherent to organizing (Schad, 2017; Smith & Lewis, 2011). While paradoxical tensions are “impervious to resolution” (Smith, 2014, p. 1613), they can be transcended, enabling an individual or organization to “embrace tensions simultaneously” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). Views on how paradox transcendence transpires are varied and sometimes contradictory. Many researchers describe transcendence as a cognitive capacity to think about or perceive tensions in harmony (Bartunek, Gordon, & Weathersby, 1983; Capra, 1975; Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse, & Figge, 2015; Waldman & Bowen, 2016; Westenholz, 1993). Yet a growing number of other scholars view transcendence as an ongoing, practical accomplishment that additionally involves discursive (Abdallah, Denis, & Langley, 2011), rhetorical (Bednarek, Paroutis, & Sillince, 2017), and/or sociomaterial actions (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017).

In this essay we use paradox transcendence as a lens to problematize and expand current theorization of organizational compassion. Our approach enriches the literature on both organizational compassion and on organizational paradox. To the former, we contribute by integrating positive and critical perspectives on compassion and highlighting concrete ways in which paradoxical tensions can be transcended. To the latter, the insights we add include identification of another source of paradox (namely, the practice of compassion) and a description of the process of paradox transcendence.

Our analysis takes inspiration from a journey “East” to Bhutan, a cultural context where the virtue of compassion has been traditionally upheld as essential in informing virtuous governance. While emphasizing the importance of compassion, Bhutanese culture focalizes the interdependent tensions that make compassion paradoxical. Looking at significant social practices and material artefacts typical of Bhutan, we observe the ongoing deployment of discursive, cognitive, and socio-material strategies for resolving tensions inherent to compassion relations (Ura, 2004). By drawing attention to Bhutanese approaches to promoting compassion we expose a “blind spot” in organizational compassion literature, which to date has largely overlooked insights from other cultural traditions and has not yet grappled with compassion as a paradoxical phenomenon.

Compassion Paradoxes

The philosopher Rousseau (1762 [2003]), teachers in the Christian and Buddhist traditions, research in medicine and psychology (Lutz, Brefczynski-Lewis, Johnstone, & Davidson, 2008; Ricard, Lutz, & Davidson, 2014), and recent organizational theory (Worline & Dutton, 2017) hold compassion in the highest regard. This appreciation is not universal, however. Philosophers from Plato (1992) and Spinoza (1996) to Kant (1996) and Nietzsche (1966, 1997, 1998, 2002) have dismissed compassion, viewing it as a passion that is emotional and irrational and therefore a questionable guide for ethical behavior. These philosophers argue that compassion can have ill effects, such as discouraging individual efforts toward wellbeing; undermining personal agency, dignity, and self-worth; and overemphasizing the importance of material possessions. Kant (1996) and Nietzsche (1999) add that compassion expands suffering by contagion, moving from one to two or more. Spinoza (1996) sees the hopelessness of “unmanly compassion” (p. 68) as springing from “bondage” or “man’s lack of power to moderate and restrain the effects” (p. 113).

Similar critiques have been advanced within the organizational context by Thompson (1975) and, more recently, by du Gay (2008), who converge in their argument that, in contrast to rules based bureaucratic processes, compassionate administration is an arbitrary and unfair expression of favoritism. Such views find support in research by Batson, Klein, Highberger, and Shaw (1995) indicating that compassion leads to decisions that conflict with justice. Other studies suggest that peer groups or subordinates sometimes deem compassionate behavior on the part of a friend or manager as indicating powerlessness, weakness, and sentimentality (Georges, 2011; Martino, 2000). Strong identification with other people's suffering has also been found to generate a sense of sentimental hopelessness and moral distress (Halifax, 2011). Furthermore, people who perform emotional labor, such as those in the caring professions, sometimes experience compassion fatigue, a form of emotional and physical exhaustion (Hochschild, 1983). Compassion burnout is also found in those who play the role of the workplace toxic handler, taking on the emotional distress of others to face down compassionless organizational practices (Frost, 2003).

Compassion's paradoxes can be observed even at the neurophysiological level. Compassion initially activates the brain areas associated with threat (the amygdala and the insula) triggering the sympathetic nervous system's "stress response" characterized by increased heart rate, dilated pupils, and tightened muscles—arising from alertness and sensitivity towards another person's suffering (Lutz et al., 2008; Ricard et al., 2014). This "stress response" is followed by activation of the parasympathetic nervous system's "rest response," stimulating the vagus nerve that slows the heart rate and breathing due to feelings of love and kindness towards the suffering person. Overall, the biological benefits of compassion include boosting immune functioning and increasing longevity (Konrath & Brown, 2013). These benefits are less apparent, however, if the compassion response is not motivated by an altruistic intent of alleviating suffering (Konrath, Ho, & Zarins, 2016).

Rather than launching a diatribe on the positive and negative aspects of compassion, we propose treating compassion as an inherently paradoxical phenomenon, characterized by persistent interdependent, yet contradictory tensions, such as those between sentimentality and rationality, weakness and strength, dependence and independence, domination and mercy, fatigue and energy (see Figure 1). The poles of a paradox “seem logical in isolation, but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously” (Lewis, 2000, p. 760). In contrast to dilemmas, which require a difficult choice between competing alternatives (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016), or dialectic tensions, which can be temporarily resolved by integrating contradictory elements (Clegg & Pina e Cunha, 2017), paradoxical tensions are persistent, even if they often remain latent and become salient only at specific points in time (Smith, Erez, Jarvenpaa, Lewis, & Tracey, 2017).

 Insert Figure 1 about here

Responding to Paradox

Various paradox response strategies have been theorized as separation (i.e., choosing to recognize one tension while ignoring the other), denial (i.e., refusing to see the tension at all), or acceptance (i.e. harmonizing tensions) (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Tsoukas & Pina e Cunha, 2017). In practice paradoxes are typically managed, however, through strategies of temporization (i.e., attending to contradictory elements separately at different times), spatialization (i.e., assigning tensions to different units or people), relativization (i.e., rhetorically arguing for a shift in viewpoint), or simply by suspending judgment and plunging into action (Czarniawska, 2017). These practical strategies overcome the risk of paralysis arising from the anxiety one feels when facing contradictions (Jay, 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Since paradox responses tend to become part in the tangle of contradictions

(Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017), however, they can generate further paradoxes. Denying or ignoring tensions, on the other hand, leads to vicious circles (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Another possibility advanced as an effective path to mobilizing generative action (Abdallah et al., 2011; Bednarek et al., 2017) and as a defining characteristic of leadership excellence (Smith & Lewis, 2012; Sutherland & Smith, 2011), is to transcend paradoxes by creatively synthesizing contradictions. Transcendence is frequently conceptualized in the literature as a cognitive process of reframing tensions in a manner that accommodates them as inherent to life (Bartunek et al., 1983; Hahn et al., 2015; Waldman & Bowen, 2016; Westenholz, 1993), a mindset often associated with Asian philosophy (Chen, 2002; P. P. Li, 1998; X. Li, 2014).

Alternatively, other views emphasize the role of sociomaterial organizational practices in achieving transcendence. This sociomaterial perspective does not view transcendence as an epiphany, but rather as an ongoing achievement that involves a multiplicity of micro-practices embodied in artefacts, routines, tools, politics, emotions, and communication (Hemetsberger & Reinhardt, 2009; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee, 2015). Further distinction can be made in the deployment of political and rhetorical practices in accomplishing transcendence. While politics and the use of rhetorical devices (and cognitive coherence *per se*) are included within sociomateriality (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014), for the purposes of the present analysis, it can be helpful to distinguish between them. Political practices facilitate transcendence by discursively reconstructing tensions in a manner that legitimizes pragmatic actions (Abdallah et al., 2011). Rhetorical practices enable transcendence as oscillation between tensions, performed by multiple agencies (Bednarek et al., 2017). From this broader perspective, transcendence is never final, but always an ongoing accomplishment of continuous

adjustment, where the resolution of one set of tensions can give rise to others (Janssens & Steyaert, 1999; Tracy, 2004).

In this essay we propose an analytical framework that integrates cognitive, sociomaterial, political and discursive paradox transcendence approaches into a broader process (see Figure 2). First, an “interpretive context” (Knight & Paroutis, 2017, p. 4) both makes paradoxes salient and spurs collective action towards addressing the underlying tensions. Second, cognitive, discursive, sociomaterial, and political actions are mobilized. Third, ongoing actions (re)produce a social context where paradoxical tensions, as incongruent as they may be, become normalized and equilibrating actions are legitimized. This salience/latency cycle is targeted at different subjects, activities, and at different times; accordingly, the process remains ongoing. Sociomaterially transcendence is never fully accomplished. For instance, while the use of artefacts and symbols may be legitimized on the basis of making tensions salient to neophytes, the routine taken-for-granted nature of the coping activities practitioners perform may simultaneously make the contradiction latent again. Periodically, practitioners need to be reminded about the necessity of reconciling opposites, so they do not become fixated on a single pole of the tension.

Insert Figure 2 about here

In what follows we apply our proposed framework as a heuristic tool to examine the transcendence of tensions in compassion as an ongoing accomplishment. Our specific case study is Bhutan—a cultural context where, since antiquity, compassion has been espoused as a guiding virtue for civic, public, and private life.

Compassion in Context: The Case of Bhutan

Bhutan is one of the few countries where Buddhism is the official religion. Given that that Buddhism holds compassion (*karuṇā*) as one of its primary ethical values, Bhutan may provide an ideal setting for investigating paradoxes in compassionate governance. As stipulated in The Constitution of The Kingdom of Bhutan (2008), “The State shall strive to create conditions that will enable the true and sustainable development of a good and compassionate society rooted in Buddhist ethos and universal human values” (p. 20). Over the past half century, the government of Bhutan has attempted to integrate past and present by modernizing efforts in education, health, and economic development, while simultaneously working to preserve the environment and traditional culture.

The Bhutanese *Dzong* as Discursive Text

A central artefact in Bhutanese culture and society is its *Dzongs*, fortress-monasteries that serve as district administrative and cultural-religious centers. Rather than mere relicts of a heroic feudal past (as are European castles, for example), *Dzongs* are living and fully functional monuments that continue to fulfil the same political-administrative and religious functions as those for which they were initially designed and constructed (Dujardin, 2000). The cultural centrality of the *Dzong* “is reflected in the fact that the national language is called *Dzongkhag*, which literally means the language spoken in the *Dzongs*, and each district is called a *Dzongkhag*” (Amundsen, 2001, p. 24). In addition to serving primary political and religious functions, “the monastery-fortress may well be approached as a ‘propelling’ monument, a culture magnet and vehicle of cultural transfer in contemporary Bhutan” (Dujardin, 2000, pp. 151-152). Bhutanese *Dzong* thereby function as “spatial text” (Dovey, 1999, p. 1), as a vehicle of discursive power by directly including or excluding actors and actions, producing awe and meaning, and reproducing social identity (Dale & Burrell, 2008).

A defining feature of the *Dzong* (and Bhutanese culture, more broadly) is the ornamentation of wooden surfaces such as windows, doors, and beams, with floral, animal, and religious motifs in traditional colors and patterns. Unsurprisingly, this iconography offers insight into the Bhutanese perspective on compassion. Interpretation of these *Dzong* images should also take into account their surroundings. Wangchhuk (2008) explains that the principal purpose of the *Dzong* art is to communicate crucial discourse on spiritual and cultural values, framing the cognitions and practices of Bhutanese society:

Bhutanese art is not primarily concerned with abstract concepts of ‘beauty’, but with interpretation of values and beliefs that are held by the vast majority and embody the eternal stream of life or consciousness. It is a process, deeply imbued with a strong sense of mortality, with many art forms epitomizing the eternal struggle between the forces of good and evil. (p. 85)

Considering the role of the *Dzong* in Bhutanese society and the significance of the art adorning the *Dzong* as a discursive medium for the communication of traditional Bhutanese values, religion and ideology, in which compassion features prominently, this imagery represents a relevant text for our study.

The Imagery of Compassion: An Iconographic Analysis

Iconography is the classic methodological approach for deciphering the meaning of visual cultural artifacts. Panofsky’s (1983) relational approach to iconography seeks to analyze different levels of meaning or “subject matter” (p. 26) embedded within artifacts. The *primary or natural subject matter* comprises the one immediately seen, resulting in a formal description of the image: i.e., type, object, shape, color, and size analyzed in sub-categories of fact and expression. The *secondary or conventional subject matter* explores the meaning of

the ideas represented in combination with each other—as, for example, the image of a cross symbolizing the crucifixion of Christ. The *tertiary or intrinsic subject matter* comprises the meaning conveyed by the art icon in relation to various cultural discourses, including values, mores, philosophical persuasions, and ideologies.

A rudimentary iconographic analysis of the primary subject matter of compassion in Bhutanese *Dzong* iconography reveals that compassion is not represented as enacted emotional behavior (e.g., the icon of helping hands frequently used in the West), but as a personality. Compassion is rendered as an embodied creature, seated in lotus position, with whitish complexion, wearing a bluish and reddish robe, with a serene expression and four hands—two folded across the chest in prayer and two holding a lotus and meditation beads up next to his shoulders.

Analysis of the secondary subject matter of relationships further reveals that *Chenrezi*, the “Bodhisattva of Compassion”, is always depicted in the same formulaic manner as a deity. Furthermore, he rarely appears alone, but is generally accompanied in a triad, with two other personalities representing wisdom and power. Yellow-complexioned *Jampelyang*, “Bodhisattva of Wisdom”, is also seated in lotus position with a serene facial expression. He holds high a flaming sword of knowledge in one hand (for cutting through illusions) and a lotus in the other. Dark complexioned *Chana Dorjee*, “Bodhisattva of Power”, is dancing with fierce expression and fiery eyes. He carries a thunderbolt (*vajra*) and is surrounded by blazing fires.

Analysis of tertiary subject matter concerning meaning of these images reveals that according to Bhutanese tradition Compassion, Wisdom, and Power require each other to be complete or beneficial in their effects (Ura, 2004): while Compassion without Wisdom is merely sentimentalism, Compassion without Power cannot prompt an effective response to the suffering of others. An important consideration in these relationships is that compassion is

understood to be utilitarian or outcome/context-bound, rather than deontological or rule-bound. As such, in the case of a crime, for instance, punishment can be inflicted out of compassion both for the victim and the perpetrator (Goodman, 2017). Furthermore, compassion is linked to cultivating wisdom of the truth of *dukha*, or the inevitable common experience of suffering from birth, disease, old age, and death, as well as suffering arising from *samudaya*, or attachment and clinging. In fact, traditionally, Bhutanese people practice thinking about death five times daily (Weiner, 2008). Wisdom also precludes the necessity of ending suffering both for oneself and others through the cultivation of detached compassionate thought, speech, and action, recognizing that underlying peoples' many differences, all share common aspirations of ending suffering and experiencing happiness. Therefore, Compassion, Wisdom, and Power need to be cultivated together for individual and social betterment (see Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 about here

Another image commonly depicted in the *Dzong* is that of a man leading a tiger (or, in some instances, a bull) with a chain attached to a collar around its neck. The man represents compassion, the tiger (or bull) power, and the chain wisdom. The meaning here is that, in order to achieve wellbeing and prosperity in society, people must live with compassion by making use of the tools of power in a manner that is steadily guided by the yoke of wisdom (see Figure 4).

Insert Figure 4 about here

The Bhutanese Buddhist doctrine; also represented in Tibetan Buddhist art as the deities *Avalokeshvara* (Compassion), *Manjushri* (Wisdom), and *Vajrapani* (Power) (Beer,

1999); is thus presented as a set of tensions. This iconography makes salient the paradoxes of compassion by emphasizing that, without wisdom and power, negative tensions inherent to compassion relations will gain prominence, producing negative outcomes. For instance, being too kind-hearted can equate with being cruelly irresponsible; being too gentle can equate with being weak and ineffective. These descriptions suggest that Bhutanese culture, imbued with its rich Buddhist heritage, views compassion as a guiding principle for life and public administration, while understanding the necessity of making salient its limitations and enacting transcendence strategies.

Social Practices and Structures

Broader observation of Bhutanese society shows that the values projected in the *Dzong* are not merely lifeless symbols, but are actively assimilated, cultivated, and materialized in social and institutional practices. Leading the accomplishment of compassion in Bhutanese society is the King, seen as the embodiment of virtue. This remains true even in contemporary Bhutan, after its transition from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in 2008 (Wangchhuk, 2008). Traditional teaching holds that, in order to avoid despotic leadership, the ruler must cultivate a “triad” of necessary leadership qualities (Ura, 2004, p. 4). Penjore (2009) examines Bhutanese folk-tales wherein the ideal king is portrayed as one who leads by example: “The king is the paragon of virtues, the epitome of power and authority, compassion and discipline, knowledge and wisdom” (p. 83). Ura (2004) further explains the virtues of the ideal Bhutanese ruler:

This triad of knowledge, loving kindness, and power are classical Buddhist qualities perceived as necessary in any leader. Power exercised in isolation can easily be unconstrained without the other two. Balance radiates from such a developed leader because the power element is restrained by loving kindness felt towards all sentient

beings and is directed by the wisdom-knowledge... Implicit in this combination of three classical qualities necessary in a leader is also a view that no external entity or agency can enforce balance and equilibrium in a society unless the individuals within the leadership strata, or every entity for that matter, acquires these three internal characteristics. (p. 4)

Two additional discursive elements pivotal to Bhutanese social and institutional practices which assume a specific relevance in managing the complexity of compassion are the philosophies of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and the “Middle Path Strategy.” Instead of highlighting Gross Domestic Product as a measure of national performance, in 1972, the King of Bhutan declared an official policy objective of increasing the nation’s GNH by building an economy serving, rather than superseding, the country’s spiritual values (Bates, 2009). Scholars associate Bhutan’s focus on GNH as a direct expression of the Buddhist principle of compassion (McDonald, 2003), since “GNH, besides fostering a compassionate point of view or feeling for others, is also about compassionate engaged action” (Tashi, 2011, p. 19). Here compassionate action is applied as synergistic balance of both relieving suffering and promoting happiness (Tashi, 2011). Since happiness implies the pursuit of sustainable development, which “involves the interdependency and co-existence of human beings and nature in a sustainable manner” (Rinzin, 2006, p. 31), happiness as a goal does not simply replace material wealth, but also highlights the importance of balancing divergent logics.

The fundamental importance of balancing contradictions is also embedded in the “Middle Path” strategy, viewed as a practical application of the Buddhist idea that the way to enlightenment requires finding an equilibrium between extremes of materialism and spirituality (Rinzin, 2006). From an applied perspective, this value translates into practical government policies limiting globalization and the exploitation of natural resources,

accepting the constraints this puts on material development. Furthermore, it informs a governance approach of decentralizing responsibilities while maintaining integrated management.

Transcending the Compassion Paradox: The Bhutanese Way

The brief analysis provided thus far enables us to outline some of the “transcendence” logics and practices underlying the Bhutanese approach to compassion. To begin, the insight gained on the relationship between compassion, wisdom, and power can be used to re-evaluate the paradoxical tensions of compassion presented earlier in Figure 1, identifying them as essentially tensions of sentimentality vs. wisdom, and domination power vs. generative power (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1 shows how the Bhutanese Buddhist ideology of highlighting and balancing tensions facilitates the cognitive reconceptualization required for transcending the contradictions of compassion: balancing extremes of emotion driven sentimentality and detached rationality, as well as tendencies of controlling domination (power-over) and autonomous empowerment (power-to). The manifestation of this intellectual move in practice, however, requires the support of an array of sociomaterial elements that underpin the maintenance and reproduction of compassion paradox transcendece as an ongoing accomplishment (see Figure 5).

Insert Figure 5 about here

In our case, the observable components contributing towards paradox transcendence and maintenance as a practical accomplishment include: ideological/cognitive strategies (such as those inspired by Buddhist principles); rhetorical practices, such as the GNH and the “Middle Path” policies; sociomaterial elements, as represented in the *Dzong*; and political processes, as embodied in the sovereign and the clergy (Mathou, 2000). In Bhutanese life, these are supported by an array of other social practices, such as the *Kidu*, a system of welfare that bonds royalty and people (Shaw, 2015). In their entirety, these practices preserve the country’s isolation, its ethnic and religious homogeneity, and the conservation of traditional values to produce a social and institutional context that facilitates the balance required for managing the paradox of compassion. Consequently, contradictions become framed as a necessary unity, an idea well captured by the paradoxical address delivered by the current King Jigme Khesar Wangchuck on the occasion of his ascending the throne: “Throughout my reign I will never rule you as a king. I will protect you as a parent, care for you as a brother, and serve you as a son” (French, 2009, p. online).

Nested Paradoxes of Power, Wisdom, and Compassion: Insights from Organizational Theory

Deeper analysis of the Bhutanese context offers another insight on transcending compassion paradoxes – that of nested paradoxes, i.e. where one paradox sits within another (Cunha, Simpson, Clegg, & Rego, 2018). Since transcendence is an ongoing accomplishment rather than an isolated act, transcending one set of tensions can highlight the existence of further tensions, which may remain latent (undetected) within a given social context. Although in popular culture, including the country’s construal in the media and travel brochures, Bhutan is imagined as an ancient, authentic, and uncorrupted Buddhist kingdom, critics hold that the dominant utopian narrative is highly mythologized (Schroeder, 2011), ignoring the persistent tension between Bhutan’s aspiration to maintain its traditions while

also pursuing development towards modernity (Brunet, Bauer, De Lacy, & Tshering, 2001; Duncan, 2013). In this respect, Mishra (2013) argues that Bhutan's GNH policy has guided international attention away from the coercive disenfranchisement of its Hindu-Nepalese minority which, totaling 100,000 people, comprises about one sixth of the population. Although the Hindu-Nepalese have lived in Bhutan for several generations, in the 1980s, they all were declared illegal immigrants and forced to become refugees outside the country's borders (Duncan, 2013). As a population, they did not fit with Bhutan's effort to paternalistically construct and maintain a coherent national identity through a "one nation, one people" policy emphasizing the preservation and practice of traditional Druka social and cultural norms of dress, architecture, and etiquette (Mishra, 2013). The compassionate interests of national happiness are thereby used to justify illiberal practices of compulsory dress codes, the proscription of traditional architectural motifs for all new constructions and, last but not least, the exile of a minority population (Bok, 2010; Potts, 2011). Critics additionally argue that measures of GNH are not nearly as reliable as Gross Domestic Product as a basis for government policy, or international compassion, for they rely upon subjective judgments of wellbeing that may be arbitrarily defined by government in a manner that best serves its own interests (McCloskey, 2012).

Just as perceptions of Bhutan reflect highly romanticized narratives that camouflage the contradictions behind its experiment with Buddhist democracy, so too the representation of compassion within organizational discourse tends to mythicize the benefits derived from organizational compassion (Dutton & Workman, 2011; Rynes et al., 2012), largely overlooking the paradoxes associated with its limitations and potential ill effects. The very existence of effective positive practices (such as Bhutan's compassion paradox transcendence system) can conceal other systemic contradictions operating as oppressive power relations (Simpson, Clegg, Lopez, et al., 2014; Simpson, Clegg, et al., 2014b). Simply stating that

compassion requires wisdom and power to be properly exercised, and that a “golden mean” should be achieved among these elements is insufficient for comprehending the paradoxical complexities of compassion relations, or even properly understanding the implications (and limitations) of the Bhutanese model. Accordingly, to gain further insight on organizational compassion as a paradox to be transcended, we next consider the inherent complexity and tensions underlying the relationships between wisdom/compassion and power/compassion, as they have been implicitly and explicitly explored in organizational studies.

Wisdom/Compassion

In organizational studies wisdom is frequently juxtaposed with knowledge (Nonaka, Chia, Holt, & Peltokorpi, 2014). While the latter is deemed to refer to clear and unequivocal understanding of information, the former is seen as a more sophisticated construct, involving discerning judgment and appropriateness of action (Bierly III, Kessler, & Christensen, 2000). Wisdom accordingly implies an awareness of the limits of knowledge, an acknowledgement of what is not known (Nonaka et al., 2014). Where knowledge is confident and certain, wisdom is aware of its own ignorance (Weick, 2004). This conceptualization highlights that wisdom is an intrinsically paradoxical concept intertwined with its logical opposite, stupidity (ten Bos, 2007). Wisdom deployed as critical reflexivity is therefore seen as counterproductive in organizations focused on short-term efficiency and profit maximization (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

Of relevance here is the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, a value that has been discussed at great length within management and organizational studies (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram, 2012). *Phronesis* is practical wisdom or experienced discernment applied as good actions, or *praxis*, as a way of living; this is contrasted with *techne*, or technical or instrumental knowledge to be applied in *poiesis*, or production. In the Aristotelian view, both individual and social virtues further imply a consonance of wisdom

and feeling (Sokolon, 2007). These are intrinsically linked with the situatedness and un-generalizability of ethical judgment (Tsoukas & Cummings, 1997): moral decisions cannot be made while ignoring context, time, contingencies, emphasizing the centrality of action in any account of morality and wisdom.

The connection between action and emotion is that the latter typically triggers an impulse to act, as implied by the etymological connection between “emotion” and “movement” (Huy, 2012). There is another less obvious link between wisdom and action, however, stemming from performative epistemology (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Tsoukas, 2017). Specifically, wisdom is not about representing the objective, discrete properties of a separate reality, but rather “knowing is action. Agents bring the world forward by making distinctions and giving form to a collectively held, unarticulated background of understanding” (Tsoukas, 2017, p. 148). Purpose, affects, wisdom, knowledge, improvisation, discursive conditions all come together in practices constituted of “an array of ends, projects, uses (of things), and even emotions” (Schatzki, 2005, pp. 171-172). Aristotle’s philosophical intuition of the intertwinement of wisdom, cognition, and feelings has found a scientific confirmation both in cognitive psychology experimental research (see Kahneman, 2011 for a review) and in studies on emotional intelligence (Barrett, 2002; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Building on Aristotelian philosophy, Nussbaum (2003) portrays compassion as a rational process that involves the exercise of different “judgments” (p. 321), including: assessing the seriousness of the suffering (*judgment of size*); determining that the suffering was not derived from the sufferer’s personal fault (*judgment of nondesert*); the degree to which the predicament of the suffering person is identified as a condition that could be one’s own (*judgment of similar possibilities*); and the relevance of the suffering person for one’s own life goals and objectives (*eudemonic judgment*). This form of wisdom is clearly limited to the perspective of the “giver” of compassion. The importance of a relational wisdom is

instead invoked by Dutton et al. (2014) in developing Atkins and Parker's (2012) idea of compassion appraisals wherein "both the sufferer and the focal actor seek to comprehend the situation and their roles in relation to it and each other" (Dutton et al., 2014, p. 285). For the giver, this can involve both perspective-taking and appraising, two processes that have a moderating effect upon each other. Likewise, the past and future consequences of responding with compassion may be evaluated. For the receiver, this can include developing attributions regarding the giver's motives for providing support.

Wisdom is similarly invoked by Simpson, Clegg, et al. (2014b), who describe a process of mutual "assessment" in organizational compassion relations. People are judged as legitimate receiver(s) and giver(s) of compassion against four criteria. For the receiver of compassion, assessments center around whether or not the suffering person is: (1) responsible for their condition; (2) was aware of the danger or risks that lead to their suffering; (3) has the means to address their condition; and (4) whether or not the suffering is rooted in larger-scale systemic social or organizational factors. The more of these criteria that are met, the more legitimate a receiver's claim to compassion. For the giver of compassion, assessments center on whether or not: (1) profit is a motive in providing support; (2) there is a legitimate relationship with the receiver (either as a family member, colleague, or an authorized professional caregiver, police officer, etc., government department, or reputable NGO); (3) the receiver experiences positive outcomes as a result of the support; and/or, (4) whether or not the providing of support is tied to conditions that give the provider advantage and control over the receiver.

The relationship between wisdom and compassion is more nuanced and problematic than the relatively simple idea that emotion-triggered desires to prevent suffering should be tempered with wisdom (so that, for instance, a doctor is not deterred from administering a beneficial injection by the crying of child who fears the needle). It should be further noted,

however, that wisdom implies a context-specific value-based rationality, which – in a particular ideological and discursive setting – can lead to a total disregard for those sufferers seen as alien or undeserving. It is on basis of such implicit judgments that compassion-driven Bhutan can blatantly ignore the plight of its ethnic minorities.

Power/Compassion

While the most prominent view of power is the negative one, focusing on manipulation, coercion, domination, and constraint, power can also imply positive, generative implications of enabling, supporting, and facilitating. Among scholars the term “power” represents a multidimensional concept (Clegg & Haugaard, 2009). To account for this multidimensionality, the distinction between *power-to* (i.e., drawing attention to generative capacities) and *power-over* (i.e., highlighting repressive implications) has been proposed (Göhler, 2009). Stated differently, power is both as the capacity to enforce one’s will over others as well as the ability to achieve something in concert with others (Arendt, 1970). Since competing tensions are always present, however, power is rarely purely either of the two readings outlined above. Power is therefore better described as an ongoing process, rather than a final outcome (Clegg, 2009).

Organized action requires some form of constraint on individual action, and power can also manifest as shifting control from management to employees—specifically, in the form of empowerment. Power in organizations is thus another inherently paradoxical phenomenon: it is not possible to harness its generative, enabling, and transformative potential without invoking its “oppressive” controlling implications. Even the cooperation of free agents in maintaining a sustainable common is predicated on some forms of individual control and enforcement (Ostrom, 1990).

The tension between *power-over* (the beneficiary) and *power-to* (help) is particularly evident in the practice of compassion. A giver of compassionate support may, purposefully or

not, both support and encourage, but also patronize or belittle a receiver when addressing their vulnerabilities (Clark, 1987, 1997). The support may further be offered with the aim of alleviating suffering, but also engendering a sense of obligation and indebtedness in the receiver, as well as for enhancing the giver's own public image, or possibly for soliciting public funds (Richter & Norman, 2010). In caring for those who suffer the giver may, consciously or not, engender a sense of diminished agency as dependency, obligation, indebtedness, and even emotional enslavement (Stirrat & Henkel, 1997; Szasz, 1998). Furthermore, the giving of compassion may arise not just from the giver's sense of personal strength and fortitude, but also from their own personal weakness or insecurity. The co-existence of multiple agencies may also "misguide" feelings of compassion: for instance, in his famous obedience experiments, Milgram (1975) observed that "compassion on the part of the subject, an unwillingness to 'hurt' the experimenter's feelings" (p.151) was one of the forces that led participants to obey orders despite the apparent suffering they were causing to others.

The receiver can also experience paradoxes of power in compassion: the exceptionalism that characterizes compassion—whereby an individual or group is singled out for special care and attention—can cause distress on account of the envy and jealousy experienced from the receiver's peer group (Crisp, 2003; Frost et al., 2006). The gratitude felt towards the giver can also be coupled with feelings of resentment and personal shame, along with diminished sense of self-confidence, courage, self-trust, and healthy pride (Lupton, 2011). Depending on others for compassionate support can also lead to the development of a victim mentality, with a diminished sense of personal agency and responsibility for one's own personal wellbeing and happiness (Olasky, 1995).

Bhutanese practices of compassion reflect these dynamics. The depiction of fiery-eyed, dark-complexioned *Chana Dorjee*, carrying his *Vajra* and surrounded by fires, indicates the

active but also potentially destructive nature of power. Depicted alongside compassion, there is recognition that, without power, compassion becomes idle, but when power is out of control, compassion too is lost.

The tension between power-to and power-over, however, is not the only element of complexity characterizing the phenomenon of power in compassion relations. Power is not merely an explicit outcome of detectable action, but can also be expressed systemically to implicitly shape people's attitudes, values, and beliefs (Lukes, 1974). Or—even more radically—it can define the taken-for-granted principles that guide cognition and social life, as a form of power/knowledge producing and maintaining an overarching regime of truth (Foucault, 1984). Forms of soft domination are accordingly always at play, even in the case of “empowered organizational members” exercising self-discipline, conducting them towards self-exploitation (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). This “systemic” form of domination is embedded both in organizational structures, such as processes and hierarchies, and in broader forces transversal to society, such as institutional norms and technologies (Clegg, 1989). From this perspective, compassion (as an institutionally codified social practice, as in the case of Bhutan) can turn into an invisible mode of systemic power both enabling and constraining human agency.

Organized compassion relations, both at the macro social level and at the meso level of specific organizational practices, frame the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and values of individuals towards caring and supporting for others in times of suffering, so that “the process of compassion organizing unfolds through the complex interaction of social architecture and human agency over time” (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006, p. 74). Of relevance here is Bhutan's compassion inspired GNH policies. While beneficial in many ways, as a mode of systemic power, there are also inherent negative implications as discussed earlier. The GHN accordingly represents an oversight in state policy informed by the virtue

of compassion that additionally acts as negative systemic domination power. A further example of systemic power informing compassion relations with negative effects is explored by Simpson et al. (2014) in their study of the Magdalene asylums that operated as “shelters” for girls being blamed for social degradation in Irish society (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen, 2013). This case, apparently initiated with compassionate intentions, where “compassionate” support was imposed as government and organizational policy, has been described as an example of a “total institution” (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006, p. 143).

Systemic power expressed as materiality and embedded into built spaces (Dale & Burrell, 2008) is also relevant to organized compassion, as illustrated in the *Dzong*. The holistic corporeal experience of walking into a *Dzong* immerses the senses and the reason in learning about the complex and intertwined nature of compassion by observing paintings and sculptures. Use of material artefacts in illiterate society has been explored in linguistic studies, which have shown how physical artefacts, with their combination of symbolism and materiality, complement oral communication in complex social interactions (Enderwitz & Sauer, 2015). Through engagement with a specific material assemblage (the *Dzong*, together with its constituents: architectural forms, iconography, ritual performances, occupants, etc.), the complex socio-material practice of compassion can be taught and reproduced according to institutionally accepted forms. Consequently, both the practice of compassion and its symbolic celebration become “functional” in maintaining a recognized social order—paradoxically acting as both a supporting and as a constraining force in relation to individual freedoms.

Organizational Applications: Transcending Bhutanese Transcendence

Strengths and weaknesses in the Bhutanese approach to transcending the paradoxical tensions of compassion have been considered thus far. We next seek to identify an approach that; while recognizing inherent tensions of compassion, wisdom and power; acknowledges

additional nested contradictions inherent to the notion of wisdom (the relativism and context dependence of judgment) and power (the existence of various forms of domination). We hold that awareness of this complexity, connecting different aspects of human experience and accepting the recursive nature of social relationships (Tsoukas, 2017), is essential for positive transcendence of the multiple paradoxes inherent to the compassion/power/wisdom triad.

Beyond Formulaic Wisdom

Nussbaum's (2003) judgements, Dutton et al.'s (2014) relational appraisals, and Simpson et al.'s (2014b) legitimacy assessments discussed earlier underscore the importance of wise judgement in the practice of compassion, while highlighting the importance of considering the compassion as a mutual relationship. More than a one-sided internal emotional response, compassion is reframed as a social relational process that gives wise consideration to the specific conditions of the "Other." For philosopher Levinas (1988, 2003), such consideration of the Other is the basis of ethics and mature philosophy. Rather than viewing philosophy as the "love of wisdom," the literal meaning of the Greek words *philo* ("wisdom") *sophia* ("love"), Emmanuel Levinas (1981) described philosophy as the "wisdom of love" (p. 162). We propose that it would be beneficial for organizational theory to embrace not just compassion, but *wise* compassion—i.e. which makes salient the tensions of sentimentality and rationality, injustice with fairness and justice, and transcends them through the cultivation of compassion informed by wisdom that engages capabilities for both feeling and rationality (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

Compassion Informed by Power-to as Courage

Compassionate action relies on power-to as access to resources, both structural (i.e. finance, connections, technology, facilities, etc.) and internal – as *courage* (Kanov, Powley, & Walshe, 2016). Sociologist Clark (1997) found that, in instances where compassion is experienced as domination, receivers sometimes draw upon their power-to in asserting their dignity with “strength and courage” (p. 190) by refusing the support, or accepting it on their own terms and conditions.

For the giver of compassion in organizational settings, courage is typically associated with relational power imbalances, manifesting in actions that threaten relationships with more powerful individuals (Koerner, 2014). In social contexts characterized by a prominence of power abuse upheld by systemic power that normalizes social relations as taken for granted, compassionate action can involve challenging existing inequities, placing the giver of compassion at risk, and necessitating a great deal of personal courage. That compassion requires courage is also demonstrated by the famous *bystander effect*, where the likelihood of an individual helping a person in an emergency decreases as the number of bystanders increases (Darley & Latane, 1968). Bucking the trend by responding differently from everyone else takes courage, as it is an inherent human characteristic to seek social acceptance.

Nietzsche (1968, pp. 198-199) may have been referring to courageous compassion when, after criticizing the status quo of compassion relations, he highlighted a higher compassion: the “*more manly* brother of compassion” (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 79), a compassion of strength. For Nietzsche (2002, p. 67), such compassion is expressed at an emotional distance. According to Cartwright (1984), distance spares the recipient of compassion the humiliation of knowing that they are the object of someone’s charity, thereby preserving their dignity by protecting them from developing a sense of dependency. Distance also allows the giver anonymity, eliminating the weakness of egotistical pride and bragging and minimizing

sentimental attachments (Pullen & Simpson, 2009). Swanton (2011) argues that Nietzsche advocates a mature generosity that contrasts with the vices of unhealthy compassion rooted in selfishness and self-sacrificing charity. A related idea is that a person must have the courage to withdraw compassionate support when s/he knows it is unsustainable, or has become overly emotional and might lead to further distress for all involved (Lilius et al., 2011). Accordingly, power-to as courage is relevant both to giving or refusing to give support as well as in receiving or refusing to accept support offered (Simpson, Clegg, & Pina e Cunha, 2013; Simpson, Clegg, et al., 2014b). Compassion that relies on courage—to respond, withdraw, receive or refuse—helps with transcending compassionate support that looks and feels too much like domination (see Table 3).

 Insert Table 3 about here

Conclusions

The central thesis of this essay, drawn from our analysis of compassion-informed practice and governance in Bhutan and a dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophical and research traditions, is that focalizing the inherent tensions of compassion can support transcendence through the strategic cultivation of complementary virtues, such as wisdom and power, in all their multidimensionality. Recognition of the wisdom-power-compassion triad suggests that organized compassion must be conceptualized as inherently tension laden, with the ongoing potential for virtuous compassionate action to be paralyzed by vices of sentimentalism and domination. The case of Bhutan both illustrates how paradoxes can be transcended through a coherent series of social practices and also how, despite successes in many areas, compassion nonetheless continues to falter and fail in others. Bhutanese society's capability of consistently performing compassion demonstrates the

effectiveness of incorporating integrated social practices and material artefacts in making compassion tensions salient, providing concrete ways for balancing the tensions, and creating a discursive setting that enables legitimate compassionate action. Simultaneously, Bhutanese compassion can also be viewed as built on exclusionary and oppressive practices, that come with added costs of social stagnation and isolation. Even the imperfect nature of this benchmark, however, helps reveal a way forward for organizational compassion—namely, the cultivation of a complex view of compassion informed by a phronetic sensibility to the need for maintaining awareness of power effects and judgment pitfalls. The resulting wise compassion, deployed with the support of generative power, takes the form of courageous action. It is this transcendent wise and courageous compassion that will most benefit individuals, organizations, and society more broadly. While wise compassion is mostly courageously enacted at the individual level, all responsibility should not fall upon the individual. Instead, it needs to be supported and legitimized by structures of power at the organizational and societal levels. Providing a work environment where employees feel psychologically safe to courageously challenge the status quo (Cunha et al., 2018; A. Edmondson, 1999; A. C. Edmondson, 1996) and take extraordinary measures to compassionately support a suffering colleague is another way that systemic power-over can be deployed as power-to (Kanov et al., 2016). Additional systemic organizational factors in the form of compassion competencies and aspects of social architecture have been identified in research as facilitative of workplace compassion relations (Dutton et al., 2006; Worline & Dutton, 2017).

We end this essay by reiterating that, in transcendence, there is no end. As highlighted by our model (see Figure 2), which can be generalized as a heuristic tool for investigating any organizational paradox transcendence process, transcendence is an ongoing practical achievement. Given that tensions are inherent to organization where “competing demands

cannot be resolved but rather continually resurface” (Smith et al., 2017, p. 307), the transcendence of organizational compassion tensions should be approached as an ongoing accomplishment. Each day the tensions will present themselves, providing opportunity to make them salient and deploy cognitive, discursive, and socio-material transcendence strategies to enact wise compassion courageously supported by generative power-to, both systemic and individual.

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