Compassion as sociomaterial practice imbued with power:

insights from the Buthanese Buddhist tradition

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Abstract

Since the turn of the century, compassion has emerged as a focus of serious academic theorizing in organizational studies (for overviews see Lilius et al. 2012; Rynes et al. 2012; Dutton, Workman & Hardin 2014; Simpson, Clegg & Pitsis 2014a). Compassion has been defined by Dutton et al. (2014, p. 277) as "an interpersonal process involving noticing, feeling, sensemaking, and acting that alleviates the suffering of another person". However, focusing on the positive aspects of organizational compassion glosses over an extensive body of work in philosophy, literature and academic research that highlights the limits of compassion as a complex social relational process (Dutton et al. 2014). Compassion is a response to be measured against circumstances.

Journeying East to the State of Bhutan where the virtue of compassion has traditionally been upheld as essential in informing virtuous governance, it is understood that compassion, or loving kindness, must be tempered with wisdom and power. In this paper we invoke a dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophy and cultural analysis and Bhutanese iconography as well as science to open the 'back box' of compassion in organized settings, showing it as a complex social relational process, and deconstructing its relationship with power. Inspired by

the Aristotelian view that wisdom is inextricably linked to action and context, we propose to develop a praxiological approach (Tsoukas 1994, 2017) to compassion, conceptualising it as a social practice that incorporates cognition in action through the mediation of embodied feelings.

The case of Buthan inspire two reflections on the social practice of compassion which bridge the apparent gap between individual embodied experience and social symbolic practices, pointing at both intrinsic and extrinsic connections to materiality. On one hand it suggests to conceptualize compassion a socio-material practice involving cognitive, embodied and performative elements, while highlighting the role played by power in shaping all three aspects. In addition to empowering action, power/knowledge effects are central to the processes of 'legitimation' of compassion (Simpson, Clegg & Pitsis 2014b), since they shape sensemaking that determine recognition of suffering. Also feelings are mediated by the social: compassion is felt for equals, in contrast to the 'pity' offered to subordinates (Hochschild 1983), which makes compassion constitutive of a social identity that emerges through processes of group categorization, identification and comparison (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel & Turner 2004).

On the other hand, the role of the monastery fortresses (*Dzong*) points at the role of material artefacts and corporal experience in conveying the complexity of this social practice Through the bodily engagement with a specific material assemblage (including architectural forms, iconography, ritual performances, occupants, etcetera) irreducible complexity of the sociomaterial practice of compassion can be taught and reproduced according to institutionally accepted forms. This way both the practice of compassion and its symbolic celebration become 'functional' to maintain a recognized social order.

The purpose of our critical deconstruction is not to negate the relevance of compassionate action but to unveil the specific 'logics of virtue'. The intent is to raise awareness of how compassion is shaped by discursive conditions and cultural values, while at the same time reflecting on the action that can be done to promote truly compassionate organizations.

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