

Understanding and Watering the Seeds of Compassion

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The authors call for a broad agenda to create comprehensive models and research on the development and promotion of empathy and compassion. This wish would lead to a new level of developmental/ecological understanding of the growth of compassion as well as effective policies and practices and interventions that nurture caring, compassion, and service to others in our schools and communities. The authors define *empathy* and *compassion*, briefly discuss the outline of early developmental processes, and call for basic research on these essential aspects of human development. The authors conclude by discussing the need to develop new ways to promote empathy and compassion in families, schools and communities. 5
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Our wish is for a life-span developmental psychology to make greater contributions to building a compassionate world society. This calls for a broad agenda to create comprehensive models and research on the development and promotion of emotional awareness, empathy, and compassion. The practical outcome of such a comprehensive program would include (1) clearer developmental/ecological models of the growth of compassion; (2) effective policies, programs, and practices that support the development of caring, compassion, and service to others in our schools and communities; and (3) children, youth, and adults who show greater service to others as well as caring about the preservation of the earth's ecology. Here we define *empathy* and *compassion*, briefly discuss the outline of early developmental processes, and call for basic research on these essential aspects of human development. We conclude by discussing the need to develop new ways to promote empathy and compassion in families, schools, and communities. 15
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This wish is guided by the conviction that empathy and compassion are core dimensions of human nature that can be nurtured. Further, when nurtured they will enhance one's personal growth and health as well as the health and well-being of others and the quality of the natural, physical environment. Awareness, empathy, and compassion contribute to personal well-being and interpersonal experiences that nurture secure, authentic, and life-enhancing relationships. Thus, promoting these qualities in caregivers (parents, teachers) and children and youth, themselves, is essential to promoting child well-being, strengthening families, building cohesive communities, and caring for the environment. This is especially important given the increasing experience of the global interdependence of the human condition and the downsides of the ubiquitous modern narratives of global warming, environmental degradation, and terrorism. 25
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Over the past decade, research on understanding and nurturing well-being has advanced. Nurturing mindfulness, equanimity, and compassion can lead individuals to experience everyday life as less stressful and more harmonious. Interventions that nurture these abilities have shown promise for reducing an array of psychological problems including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and other health outcomes (Mind & Life Research Network, 2012). Such interventions also have reduced negative physical responses to stress including immune system function (Davidson et al., 2003). They have also been shown to increase focus and attention as assessed by directly observing brain activity (Holzel et al., 2011). Further, nurturing awareness, empathy, and compassion has the potential to improve the quality of our relationships. Although substantial attention has been focused on understanding and promoting compassion in adults, there has been less focus on children and youth or the cultivation of these attributes in the early and most malleable stages of development (Greenberg & Harris, 2012).

DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESSES RELATED TO EMPATHY AND COMPASSION 45

Defining Empathy

The study of empathy in human development has received considerable attention. *Empathy* can be defined as an affective response that is experienced as similar to that of what another person is feeling or might feel (Decety & Jackson, 2006). Although some theorists reserve the term *empathy* for experience in which one is experiencing the feelings of others and also recognizes that the self and other are different, others have included general emotional contagion as a primitive developmental form of empathy. There is substantial evidence that empathy can lead to either emotional overarousal—a feeling of being flooded with the uncomfortable or painful emotions experienced by another or feeling of sympathy toward others. If this emotional overarousal leads to feelings of personal distress it can lead to avoidance rather than prosocial action. Thus, depending on one’s experience of empathy it can lead to either prosocial/compassionate actions or to self-protection (Batson, 1991). In a series of landmark studies, Eisenberg and her colleagues (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006) have found that when empathy leads to feeling sympathy toward another, children and adults are more likely to show prosocial or caring actions.

There is clear consensus that empathy has a biological basis and that children experience a simple form of empathic reactions in the first year of life. Hoffman (1982) noted that in these earliest experiences of empathy/sympathy the young child does not clearly differentiate another’s distress from his or her own, and thus the infant experiences self-related distress as part of empathy. From age 18 to 36 months there is developmental growth in the toddler’s affective and cognitive aspects of empathic reactions to the experience of pain of others. As preschool children develop the ability to take the perspective of another, children are increasingly able to experience sympathy that likely involves the right inferior parietal cortex and prefrontal areas (Decety & Jackson, 2006).

The ability to take the perspective of others marks the broader involvement of cognitive processes in experiences and understanding empathy as well as motivations and choices regarding prosocial actions. Further, beginning in the preschool years, the development of self-regulatory functions (executive abilities) allow for the child to use newly acquired cognitive abilities to regulate emotions felt when highly aroused by experiencing painful emotions of others.

Developmental models to date have highlighted the cognitive components of intersubjective understanding including the need to comprehend the other's state, the differentiation between self and other, the affective component of empathy, and the importance of regulatory processes in empathy-related responding (Eisenberg et al., 2006). 75

Individual Differences in Empathy

In addition to the developmental changes, there are clear individual dispositional differences in empathic responding and prosocial action. Further, it is clear that the nature of early parenting and home quality have a substantial influence on empathic arousal, self-regulation, and prosocial responding. Parents who are responsive, authoritative, and use reasoning are more likely to have children who are empathic, whereas parents who are authoritarian and display strong negative affect (e.g., anger and high arousal) have children who are less likely to be rated by others as empathic. 80 85

Eisenberg and colleagues pioneering work has demonstrated that individual differences in self-regulatory control in children are related to individual differences in feelings of sympathy versus experiencing personal distress (Taylor, Eisenberg, & Spinrad, 2015). Research indicates that feeling sympathy primes the use of other-oriented moral cognitions and is predictive of prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior emerges when children have the skills (guided practice), opportunities to practice the skills, and have role models that recognize and honor these actions. Thus, affective awareness, a caring and sensitive environment, as well as the development of self-regulatory-skills are likely to affect the developmental trajectories of caring in children and adolescents. 90

Defining Compassion

Compassion can be described as having two main components: the affective feeling of caring for one who is suffering, and the motivation to relieve suffering. Thus, it has a close relationship to the affective states of empathy and sympathy, but most distinctively, it also includes the intention to attempt to relieve suffering. *Compassion* has been defined in various ways in the field of psychology (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010; Siegel & Germer, 2012). It has been defined as a feeling ("I am feeling compassion"), as a mood, as a state of motivation (see Gilbert & Choden, 2014), and as actions ("He behaved compassionately"). It is likely that compassion emerges from a complex integration of motives, emotions, and competencies/skills as noted by Halifax (2012). Although prosocial behavior (being kind, volunteering, helping others) can result from various motivations (i.e., building a positive self-image, being recognized by others, avoiding guilty feelings, etc.), compassion is motivated by the desire to relieve suffering and is not seen as motivated by recognition or reward from self or others; it is done purely for its own sake. Although Singer and colleagues have shown that though empathy training alone (e.g., training focused on feeling the suffering of others) can lead to higher rates of negative affect, compassion training which explicitly include the desire to relieve suffering reverses this negative affect and increases positive affect. In addition, Singer and colleagues have shown that entirely different cortical networks are engaged during empathy versus compassion (Klimecki, Leiberg, Ricard, & Singer, 2014). Understanding the developmental maturation of these two networks and their 100 105 110

correspondence with first-person experience will be a substantial interdisciplinary task for social developmental and neuroscientists. 115

Halifax (2012) provided a useful heuristic theory that contextualizes compassion as an emergent process that is grounded in a number of interrelated attentional, affective, and cognitive processes that allow an individual to respond compassionately in a manner that is embedded in a particular social, ethical, and political context. She elaborated three axis or dimensions that have their own developmental progression and that create this emergent process. The first dimension includes attentional and affective balance. Attentional balance is characterized by a nonjudgmental attitude wherein attention is stable and able to maintain focus (i.e., nonreactive). Affective balance includes the development of kindness and equanimity. Kindness can be seen as a tendency or disposition to be genuinely concerned for others. Equanimity provides mental stability that provides a base to support kindness (without being overwhelmed by personal distress as discussed above). As elaborated by Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, and Finkel (2008), positive emotions can broaden the attentional base to allow more effective thoughts and actions. Thus, by cultivating positive and prosocial mental qualities one improves attention and mental fitness. 120 125

The second dimension includes the cognitive dimensions of intention and insight that operate in accord with attentional and emotional balance. Cognitive control allows access to memory and the ability to regulate emotion (reappraisal and down-regulation) and thought. It allows attunement or perspective taking that facilitates understanding the mental experience of another and supports differentiation of self and other in which autonomy is preserved in empathy-inducing situations. This domain also includes cognitive-moral thought that allows the discernment of moral issues and the ability to have insight and clarity. Finally, this domain includes intention or motivation, which is related to enactment of moral behavior. The ability to listen mindfully with clarity and caring as taught to teachers in the Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) model requires both of the first two dimensions (Jennings, Frank, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2013). 130 135

The third domain consists of physical embodiment. This includes the experiential or felt sense of the other's suffering that is interoceptive and primes the body and mind for an empathic reaction. This embodiment also includes a dispositional readiness to act, which is integrated with the other two dimensions and leads to contextually engaged thought and action. Halifax's (2012) model is unique in capturing the multidimension and emergent qualities of compassion. This broad conceptual model provides a blueprint that requires further developmental consideration. 140 145

Halifax (2012) provides a secular model, but one that can accommodate the further definitional complexity of the term *compassion* as it is a term used in various historical religious domains. In the Judeo/Christian tradition as "love thy neighbor as thyself" and in the Buddhist tradition as one of the "four immeasurables" that is a mental power that serves as the basis for powerful meditative insight (see Makransky (2012) for variations within Buddhist traditions). The various religious traditions prize compassion as the ability to see the other as the same as oneself; to see past outward appearances or race, gender, culture, age, and other categories; to understand the fundamental similarity of all beings; and understand that suffering and the relief of suffering is a central component of human existence. In a secular manner, compassion can be seen as encoded in the deep layers of meaning of the "Golden Rule" that is universal, at least within cultures (if not extended to other cultures), and is central to our work in promoting social and emotional learning (Kusché & Greenberg, 2012). 150 155

Finally, there is a growing literature on the need and therapeutic approach of nurturing greater self-compassion (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Compassion for oneself has been shown to mediate improved emotion regulation processes that support compassion towards others (Holzel et al., 2011). Developing self-compassion maybe particularly important for persons suffering from trauma, depression, and anxiety. 160

VISION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our broad challenge to the next generation of developmentalists is to understand with greater clarity the developmental course and integration of these dimensions as they are embedded in different cultural contexts. To do this, there are a few central questions. 165

First, how does the complex combination of skills necessary for empathy and prosocial behavior and motivation for compassion develop? This will require careful measurement of early family, school, other caregivers, and peer interactions across development. A central issue here is to understand the development of prosocial behaviors that are motivated by true compassion, and not based on future rewards. It also will be important to investigate how the experience of caring by children can be recognized and nurtured by adults in a manner that creates mental clarity and motivation; an attitude of gratitude for the opportunity to care for others? 170

A second challenge is to understand how preventive interventions and policies in schools and communities can facilitate compassion and the attendant prosocial attitudes and behavior. This challenge includes testing new ideas for supporting compassionate behavior in teachers (and parents) as well as creating caring classroom and school environments. In the teen years, further study and innovation in “service-learning” experiences may be an excellent means to nurture a compassion and contribution to “the commons” (Flanagan & Galloway, 2014). In adulthood, we need further understanding of how varying volunteer experiences can further support compassionate feelings and actions. In a world of divisions from the classroom to neighborhood to the country, can carefully prepared experiences lead to the softening of in-group versus out-group perceptions and thus lessen bullying, aggression, and other forms of fear and hatred toward those that appear different? It is our belief that integrating social and emotional learning (SEL), systems thinking, and mindfulness can be a scaffold that supports this appreciation across the life span (Goleman & Senge, 2014). 175 180 185

A third challenge is to take an even broader view of compassion and understand the conditions that can nurture a greater appreciation for the interdependence of all beings. Facilitating such appreciation and action could support environmental actions that deepen our commitment and caring for the natural environment. Such actions could be powerful influences on preservations of our forests, wildlife, and act to reduce global warming and environmental degradation. This long-term systems reflection was central to the “Great Law of the Iroquois” that encourages one to think seven generations ahead (about 140 years into the future) and decide whether the decisions they make today would benefit their children seven generations into the future. 190

Finally, the fourth challenge will be to develop valid assessments of compassionate states of mind, attitudes, and behavior. This will require conceptually-driven models of measurement that are triangulated by multiple methods including self-report, the reports of others, the use of hypothetical vignettes, observations of naturalistic behavior, observations in reaction to interpersonal social task performance, the use of neuro-economic tasks, and qualitative first-person 195

reports of experience. In some cases, multilevel models of assessments that include neural and psycho-physiological levels may help to better triangulate these concepts. 200

We believe that promoting secular, universal interventions focused on social and emotional learning, mindfulness and compassion with families, teachers and youth in classrooms and community centers provide numerous intervention opportunities. Elsewhere we have elaborated on how nurturing the interpersonal aspects of mindfulness with parents (Coatsworth et al., 2014, 2015) and teachers (Jennings et al., 2013) can facilitate caring and compassion. Nurturing these intra- and interpersonal skills can provide the opportunity to reach beyond our individual finite existences to help direct the chain of cause and effect toward beneficial outcomes that transcend the limits of our own present condition. Such practices as loving kindness (Fredrickson et al., 2008), *tong-len* (“giving and receiving”; Jinpa, 2010), and “just like me” (Broderick, 2013) have already shown preliminary promise. However, we emphasize the importance of utilizing secular principles that can lead this work to be effective across many cultural contexts. Here we offer some preliminary thoughts about secular principles and practices that may contribute to developing a common framework for such interventions (Greenberg & Mitra, 2015). These include: 210 215

- create learning contexts that support inquiry into the causes of suffering
- skillfully examining the grounds of human motivations and intentions
- removing the hindrances and obstacles to safe, health and truly democratic modes for organizing human communities
- employing practices that enhance human potential for prosocial behavior by taking other’s perspective 220
- leading with the premise that people are more alike than different, yet mindfully exploring, recognizing and honoring differences
- cultivating of nonaggression and peaceful modes of action
- developing mutual tolerance and respect for all cultures and faiths 225
- supporting prosocial action (volunteer, giving) that is based on compassionate motivation.

This broad agenda for action requires support from the earlier mentioned careful developmental study of empathy and compassion at multiple levels of analysis. Such study will guide the use of developmentally, culturally, and contextually appropriate models of instruction and support. We believe that this wish provides a strong scientific agenda for human development as well as opportunity for our field to make new, substantial contributions to the human condition. 230

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