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Compassion Predictors in Undergraduates:

A Catholic College Example

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Abstract

Compassion is sorely needed in contemporary society including within faith based colleges. Past research has examined the prevention of compassion fatigue in healthcare professions, but relatively little research exists on the predictors of compassion, particularly among student populations. This study examines the factors associated with higher compassion levels in graduating college seniors revealing demographic, experiential, and belief-related factors contributing to compassion. Results suggest that the general profile of a highly compassionate graduating college senior is a student who is female, politically liberal, religious, studying the natural or social sciences, actively involved in community service or volunteering, and who has undergone workshops on racial/cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Keywords: Compassion, college students, Catholic higher education

Compassion, defined as ‘being moved by another’s suffering and wanting to help’ (Lazarus 1991, p. 289), is considered a desirable human trait and has been advocated for in religious and spiritual development for centuries. Altruism, a value closely related to compassion (Smith, 2009), is thought to have evolutionary roots because of its social desirability in groups and strengthening of maternal instincts (Darwin, 1871). Sober and Wilson (1998) found that groups with more altruists ultimately fair better than groups with fewer altruists.

Yet, what makes a person compassionate? Are there certain qualities or traits that inherently predispose a person to become compassionate? Are there activities or experiences that cultivate compassion? Compassion has been traditionally reserved for parental and religious education; however, a developing trend to include compassion-related curriculum in the higher education system suggests compassion is an integral part of education in general (Campus Compact, 2012). Interestingly, most research exploring compassion education concerns the training of nurses, physicians, and other healthcare professionals (Shih, Hu, Lee, Yao, Chen, & Chiu, 2013; Horsburg & Ross, 2013), and ‘compassion fatigue,’ the burn-out of compassion, is a more commonly researched topic than its predictors (Stewart, 2012; Thomas, 2013). Research on the cultivation of compassion in undergraduate education is scarce.

The college years are transformative for human growth and development. Feldman and Newcomb (1969) demonstrated that higher education has a significant and lasting impact on a person’s values, attitudes, and beliefs. Pascarella and Ternezini (1991) examined the long-term effects of higher education—the lasting attitudes, beliefs, and activities of students several years after graduating. In addition to impacting future earnings and employment, a college education affects a student’s cognitive, moral, and psychosocial characteristics alongside attitude and value

formation. College is, therefore, an ideal time to focus on nurturing compassion. According to Smola and Sutton (2002), Generation Y is expected to be the first socially active generation since the 1960's, with compassion as its backbone.

Due to the increasing interest in the nature of one's moral education rather than solely academic development, many universities are experimenting with a 'service learning' component in their curriculum. Service learning, or community service learning (CSL) is broadly defined as allowing 'students to gain a greater understanding of concepts while they contribute to their communities' (Billig, 2000, p. 658). CSL can lead students to become engaged citizens, grow in compassion, develop greater sensitivity, increase their awareness and understanding of social problems, instill a commitment to making the world a better place, and in some cases, demonstrate increased moral reasoning abilities (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008; Gorman, Duffy, & Heffenan, 1994). While the evidence for a link between CSL and increase moral reasoning is mixed, CSL tends to force students to confront moral issues and is therefore an effective tool in moral development (Rest & Narvaez, 1991).

There is also evidence that CSL increases participants' feelings of compassion and empathy. Bernacki et al. (2008) reported that service learning participants found their combined coursework and service-learning experience provided them with an enhanced ability to be more compassionate compared with those who did not participate in such a course. Jones and Hill (2001) and Jones and Abes (2004) have also documented the potential of CSL to increase empathy and compassion in participants. In 2009, Plante, Lackey, & Jeong Yeon found that students who participated in CSL showed an increase in compassion compared to students who did not participate, using the Compassion Love Scale (Sprecher, & Fehr, 2005). Hwang, Plante, & Lackey (2008) developed an abbreviated version of this 21-question, seven point Likert scale,

which is used in this current study. CSL may offer a unique opportunity for people to bridge the gap between themselves and others, effectively re-categorizing people who seemed to be different from themselves as similar. An increase in perceived self-other similarity results in increased compassion, particularly when self-other similarity involves those who are weak or vulnerable (Oveis, Horberg, & Keltner, 2010).

In a recent study exploring the link between spirituality, altruism, and compassion, (Saslow, John, Piff, Willer, Impett, Kogan, et al., 2013) found that individuals who identify as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious' tend to be more altruistic and that compassion mediates this relationship. The Big Five Traits of Agreeableness, Openness, and Extroversion did not explain the relationship between spirituality and altruism, suggesting compassion plays a unique role in mediation. Historian, Karen Armstrong (2006), has long argued that compassion and empathy are the foundations of the world's religions, and the implications of Saslow et al. (2013) suggest there is an important relationship between spirituality and compassion. What is more, religiosity does not procure the same feelings of compassion as spirituality (Saslow et al., 2013). The feelings of compassion in religious individuals tend to be circumscribed to those in line with their personal values and not universally applied (Baston, Floyd, Meyer, & Winner, 1999). The development of compassion has distinctly different outcomes in religious versus spiritual individuals, and this link is further discussed in the study at hand.

Individual and cultural differences influence compassion, and there are some factors that predispose individuals to become more compassionate than others. For example, people of lower socioeconomic status have a tendency to be more other-oriented and feel greater compassion, which leads them to act more altruistically than their higher socioeconomic counterparts (Piff, Kraus, Cote, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010). Additionally, individuals that are spiritual have similar

tendencies to be other-oriented and feel compassion, which often leads to generosity even in situation where they do not personally benefit (Saslow et al., 2013). While increasing people's feelings of compassion might inspire them to volunteer, people who already consider themselves compassionate are more likely to volunteer and act on their compassionate feelings (Omoto, Malsch, & Barraza, 2009). Finally, there are some gender differences. In a study conducted at the University of San Diego, one researcher found that women are inherently more likely to increase in compassion than men; they are more predisposed to develop compassionate feelings, given the right circumstances (Lovette-Coyler, 2013).

In summary, there is evidence that spirituality and community-service learning play key roles in predicting compassion. There are certain characteristics in people that can support or hinder compassion such as their gender, level of spirituality, or lower socioeconomic status. It seems promising that the integration of CSL opportunities and the nurturing of spirituality in undergraduate education might be associated with more compassionate graduating seniors.

Research on compassion has explored the effects of burnout among nurses, psychologists, and other service-related professions; it has also explored the effects of volunteering and to a minimal extent, community-service learning. However, limited research exists examining compassion in higher education, and whether or not a link actually exists. The current study sought to further explore the possibility of a relationship between compassion and both relevant demographic and college activities in an undergraduate Catholic college setting. Are there programs or experiences universities can offer to increase compassion levels in its students? This study explores factors associated with high compassion scores in graduating college seniors. We hypothesized that based on previous research findings, that gender, community based learning and volunteer activities, spirituality and religious engagement,

multicultural awareness, and more other directed attitudes would be associated with higher levels of assessed compassion among college seniors.

Method

Participants

Data were collected anonymously from graduating college seniors ($N= 1706$, 608 male, 1098 female), ranging in age from 21-23. The university incentivized participants with early pick up of June commencement tickets. The majority of the sample was Caucasian (59.9%) and female (62.7%). However, the sample also included Asian/Pacific Islander (19.1%), Latino/Hispanic (14.8%), Other (4.8%), Native American/Alaskan (3.3%), and Black (2.9%) participants.

Measures

Data were extracted from 5 years (2009-2013) of the university's college senior survey, which is distributed to graduating seniors annually. The survey consisted of 56 total questions; only 20 of the items were used in analysis. The researchers selected the included questions due to their potential relevance to compassion, based on prior research. Participants completed questions about demographic data, political and social attitudes, and activity involvement during the college years, as well as the Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (SCBCS). The SCBCS is a 5-item measure designed to measure "compassion and its relation to pro-social behaviors" (p. 421). Items on the SCBCS were generated from Sprecher and Fehr's *Compassionate Love Scale* (2005) which seeks to measure altruistic love towards others. Items on the SCBCS are scored on a 7-point scale from 1 being "not at all true of me" to 7 being "very true of me." Sample items include, "When I hear about someone (a stranger) going through a difficult time, I feel a great deal of compassion for him or her" and "I tend to feel compassion for people, even though I do

not know them.” Research has found that the SCBCS has adequate reliability and validity as well (Plante & Mejia, 2016).

Procedure

The college senior survey data was stored in the university’s Institutional Research Department and accessed, with permission from the university’s Institutional Review Board, for analysis. All identifiable student information was removed including their names and university ID numbers, preserving their anonymity. Data were then analyzed using correlational, multiple regression, and ANOVA procedures.

Once variables correlating with compassion scores were identified, a step-wise regression analysis was performed to find the best-fit regression equation. The data were self-reported, and therefore, emphasis was placed on action-oriented variables rather than those asking about personal beliefs or feelings in the regression equation.

Results

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Results

Results indicate that women ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.99$), those who identify as politically liberal ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.05$), actively attend religious services ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.93$), frequently perform volunteer work ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.13$), have been exposed to diversity training ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.95$), and who have essential goals toward helping others in difficulty ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.88$) and participating in community action ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.88$) scored the highest on the compassion inventory scale while men ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.98$), those who identify as politically conservative ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.32$), do not attend religious services ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.04$), do not participate in community service ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.07$), frequently drank beer in college ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.98$), and have essential goals of being well-off financially ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.01$)

and seeking a profession with high income potential ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.05$) scored the lowest on the compassion inventory scale according to analysis of variance (ANOVA) analyses (all $p < .01$).

Correlational Results

Of the top fifteen variables most highly correlated with compassion scores, five were related to volunteering and community service such as ‘Goal: Helping others in difficulty’ ($R = 0.54$, $p < .01$), ‘Career Concern: Work for social change’ ($R = 0.50$, $p < .01$), and ‘Act: Performed community service for class’ ($R = 0.23$, $p < .01$). Four of the top fifteen variables were related to the tolerance and awareness of racial and cultural diversity such as ‘Ability to see from others’ perspective’ ($R = 0.29$, $p < .01$), ‘Ability to tolerate different beliefs’ ($R = 0.28$, $p < .01$), and ‘Attended a racial/cultural awareness workshop’ ($R = 0.22$, $p < .01$). Another three variables of the top fifteen were connected to religiosity and spirituality such as ‘Goal: Develop a meaningful philosophy of life’ ($R = 0.25$, $p < .01$), ‘Self-rating: Spirituality’ ($R = 0.23$, $p < .01$), and ‘Act: Attended a religious service in the past year’ ($R = 0.23$, $p < .01$).

[Insert Tables 1-2 About Here]

Multiple Regression Results

Correlational analysis was used to determine the variables most highly correlated with compassion and then a multiple regression analysis was performed, based on those variables, to determine the best-fit regression equation. To obtain a more objective measure of compassion, variables that were action-oriented rather than opinion based were prioritized to minimize the effects of demand characteristics. Approximately 40% of the variability in compassion scores can be predicted by the following five variables: gender, attended a religious service, attended a racial/cultural awareness workshop, performed community service as part of a class, and

identified political views. The model summary of the best-fit regression equation is reported in Table 3 ($R = 0.40$, $SE = 0.93$, $p < .01$).

[Insert Table 3 Here]

The findings of this study suggest that certain demographic factors such as gender, religious views, and political views predispose certain individuals to be more compassionate than others (see Tables 1-3). Results also reveal that college experiences and programs such as participation in community service and racial awareness workshops, cultivation of a spiritual life, and studying the natural or social sciences were associated with higher compassion scores in our regression analysis, while financial goals and partying behavior were associated with lower compassion scores (all $p < .01$).

Discussion

According to evolutionary theory, people are orientated toward altruistic behavior because it's considered more adaptable—communities could not survive without working together (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010). Additionally, current and past research demonstrate that compassionate people are happier, better adjusted, and moral citizens of the world (Smith, 2009). While there has been skepticism about teaching compassionate behavior through institutionalized education (Lovette-Coyler, 2013), our results indicate certain elements in higher education are associated with higher compassion scores.

There was a significant positive correlation between compassion scores and being female, identifying as politically liberal, participating in community service, participating in racial awareness workshops and other diversity training, and preparing for a service-oriented career like healthcare. These results suggest compassion may be connected to human-centered and service-oriented experiences (Shih, Hu, Lee, Yao, Chen, & Chiu, 2013).

One of the main predictors of higher compassion scores was community service and volunteering. This finding is in line with previous research, which suggests there are positive benefits to community service-learning (CSL). Just as Bernacki et al. (2008) reported that CSL increased students' feelings of empathy and compassion, we found that participation in community service, even to satisfy a class requirement, was associated with higher compassion scores. These results support the mission of programs like Campus Compact (2012) that aim to institutionalize volunteering and community action as part of an undergraduate college education.

The current study also supports the findings of Smola et al. (2002) that Generation Y is likely to be socially active in the future. In our sample, 44% of students listed the goal of participating in community action as 'very important' or 'essential' and 51% reported that working for social change was 'very important' or 'essential' to their career. Plante et al., (2009) established an earlier link between college students who participated in immersion trips involving CSL and higher compassion scores. In this study, students retained their measures of higher compassion scores in a three-month follow-up assessment. While this study is not longitudinal or causal like Plante et al., (2009), the fact that students reported community action and volunteering were important to their career plans and goals suggests there could be a lasting relationship between higher compassion scores and those interested in community service. This emerging relationship supports the conclusions of Pascarella et al. (1991) that the influence and lessons learned during the college years have staying power.

Another strong link was revealed between religiosity and/or spirituality and higher compassion scores. In our study, those who identified with a religion, regardless of tradition, tended to have significantly higher compassion scores than those who identified as having no

tradition affiliation. While Saslow et al. (2013) found that those who identify as ‘spiritual’ tend to be more compassionate than those who identify as ‘religious,’ our findings suggest this distinction may not be particularly important. In line with Armstrong’s (2006) ideas that compassion is the common factor in the world’s religions, our findings reveal that having *any* type of religious or spiritual practice is associated with higher compassion scores. Those who identified as religious or spiritual had significantly higher compassion scores than those who identified as secular. Additionally, those who attended a religious service, regardless if he or she identifies with a religion, tended to have higher compassion scores than those who never attended any religious gathering or service.

The current study revealed another pattern in higher compassion scores suggesting a connection may exist between compassion and participation in racial and cultural awareness workshops as well as exposure to a diversity of values, beliefs, and perspectives different from one’s own. Currently, very little exists in the literature on the association of compassion with exposure to diversity and different racial and/or cultural perspectives. However, Bernacki et al., (2008) found a link between CSL and the development of greater sensitivity and increased awareness and understanding of social problems among college students. While this programming does not explicitly involve racial and cultural awareness workshops like our data, there are similarities in the level of exposure to diverse perspectives in both workshops and CSL, particularly with marginalized populations. However, more research should be conducted to tease out whether or not exposure to diverse perspectives or the act of volunteering is driving the association with compassion scores in CSL. It is possible both contribute to higher scores, making the case for developing university-based racial/cultural awareness programs for students.

Our data not only revealed patterns for activities and opinions that are associated with compassion scores, but it also revealed areas that were associated with lower compassion scores. One particular trend was the connection between valuing monetary incentives and goals and lower compassion scores. Students who listed the goal of being very well-off financially as ‘very important’ or ‘essential’ were significantly less compassionate than those who said such a goal was ‘somewhat important’ or ‘not important.’ Additionally, students who responded that high income potential was ‘very important’ or ‘essential’ as a career concern tended to have significantly lower compassion scores than students who said it was ‘somewhat important’ or ‘not important.’ The relationship between financial values and altruistic values should be explored in more depth in future studies.

Another area that tended to correlate negatively with compassion scores was partying behavior. In general, the data revealed a trend that as the number of hours reported partying increased, correlated compassion scores tended to decrease. Additionally, people that reported drinking beer ‘frequently’ had significantly lower compassion scores than those who drank beer ‘occasionally’ or ‘not at all.’

There are several limitations of the current study. One such limitation is that correlative analysis was used, not allowing cause-effect conclusions to be drawn. No longitudinal or change-data was included. Furthermore, measurements were based on self-reports, and therefore, demand characteristics may lead to biased results. The sample was collected from a pool of graduating seniors from a private, Jesuit university, and therefore, generalizability cannot extend to other universities. Additionally, the sample was primarily Caucasian and female students, limiting generalizability further. There were approximately two females represented in the study for every male, making the sample narrow and poorly reflective of the general population.

Future research should examine compassion in more objective, observable ways and ideally be able to draw conclusions about cause-effect relationships. Creating more objective, behavioral measures of compassion would be a helpful addition to the literature. Future research should aim to include randomized trials and longitudinal models with follow-up data and pre and post assessment scores. Additionally, a broader range of universities (public, non-religious) should be included for results to be generalizable to more college students. Future research should target a more diverse participant pool that includes higher representation of males and ethnic minority groups.

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