Compassionate Leadership at Work: Cultivating Compassion by Reducing Uncertainty, Emphasizing Personal Well-being, and Aligning Compassionate Actions

by

Cristopher John Tietsort

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Elissa A. Adame, Co-Chair
Sarah J. Tracy, Co-Chair
Jess A. Alberts
Jennifer D. Nahrgang

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of leadership communication in cultivating compassion at work. To do so, this study utilizes positive deviance case selection and qualitative, semi-structured interviews to explore employees' experiences with highly compassionate leaders. These interviews allow insight into employees' perspectives on expressing suffering at work and experiences of compassionate communication from leaders. The findings of this study extend current understandings of compassion at work by highlighting the role of uncertainty to express suffering in limiting compassion, uncovering leadership communication behaviors that cultivate compassion, and illustrating dynamics that leaders navigate when reacting compassionately. Specifically, this study extends compassion theory by (1) demonstrating that uncertainty related to emotional disclosure limits employees' sharing of personal suffering, which shapes and limits compassion processes, (2) illustrating that individuals holding traditionally marginalized or minoritized identities face additional uncertainty related to expressing pain and suffering, (3) highlighting a relational orientation that emphasizes personal well-being as enabling the compassion processes, (4) outlining anticipatory compassion as a specific discursive move that conveys care and opens space to express specific pains and suffering, and (5) empirically illustrating three dialectical tensions that punctuate the dynamic interactions between leaders and employees when relating and (re)acting compassionately.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF TABLES x

LIST OF FIGURES xi

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION 1

Preview of Manuscript 4

2 COMPASSION THEORY AND SUFFERING AT WORK 7

Suffering 7

The Scope and Cost of Suffering at Work 9

The Impact of Compassion at Work 11

Conceptualizing Compassion at Work 13

3 LEADERSHIP: DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS 22

A Discursive Approach to Leadership 24

4 CULTIVATING COMPASSION IN CONTEXT 29

Contextual Influences on Compassion at Work 30

Communicating Emotion at Work 33

Leadership, Emotions, and Cultivating Compassion in Context 39

Connecting the Dots: Creating a Context for Compassion 41

5 METHODS AND PROCEDURES 44

Sampling and Recruitment 44

Participants 48

Interview Data 49

CHAPTER Page

Qualitative Interviews 50

Interview Guide 49

Analysis 51

Role and Self-Reflexivity 53

Coding Procedures 55

6 THE INHERENT UNCERTAINTY OF EXPRESSED SUFFERING AT WORK 59

Uncertainty Limits Expressed Suffering at Work 61

Professional Expectations Limit Expressed Suffering 61

Expectations from Past Work Experiences 62

Expectations from Leadership Dynamics 67

Expectations from the Organizational Context 70

Image Management Concerns Limit Expressed Suffering 72

Situational Factors Limit Expressed Suffering 77

Stigmatized Suffering and Image Management Concerns 77

Concerns about Suffering being Seen as Valid 79

Prolonged Suffering and Emerging Uncertainties 82

Uncertainty about Actions that could Alleviate Suffering 84

Individuals Holding Minoritized and Marginalized Identities Face Additional Uncertainties that Limit Expressed Suffering at Work 86

Suffering Stemming Directly from Minoritized Identities 87

Representing One's Group Limits Emotional Expression 99

CHAPTER Page

7 EMPHASIZING PERSONALL WELL-BEING AND CREATING SPACE FOR SUFFERING 103

Emphasizing Personal Well-Being at Work 107

Crafting Emotion Rules that Cultivate Compassion 114

Invite Personal and Emotional Disclosure 114

Leaders Express Personal Suffering 120

Honor Personal and Emotional Disclosure 124

Manage Work Challenges by Assuming Positive Intent 127

Anticipatory Compassion 131

8 DISCOVERING AND ENACTING COMPASSION: NAVIGATING DIALECTICAL TENSIONS 136

Defer to Employees Disclosure Preferences *and* Asking Probing Questions 137

Defer to Employees' Disclosure Preferences 138

Ask Probing Questions 143

Invite Requests for Help *and* Propose Potential Solutions 148

Invite Requests for Help 148

Propose Potential Solutions 151

Insist Employees Accept Solutions *and* Honor Employee Agency 158

Insist Employees Accept Solutions 159

Honor Employee Agency 164

9 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION 167

CHAPTER Page

Theoretical Implications 169

Uncertainty Related to Expressed Suffering Limits Compassion. 169

Employees Holding Traditionally Marginalized Identities Face Additional Uncertainty Related to Expressed Suffering at Work 172

Relational Contexts Which Emphasize Personal Well-Being Enable Compassion........ 175

Anticipatory Compassion Conveys Care and Creates Space to Express Suffering 179

Discovering and Enacting Compassion is Punctuated by Dialectical Tensions 182

Practical Implications........ 186

Craft Job Flexibility and Leave Policies 187

Critically Assess Cultural Assumptions and Policies that Limit Expression of Suffering at Work 188

Craft Organizational Feeling Rules to Welcome Personal and Emotional Disclosure 189

Limitations 191

Future Directions 193

Conclusion 196

REFERENCES 198

APPENDIX

A INTERVIEW GUIDE 208

APPENDIX Page

B CODEBOOK 214

C IRB APPROVAL LETTER 231

D CONSENT FORM 234

LIST OF TABLES

Table | Page

1. Overview of Conceptualizations of Compassion Processes 17

2. Leader Strategies for Crafting Employee Emotion Rules at Work 131

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1. Conceptual Model of Compassion Processes 19

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Suffering is a universal part of the human experience. People in the United States are increasingly lonely and isolated from each other, face rising levels of stress and anxiety, and experience far greater prevalence of mental illness than previous generations (Cigna, 2020). This suffering pervades work as well; organizational life is inherently emotional (Fineman, 2000, 2006; Tracy, 2008), and one cannot simply leave personal challenges at home. Work also creates suffering in its own right, as employees cite work as a direct cause of rising levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout across various industries (Deloitte, 2015).

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of these challenges, as people now face threats of sickness, heightened psychological stress from the ambiguous and constantly shifting landscape, and restrictions on social gatherings and support. The pandemic has caused tangible suffering for many, including unemployment numbers that are "literally off the charts" (Schwartz et al., 2020, para. 4) and the loss of loved ones to the virus. For those fortunate to still have jobs, work-from-home situations have also introduced new stressors (Hall et al., 2020), especially for working parents who now find their kids at home (Pinsker, 2020). As Jacob Stern (2020) notes in *The Atlantic*, this pandemic is a special form of "mental-health disaster" that is likely to have long-standing consequences.

In the face of such suffering, scholars have urged greater attention to understanding compassion at work (Frost, 1999; 2003). A growing body of evidence suggests that compassion in the face of suffering can have a profound positive impact.

Compassion has been shown to help individuals cope with suffering (Lilius et al., 2008), helping mitigate the nearly $75 billion lost each year due to grief at work (James et al., 2003) and alleviate negative emotional and physiological challenges associated with individual suffering (Dutton et al., 2014). Compassion has been shown to have relational and organizational benefits as well (Dutton et al., 2014), such as greater connection with others (Lilius et al., 2011) and increased organizational commitment (Grant et al., 2008). Collectively, compassion not only helps ease individual suffering at work but simultaneously yields relational and organizational benefits.

Although research has illuminated the process and value of compassion at work (Kanov et al., 2004; Miller, 2007: Way & Tracy, 2012), questions remain as to how we might best *cultivate* the practice of compassion across organizational life. Compassion research has been critiqued as overly idealistic (Simpson et al., 2014), resting on assumptions that suffering is readily expressed at work and that recognizing another's suffering reliably triggers compassion. Consequently, scholars remain puzzled as to why compassion unfolds readily in some organizations while faltering in others (Kanov et al., 2017).

This study explores the influence of leaders' communication on expressed suffering and compassion at work. Specifically, this investigation draws on compassion theory (Kanov et al., 2004; Miller, 2007; Huffman, 2017; Way & Tracy, 2012), the communication of emotions at work (Paul & Riforgiate, 2015; Riforgiate & Komarova, 2017; Scarduzio & Malvini Redden, 2015; Tracy & Malvini Redden, 2019), and discursive leadership (Fairhurst, 2007; 2010; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014) to explore employees experiences with compassionate leaders and illuminate how their messaging

and behaviors create space for the expression of suffering and communicate compassion at work. To date, little research has taken a discursive leadership perspective on compassion (cf. Daugherty, 2019), and few empirical studies have explicitly explored the role of leadership in shaping compassion at work (Dutton et al., 2014). Additionally, though scholars have theorized about the uncertainty related to expressing suffering at work (Kanov et al., 2017), we know little about the ways that leaders' communicative behaviors and messages shape employees' experience of compassion and willingness to express suffering at work.

Given the pervasiveness of suffering at work and compassion's positive impact, it would be valuable to better understand how we can cultivate greater workplace compassion. This study signifies an important contribution by documenting the ways leaders communicate compassion and how this compassionate communication shapes compassion processes for employees who are suffering. With regard to prior theory, this study empirically explores the role of leadership in shaping compassion processes (Dutton et al., 2014). Additionally, this study integrates discursive leadership and scholarship on the constitution of emotions at work with compassion research, which stand to uniquely illuminate challenges related to expressed suffering and compassionate communication. Practically, this research stands to document best practices of leaders' compassionate communication at work and illuminate how leaders can locally influence greater compassion. Understanding what these behaviors and messages look like *in practice* from the employee's perspective provides access to *how* leadership communication can create compassion at work.

Preview of Manuscript

This manuscript progresses as follows. Chapter One outlines the challenges of suffering in organizational life and the need to expand our current understanding of compassion at work. Chapter Two lays the foundation of this study by overviewing the scope of suffering at work, the positive impact of compassion, and the development of compassion theory within organizational studies. Chapter Three outlines the leadership perspective used within this study, including defining key terms and discussing *discursive* approach to leadership. Chapter Four shifts its focus to how compassion is *cultivated* at work, building on Chapter Two by discussing the contextual influences of compassion. To do this, I integrate scholarship from management with communication scholarship on the constitution of emotions at work to explore the ways leaders influence emotional feeling rules, expressed suffering, and compassion processes at work. This synthesis of literature leads to the primary research questions for this study. Then, Chapter Five details the methods and analysis used within this study, including (1) sampling and recruitment, (2) qualitative interviews, and (3) analytic procedures.

Chapters Six through Eight deliver key findings. In Chapter Six, I address RQ1: *What makes employees hesitate to share pain and suffering at work?* Findings reveal that employees face significant uncertainty about emotional expression due to a variety of factors. First, participants describe how (1) expectation of professionalism and (2) image management concerns are primary sources of uncertainty which limit their expression of suffering at work, as well as other situational sources of uncertainty, including stigmatized suffering (i.e., mental health), concerns about specific types of suffering being seen as valid, emerging uncertainty from prolonged suffering, and determining

what is appropriate to ask for to alleviate one's suffering. Secondly, my findings reveal that participants holding traditionally marginalized or minoritized identities faced additional uncertainties that limit their expression of suffering, including (1) uncertainty when expressing suffering that is directly tied to one's minoritized or marginalized identity, and (2) uncertainty about emotional expression tied to stereotypes and representations of one's minoritized or marginalized identity.

In Chapter Seven, I address RQ2: *What messages and behaviors do employees identify from especially compassionate leaders that contribute to creating a context in which they feel comfortable expressing suffering at work?* My findings show that leaders are able to cultivate a relational context which emphasizes employee's personal well-being, which serves to minimize uncertainty by normalizing emotional and personal disclosure. Leaders cultivate this relational context through a variety of specific behavioral and communicative moves which craft feeling rules that allow for the expression of suffering at work.

In Chapter Eight, I address RQ3: *How do employees perceive their leaders discover and enact compassionate actions in the face of their suffering?* My findings suggest that leaders navigate three distinct dialectical tensions when reacting compassionately toward their employees: (1) defer to employees' preferred levels of disclosure *and* ask probing questions to discover the depth of their pain/suffering, (2) invite requests for help and employees' perspective on what they believe would work to alleviate their suffering *and* propose potential solutions, and (3) insist employees accept actions that will alleviate their suffering *and* honor employees' agency in the process.

Chapter Nine offers a discussion of key theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations, and future research directions. Theoretical this study (1) demonstrates that uncertainty related to emotional expression and disclosure limits employees' sharing of personal suffering, which then shapes and limits compassion processes, (2) illustrates that individuals holding traditionally marginalized or minoritized identities face additional uncertainty related to expressing pain and suffering, which increases the burden of suffering at work, (3) highlights a relational orientation which emphasizes personal well-being as enabling the compassion process, (4) outlines *anticipatory compassion* as a specific discursive move that conveys care and opens space to express pain and suffering, and (5) empirically illustrates three dialectical tensions that punctuate the dynamic interactions between leaders and employees when relating and (re)acting. I also offer specific practical implications, including include (1) crafting job flexibility and open leave policies, (2) critically assessing structures and policies that limit expression of suffering at work, especially as relates to individuals holding minoritized and marginalized identities, and (3) crafting emotional feeling rules which welcome personal and emotional disclosure. Lastly, I describe limitations and future directions.

CHAPTER TWO

COMPASSION THEORY AND SUFFERING AT WORK

This chapter lays the foundation for this study by overviewing key research on compassion. First, I define suffering and establish suffering as a ubiquitous and costly phenomenon in organizational life. Next, I show that compassion stands to make a positive impact in the face of suffering for individuals, within relationships, and across organizations. Together, these provide strong rationale that compassion is worth of increased attention by scholars as both theoretically and practically important. Next, I establish the theoretical grounding of this project by defining, conceptualizing, and outlining compassion theory within organizational studies.

Suffering

Suffering is at the root of triggering compassion. Defined broadly, suffering is an unpleasant subjective experience that is often perceived as disruptive, threatening, and/or stress-inducing in one's life (Lilius et al., 2012), typically triggered by some event or circumstance (Dutton et al., 2014). This negative experience could manifest in a variety of ways, such as physical and emotional pain, psychological trauma, existential anguish, economic challenges, loneliness and disconnection, or stress, among others.

Although suffering is often linked with a specific event, it is important to note that suffering is not limited to an acute response. Suffering is complex and nuanced, and the experience of suffering is deeply personal, non-linear, and highly subjective (Cassell, 1999; Dutton et al., 2014). Consequently, everyone's experience of suffering is different, and people often respond to the same events in radically different ways. This not only includes their original response, but also how their experience of suffering develops over

time; suffering is “dynamic, and its intensity and form often change over time” (Dutton et al., 2014, p. 281).

In the broader context of research on emotions at work, suffering is distinct from emotions, feelings, and mood. Emotions can be defined as “intense, relatively short-term affective reactions to a specific environmental stimulus” (Barsade, 2002, p. 646). Emotions include several aspects, including cognitive appraisals of a stimulus (event, situation, person), internal feelings, and external physical characteristics (Tracy, 2008). Notably, emotions typically include some kind of external display, whether intentional or unintentional. Feelings, on the other hand, are often internal to that person without physical or communicative manifestation. Lastly, mood also refers to an emotional or feeling state but does not have a direct stimulus. In this way, someone may experience a negative mood even when they are not sure of exactly *why* they feel down, whereas emotions and feelings typically have a clear trigger. Moods may include both internal feelings and emotional manifestations.

Suffering has not been explicitly categorized by emotion researchers and remains enigmatic and nebulous (Kanov, 2020). Typically, compassion research focuses on cases with a clear pain trigger (Dutton et al., 2014; Kanov et al., 2017), which would align with Barsade’s (2002) definition of emotions. However, suffering does not always manifest in external emotional displays. Even further, suffering often includes various feelings and moods. Kanov (2020) argues that suffering affects the whole person and therefore “cannot be reduced to an emotion or feeling” (p. 2). When considered in light of these definitions, suffering may manifest in external emotional displays (e.g., anger or

sadness), internal feelings states (e.g., fear or anxiety), or moods (e.g., gloomy or melancholic).

The Scope and Cost of Suffering at Work

Suffering is a universal, inevitable experience in one's life (Frost, 1999). Most often, suffering stems from individual challenges in one's personal life. Difficult moments such as the loss of a loved one or losing one's job often shock and overwhelm individuals, making even simple tasks difficult to accomplish. In other cases, suffering may be less intense or less acute, where one could reasonably try to hide it from others. For example, loneliness and social isolation are on the rise in the United States, and mental health challenges continue to increase each year (Cigna, 2020). While poignant and difficult for those experiencing these challenges, these issues are often not expressed at work as they can be harder to articulate and lack a clear pain trigger. In other cases, a recent breakup or family challenges may feel less intense than losing someone to death, which may lead affected individuals to hide their suffering and rationalize it as less severe.

Suffering in one's personal life can also be collectively experienced. Research on communal coping (Afifi, 2015) suggests that collective suffering, such as a global pandemic, creates a sense of shared suffering and mutual responsibility to engage and resolve. While this can help unite people, it also brings additional challenges, as individual and collective suffering may overlap. In other words, individual suffering such as the loss of a job may feel inconsequential compared to the shared loss of life through the global pandemic, leading to complications in making sense of one's suffering. Regardless of the source, however, suffering is not contained to one's personal life;

rather, suffering has no boundaries, and accompanies people to work regardless of whether those affected chooses to express it (Hazen, 2008; Lilius et al., 2011).

In the workplace, personal suffering may also be a direct product of one's job (Dutton, et al., 2014; Lilius et al., 2011). Work is regularly cited as a primary source of stress and anxiety (American Institute of Stress, 2020), which often leads to burnout and fatigue (Gallup, 2020). These stresses and anxieties have many causes (e.g. job pressures, toxic managers or coworkers, or long hours) that are further nuanced across industries. In most cases, these painful experiences stem from the harsh disconnect between the employee's emotional needs and organizational realities (Driver, 2007). Furthermore, employees are often discouraged from sharing negative emotions at work (Waldron, 2012), which may compound the weight of their suffering and hinder their ability to cope.

Collectively, suffering is a heavy burden for individuals and organizations. Individually, suffering is particularly taxing, and has been linked to anxiety, stress, and depression, as well as an inability to accomplish basic life and work tasks (Dutton et al., 2014). Emerging research also suggests that suffering carries physical risks as well, where chronic stress and isolation (often associated with suffering) may lead to headaches, sleep problems, and heart disease (Mayo Clinic, 2019). Indeed, the individual burden of suffering alone often serves to move us to respond compassionately when we recognize suffering and have an ability to alleviate another's pain.

The business case for reducing suffering is also increasingly clear. Suffering costs organizations an estimated $75 billion dollars a year due to employees dealing with grief (James et al., 2003), and more recent estimates suggest that job-related stress causes nearly $300 billion a year in losses due to absenteeism, loss of productivity, employee

turnover, and insurance costs (Dutton et al., 2014). Taken collectively, suffering is a heavy burden for both individuals and organizations where we should work to alleviate it whenever possible. In the face of this suffering, compassion stands to have an impact.

The Impact of Compassion at Work

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that compassion alleviates the challenges associated with suffering. Within organizational studies, Frost's (1999) call for greater attention to compassion spurred research on the positive impact of compassion at the individual, relational, and organizational level.

The clearest benefactor of compassion is the recipient. Within medical contexts, compassionate communication with patients has been shown to be positively associated with a variety of clinical outcomes, such as physical and mental quality of life (Ong et al., 2000), improved pain control (Dibbelt et al., 2009), and improved diabetes management (Schillinger et al., 2003). In organizational contexts, compassion positively influences people's ability to process and work through grief (Bento, 1994; Hazen, 2008), reduces personal anxiety (Lilius et al., 2008), and conveys a sense of dignity, worthiness, and value (Dutton et al., 2014). Related research on the buffering effect and social support suggests that managing grief also has physical benefits; social support, both realized and perceived, has been shown to minimize negative physiological outcomes associated with stress (Burleson, 2009).

Compassion also positively impacts relationships. Sufferers experiencing compassion often feel connected to others in their organization (Powley, 2009), and those expressing compassion get a sense of satisfaction and greater prosocial motivation (Grant et al., 2008). Even when not directly involved, merely *observing* compassion can increase

pride in the organization and increase prosocial motivation and behavior (Dutton et al., 2007). Together, this may lead to high-quality relationships characterized by a sense of trust, collaboration, attentiveness, and positive emotions, as documented in one case of an especially compassionate work unit (Lilius et al., 2011). Compassion, then, not only alleviates suffering for one person but ripples outward to cultivate connections.

Given the ways that compassion serves to alleviate individual pain and suffering and cultivate stronger relationships, many have argued that we are morally obligated to respond compassionately in the face of another's suffering (Reich, 1989). Indeed, compassion is a central tenet in many world religions, not only as a belief but in guiding right action (Federman, 2000). Karen Armstrong, an acclaimed religious scholar, believes that we are not only called to compassion but that it is essential to our survival. In 2009, she helped launch the "Charter for Compassion," which unifies global religious leaders to advocate for compassion as an ethical imperative and provide resources for its cultivation across the globe (Charter for Compassion, 2021). In healthcare, compassion has long been a core value in effective patient care (Mannion, 2014), seen as a way to care for and honor the dignity of those in their care. Collectively, these perspectives call us to recognize the moral and ethical responsibility of compassion as a core value in our life, relationships, and work.

In addition to individual benefits and moral imperatives, a growing body of research suggests that compassion also positively impacts organizations. Employees who receive compassion, for example, perceive their organization more positively (Lilius et al., 2008), exhibit increased commitment and attachment, and are less likely to leave their organization (Grant et al., 2008). Additionally, compassion has been shown to lead to

greater collaboration among coworkers and collective positive emotions (Dutton et al., 2007). Coupled with the cost estimates of suffering at work detailed above, compassion has clear benefits for organizations.

Taken collectively, this body of research demonstrates the positive impact compassion can have in the face of suffering. While research on compassion is widespread, the relative paucity of research on compassion within organizational studies suggests that more work needs to be done to understand the unique ways compassion functions within organizational contexts. Toward that end, I now turn to outlining the ways that compassion has been conceptualized and theorized within organizational studies.

Conceptualizing Compassion at Work

Compassion has been a topic of interest throughout history (Rynes et al., 2012) and has deep roots in philosophy, religion, and sociology (cf. Frost et al., 2006). Social scientific research on compassion, however, is quite recent. Organizational research on compassion can primarily be traced to Frost's (1999) call for greater attention to compassion and suffering at work. Given that the research has developed in primarily U.S. universities, this scholarship adopts a primarily Western conception of compassion. Although a full examination of the east-west divide of compassion research is beyond the scope of this study, it's important to consider that eastern notions of compassion have been well-documented (Walsh-Frank, 1996) and these approaches have great potential in furthering our understanding and conceptualizations of compassion.

Within organizational studies, Kanov and colleagues (2004) introduced the concept of compassion to study. Drawing upon Clark's (1997) sociological work on grief,

they suggest that compassion can be seen as (1) *noticing* another person's suffering, (2) feeling a sense of empathy and concern for the other person, and (3) responding in a way that alleviates and eases the suffering of another. More recently, communication scholars (Huffman, 2017; Miller, 2007; Way and Tracy, 2012) have built upon and extended Kanov and colleagues (2004) model. Building on these approaches, I will now define compassion and outline key elements of compassion theory.

Compassion is a type of emotional work (Miller, 2007) that is communicatively accomplished by (1) *recognizing* another's suffering, (2) *relating* empathically, and (3) *(re)acting* compassionately (Way & Tracy, 2012). *Recognizing* includes "understanding and applying meaning to others' verbal and nonverbal communicative cues, the timing and context of these cues as well as cracks between or absences of messages" (Way & Tracy, 2012, p. 307). In other words, compassion is initiated when one person is able to determine that another is suffering, often by recognizing subtle communicative cues within a specific context.

Next, relating empathically is "identifying with, feeling for, and *communicatively connecting* [emphasis added] with another to enable sharing of emotions, values, and decisions (Way & Tracy, 2012, p. 307). This definition suggests that one must not only feel cognitively for another, but they must also communicate that feeling in order to connect with the emotions of the person. People may experience cognitive empathy or be able to take on the perspective of the other person while failing to communicate that understanding, thereby inhibiting connection and failing to enact compassion.

Lastly, (re)acting is "engaging in behaviors or communicating in ways that are seen, or could be seen, as compassionate by the provider, the recipient, and/or another

individual" (Way & Tracy, 2012, p. 307). Way & Tracy (2012) use the parens around the (re) in (re)acting to indicate that sometimes proactive compassionate action may lead to recognizing and relating, even in the absence of outward suffering. (Re)acting is what Way & Tracy (2012) call the heart of compassion – where one is moved to *act* in order to alleviate another's suffering – and serves as the primary distinction between related concepts such as empathy and sympathy, both of which can remain passive.

(Re)acting compassionately often involves pragmatic efforts to alleviate another's pain (e.g., raise money to solve a financial crisis or give additional time off) but may also consist of communicating in ways that convey compassion, such as touch and nonverbal immediacy, offering advice or information (Miller, 2007), or mindfully communicating (Way & Tracy, 2012). Additionally, compassion may involve communicative mirroring (Tracy & Huffman, 2017) and communication accommodation (Soliz & Giles, 2014), as well as specific discursive moves such as vulnerable self-disclosure or co-creating a hopeful future (Tracy & Huffman, 2017). Lastly, physical presence can be a core aspect of compassion. Huffman's (2017) found that "presence, immediacy, and acts of service communicate compassion" to homeless youth (p. 159), a particular type of physical presence he called embodied aboutness. At other times, compassion may also involve strategically giving space to people to process in ways they see fit (Way & Tracy, 2012).

Way and Tracy's (2012) conceptualization of the compassion subprocesses builds on previous process models by proposing a more communicative view to complement and integrate cognitive and affective aspects of compassion. As seen in Table 1, three primary conceptualizations of compassion have been proposed which build up and nuance understandings of compassion theory. Kanov and colleagues' (2004) germinal

conceptualization highlights the perceptual (noticing), affective (feeling), and behavioral (actions) aspects of compassion. Noticing and feeling are cognitive and affective and therefore primarily seen as internal psychological processes. Miller's (2007) extended this work by arguing that feeling was not merely an internal, affective experience but a relational sense of connection that included affect, perspective-taking, and communication. In doing so, Miller (2007) proposes *connecting* as a better articulation of how one affectively, cognitively, and communicatively connects with another person in their pain and suffering. Miller (2007) also found that communication across the relationship enhanced noticing and responding; by having a greater context of another's personal life, one can better notice subtle shifts that may signal suffering and better understand actions that will be compassionate for that individual person.

Table 1

Overview of Conceptualizations of the Compassion Processes reproduced from Way and Tracy (2012, p. 307).

Kanov et al. (2004)	Miller (2007)	Way & Tracy
Noticing Paying attention to others' emotions, and reading subtle cues	Noticing Noticing not only the need for compassion, but noticing details about another's life so that the response can be the most appropriate	Recognizing Understanding and applying meaning to others' verbal and nonverbal communicative cues, the timing and context of these cues as well as, cracks between or absences of messages
Feeling Feeling compassion for another's suffering (affective)	Connecting Connecting with others (relational)	Relating Identifying with, feeling for, and communicatively connecting with another to enable sharing of emotions, values, and decisions
Responding Any action or display that occurs in response to another's pain—must be accompanied by noticing and feeling	Responding Actually behaving or communicating in ways that could be seen as compassionate	(Re)acting Engaging in behaviors or communicating in ways that are seen, or could be seen, as compassionate by the provider, the recipient and/ or another individual

As noted above, Way and Tracy (2012) extended prior conceptualizations of compassion to reflect the integral role of communication throughout the compassion subprocesses, as well as argue that (re)action is the core, distinctive component of compassion. Although compassion is often interpreted as a linear process, the three sub processes need not progress in order, are recursive, and are often repeated (Dutton et al., 2014; Way & Tracy, 2012). Way and Tracy (2012) suggest that (re)acting should be seen as the *heart* of the compassion process, which reflects not only compassion as a communicative and behavioral response but that it can also be *proactive*, where (re)acting itself can prompt recognizing and relating. Indeed, Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory suggests that action often comes before thinking or feeling.

Conceptualizing compassion as a tri-partite processual model is widely accepted among scholars, though some have proposed additions and nuances to the model. Notably, Atkins and Parker's (2012) suggest that the current conceptualizations do not account for the wide variance in empathic response among those who observe the same instance of suffering. Utilizing cognitive appraisal theory, they argue that individuals "appraise" others' suffering, which influences their response. *Deservingness* is an appraisal of whether or not one's suffering is caused by their own decisions and actions, such as losing their job after repeated bad behavior and poor performance. In this case, despite their sincere suffering, many would believe they brought this upon themselves and therefore are not deserving of care. Second, *self-relevance* appraisals are when people decide that attending to some types of suffering are not their responsibility. For example, a supervisor may not believe that emotional support is part of their job, and therefore may not respond to their employees in times of apparent suffering because it is outside the scope of their job description. Finally, *coping self-efficacy* describes one's appraisal of their own capability to respond and cope effectively; in some cases, one may feel they have too much going on or are not equipped to handle another's emotions, and therefore do not respond.

Appraisals have not been explicitly adopted into the process model of compassion, but more comprehensive models of the compassion process theory implicitly adopt this contribution by highlighting sensemaking as inherent to the (Dutton et al., 2014; Kanov et al., 2017; see Figure 1). This suggests that both the *sufferer* (i.e., person who is experiencing the hardship) and the *focal actor* (i.e., someone who recognizes, relates, and reacts in response to that suffering) must act in the midst of the uncertainty

and ambiguity of organizational life and retroactively make sense of their decisions. This sensemaking process also highlights the inherent relationality of compassion, to which I turn next.

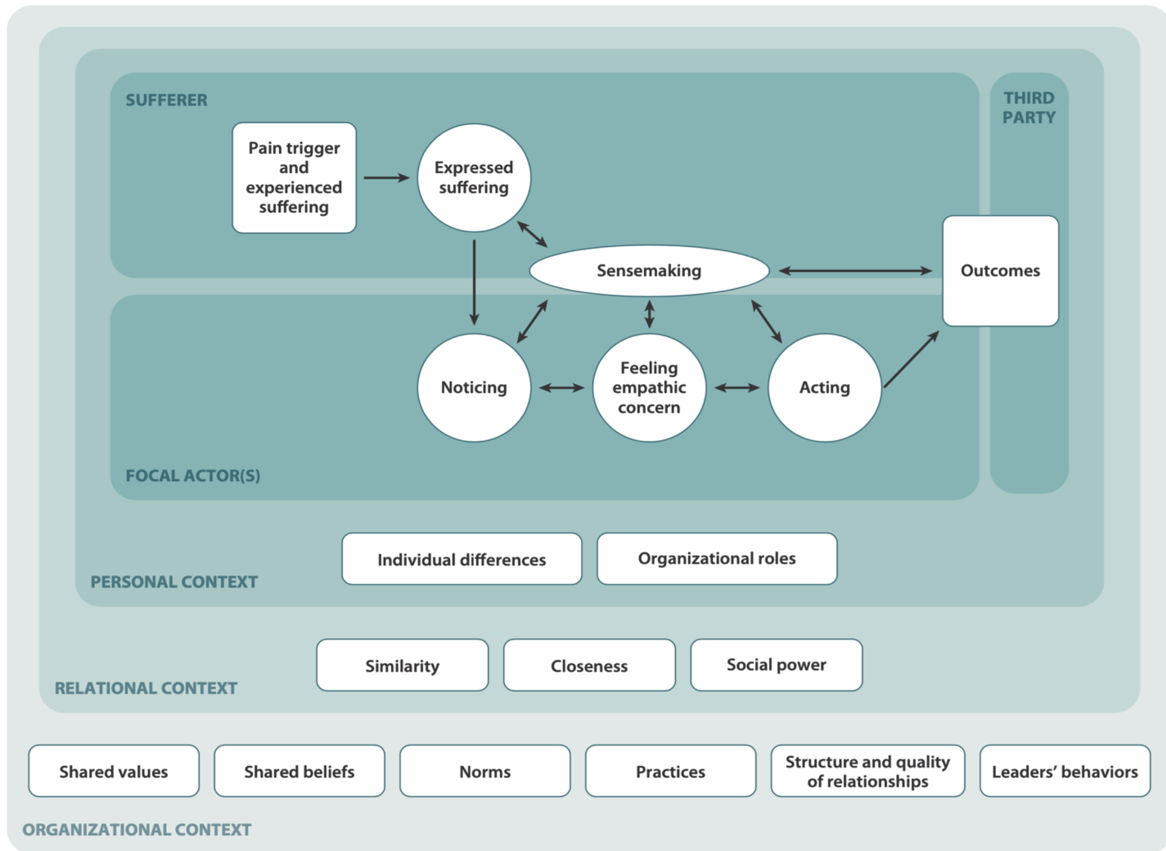

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Compassion Processes reproduced from Dutton, Workman, & Hardin (2014, p. 282)

In addition to its processual nature, compassion is also a *relational* process. Compassion can only be realized in the context of a relationship as it involves the actions of both a *sufferer* and a *focal actor*. As Figure 1 illustrates, compassion is often triggered when someone who is suffering expresses that suffering to others. Sometimes, those suffering volunteer this information to those they believe can help. In other cases,

however, they may try to hide their suffering. Here, suffering may become evident through emotional leakage (Gross & Levenson, 1993) despite the sufferer's efforts to withhold, or a focal actor may notice subtle changes in behavior and nonverbal cues that signal another is suffering. As evidenced by Miller (2007) and Way and Tracy's (2012), awareness of suffering often occurs through communication across relationships, where the close context attunes the focal actor to recognize when another was not okay. Clark's (2015) study of compassion among grieving adolescents also highlights the importance of close relationships in recognizing suffering, arguing that compassion is often co-performed within relationships where individuals are simultaneously both giving and receiving compassion. When compassion unfolds in community, those who receive compassion are moved to also recognize and express that compassion toward others.

Collectively, the relational nature of compassion highlights it as a "fluid, dynamic process in which both the sufferer and the focal actor make sense of the situation and influence each other in ways that can hinder or facilitate compassion" (Dutton et al., 2014, p. 281). Compassion becomes a form of interpersonal (Frost et al., 2006) and emotional (Miller, 2007) work that is both "effortful and concurrent" (Dutton et al., 2014, p. 283), which includes mutual and on-going commitment from both people.

In sum, compassion is accomplished when one person recognizes another's suffering, relates to them empathically, and reacts in a way that is recognized as compassionate by the sufferer (Way & Tracy, 2012). Reacting may include tangible action (e.g., organizing a meal train) but may also include a variety of verbal and nonverbal communicative actions that convey a sense of care, immediacy, and presence. These processes are recursive and complex, and both actors engage in a variety of

sensemaking processes as compassion unfolds in their specific context. In this way, compassion is an effortful form of emotional work which includes cognitive, affective, and communicative elements.

For the purposes of this study, I draw upon Way and Tracy's (2012) recognizing, relating, and reacting (as outlined above) as my primary conceptualization of the compassion subprocesses. Specifically, this model integrates communication as integral throughout the entire compassion process. Utilizing this model for my own study centers my investigation on how leaders *communicate* compassion to others. From a communicative perspective, compassionate communication not only serves as an act of compassion in the face of suffering, but leaders' communication also creates the context that compassion unfolds within, which may shape the compassion process over time.

Toward that end, I will now define and conceptualize the communicative approach to leadership that I use in this study in Chapter Three. Then, in Chapter Four, I will synthesize research to highlight the contextual influences on compassion at work, which will lead to the primary research questions.

CHAPTER THREE

LEADERSHIP: DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

Leadership is often said to be a topic for the ages, with interest as old as antiquity (Grint, 2011). This long history has led to significant confusion and disagreement on what leadership is, how it is defined, and how it should be conceptualized (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2017). As such, it is critical to define what we mean by *leadership*. Here, I offer key definitions that inform my conceptualization of leadership for this study and outline several important distinctions comparative to other definitions of leadership.

Given the multifaceted nature of leadership, it is often best to consider multiple definitions which can be held in tension (Fairhurst, personal communication, September 29, 2017). My definitions draw from communicative and phenomenological approaches to leadership. First, Fairhurst (2007) argues that "leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them" (p. 6). Barge and Fairhurst (2008) argue that leadership is best viewed as a "co-created, performative, contextual, and attributional process where ideas articulated in talk or action are recognized by others as progressing tasks that are important to them" (p. 232). In this view, leadership becomes "a lived and experienced social activity in which persons-in-conversation, action, meaning, and context are dynamically interrelated" (p. 228).

From a phenomenological approach, leadership is best conceptualized as a *phenomenon* that cannot be understood apart from the *experience* of leadership (Souba, 2014). In other words, leadership must be connected to *actual lived experience* rather than abstractions or concepts. So, from a phenomenological perspective "being a leader

means using language to reframe people's challenges such that more effective ways of being and acting are the outcome" (Souba, 2014, p. 80).

Collectively, the above definitions have several key similarities. First, leadership is valuably conceptualized as a primarily communicative endeavor, where "ideas are expressed" or "articulated in talk and action," and leaders "use language" to accomplish the task of leadership. This communicative conceptualization of leadership contrasts with many psychological approaches, such as trait-theories and behavioral approaches (Lord et al., 2017), and serves to complement our understanding of leadership as a complex phenomenon. Secondly, leadership is both co-created and contextual, and therefore inherently relational. As Fairhurst (2007) notes, leadership is only accomplished when talk or action are "*recognized by others* as progressing tasks or problems which are important to them" (p. 6, emphasis mine). Barge and Fairhurst (2008) highlight recognition from followers as foundational to our understanding of leadership as well. In other words, leadership is more about meeting the concerns of the relevant parties (i.e., followers) rather than assuming a position or exhibiting specific traits. Often, meeting stakeholders' concerns is accomplished through reframing (Fairhurst, 2007) the challenges of the relevant parties so that they can perceive them differently, and therefore act on them differently (Souba, 2014).

Third, these definitions do not tie leadership to any specific trait or hierarchical position. Therefore, *anyone* may practice leadership. Research on leadership often implicitly (or explicitly) conflates management and supervision with leadership. Although managers and supervisors do have a form of hierarchical and organizational power imbued with their position (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2017), that power (and seen

as synonymous with position) does not necessarily indicate that they are performing leadership effectively. Additionally, even low-level employees could perform leadership and be seen by others as a leader, despite their organizational position.

In summary, leadership in this study is conceptualized as a communicative process by which leaders use language (talk and action) in order to reframe problems, highlight new ways of moving forward, and progress tasks that are recognized as important to the relevant parties. In order to explicate this approach to leadership, I now turn to discursive leadership which is the foundational leadership approach that undergirds these definitions and informs how I consider leadership in this work.

A Discursive Approach to Leadership

Discursive leadership is the predominant approach to leadership within the discipline of organizational communication. Often associated with Fairhurst (2007, 2010), discursive leadership was developed as a communicative approach in contrast to the psychological paradigm of leadership that currently dominates the leadership field (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). Put another way, discursive leadership argues that leadership cannot be reduced to an essence or mental state, as it is attributional and often highly contested (Fairhurst, 2007). Consequently, a discursive approach argues that leadership is socially constructed through language.

Discursive leadership is not meant to displace psychological approaches to leadership or suggest that they are flawed. Rather, discursive leadership is meant to complement psychological approaches in order to expand our understanding of the complexity of leadership. In doing so, Fairhurst (2007) offers several ways to think about these two schools of thought as distinct in order to help contrast their approach. Central to

these contrasts is a focus on d/Discourse (reviewed below), reflexivity, and con-textual approaches to understanding leadership (Fairhurst, 2007). Fairhurst suggests that the predominant psychological paradigm considers leadership from the perspective of a "mental theater," or the connection between cognition, emotion, and behavior. Although not exclusively, this paradigm has produced leadership research that has identified traits, essences, and key behaviors that define leadership, often as used to predict outcomes through operationalization into variables. By contrast, discursive leadership focuses on d/Discourse.

Discourse often refers to two interrelated but distinct aspects of language. First, little "d" discourse is everyday talk and text. Everyday talk emphasizes the ways in which people talk to each other in everyday life: how we start conversations, how we respond to each other, and how we position different issues as important while excluding others, among other conversational moves. Text is how that everyday talk is then formalized into organizational texts such as policies, guidelines, or other formal and informal documents. This iterative process between talk and text form organizations over time, as argued in Giddens (1984) structuration theory, as well as communication as constitutive of organizations (Ashcraft et al.,2009; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004).

Big "D" Discourse, on the other hand, represents general, enduring systems that shape and form the articulation of particular ideas in a specific historical time and context. These systems often take the form of certain catch phrases that start to become the assumption or operative worldview for a particular time. For example, take "busyness" as a recent growing Discourse in the United States. When asked how one is doing, a common refrain includes "I'm just so busy" or "there's just never enough time in

the day." This everyday talk, or discourse, points toward the larger Discourse of busyness, where busyness is to be valued, hard work is important, and filling one's schedule is a signal of prestige. As this Discourse becomes more sedimented in daily life, the way people talk about busyness may inform people's decisions to take time off of work, how they balance work responsibilities with personal obligations, and judge others' choices related to time. Extending this further, this Discourse may even inform compassion at work; if busyness is of value, many people may not take the time to slow down and recognize those around them, or worse, may recognize suffering but decide they "don't have time" to help out.

Discursive leadership, then, suggests that communication should be seen as primary (as opposed to tangential). In other words, communication is not something that occurs *within* leadership contexts but rather shapes and constructs leadership (Barge, 2014; Fairhurst, 2007). Fairhurst contends that much of organizational life is inherently ambiguous, where multiple "stories" could be told. In the midst of this ambiguity, leaders use message framing (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Fairhurst, 2010) to shape the context of how that situation unfolds for people. Framing is not merely wordplay but serves to shape the realities of an individual's experience, both in that acute moment and over time. For example, suppose a leader has to discuss challenging steps ahead in the midst of a global pandemic, such as layoffs, furloughs, or potentially shutting down. The facts remain the same (fewer customers are causing revenue loss, which may impact staffing abilities), but leaders can choose to shape this context in various ways. One leader might say this is "a total disaster," that "we're at the whims of the virus," and that "we're probably all doomed." Another leader might frame the same situation as "a difficult time in which we

have an opportunity to come together as a community, create new innovative solutions, and come out better than before." Neither of these messaging strategies change the *material* realities of the situation, but they can radically shape how people make sense of that moment, which serves to inform their future thinking, talk, and behavior.

Effective framing often involves attuning oneself to what Barge (2014) calls the emerging conversational ecology of an organization. Ecology refers to the relationships within a system and their inherent interconnectedness. As a *conversational ecology,* Barge (2014) argues that leaders must understand what types of talk and action have meaning within the particular relations they are embedded and attune their language to these local meanings. In other words, leaders should pay attention to *which* d/Discourses matter and connect with people in their specific context.

In the context of the current study, a discursive leadership approach suggests that d/Discourse (Fairhurst, 2007) and emergent conversational ecologies (Barge, 2014) influence how people make sense of their organizational reality. In the case of compassion, issues surrounding emotions, suffering, compassion, and appropriate emotional expression at work are ambiguous until given meaning through communication. In this way, leaders' everyday talk may shape organizational realities in ways that either encourage compassion or create increased uncertainty and ambiguity that may cause compassion to falter.

As an illustration, consider the talk of two leaders in different organizations. One leader regularly talks about being task focused, getting things done, and delivering to clients in a professional way. This leader rarely discloses personal information, does not enjoy small talk, and regularly interrupts people if they deviate from the agenda with

personal stories. Once, when an employee had a family member pass away, you heard that the boss simply asked when she thought she could be back at work.

Another leader is known for regularly chatting with employees, asking about their weekend and following-up on previous conversations, and volunteering information from their personal life. This leader talks regularly about the importance of delivering quality products to clients, but also affirmed that we need to take care of each other and speak up if we're struggling. In meetings, this leader is known to get through the agenda but has created space for personal sharing and connection. Recently, when an employee had a family member pass away, you heard the boss said they sympathized with how she must be feeling, that loss was a difficult and unpredictable process, and that she should take as much time off as she needs. Apparently, the boss also disclosed their own recent loss, and noted how we need to be there for each other at work.

From a discursive approach, these leaders' everyday talk shapes reality in their respective contexts. While these examples may be extreme, I argue that each is plausible and likely to influence compassion processes in radically different ways. A discursive approach does not deny that various other factors also influence compassion at work, but centers leaders' communication as the central focus to understand how compassion is locally constructed in various contexts.

In this spirit, Chapter Four outlines the challenge of *cultivating* compassion in context. I briefly review the challenge of cultivating compassion before outlining two major approaches to understanding contextual influences on compassion. Then, I argue that leadership has a significant influence on compassion at work that has been underexplored, which leads to my primary research questions.

CHAPTER FOUR

CULTIVATING COMPASSION IN CONTEXT

Compassion theory, as discussed in Chapter Two, has greatly enhanced our understanding of the process of interpersonal compassion at work. However, understanding the subprocesses of compassion and how they function does not necessarily illuminate the conditions that allow compassion to flourish within organizations. In line with this thinking, compassion literature has been critiqued as overly idealistic (Simpson et al., 2014) where it is largely assuming that compassion will unfold naturally and that employees feel comfortable expressing suffering at work. Consequently, compassion scholars maintain that there are still many unanswered questions as to how to *cultivate* compassion within organizations (Kanov et al., 2017) and that current theory fails to account for why compassion unfolds readily in some organizations while faltering in others.

To address this challenge, this chapter outlines and integrates two bodies of literature that speak to *cultivating* compassion in context. First, I briefly discuss current compassion research, largely in management, that discusses various contextual factors that influence compassion. Second, I outline key findings from research on the communication of emotions at work. While not explicitly integrated within the compassion literature, I argue that communication about emotions at work may significantly influence compassion processes, especially in how emotions are constituted through language and how it relates to the expression of suffering. Finally, I highlight leadership as a significant influence within both bodies of literature and argue that

leadership is a central but underexplored influence on compassion at work. This discussion leads to my primary research questions.

Contextual Influences on Compassion at Work

As one might expect, various attributes and conditions at work influence how compassion may unfold. Drawing primarily from management research, researchers have focused on factors related to personal, relational, and organizational context (Dutton et al., 2014). First, the personal context highlights individual differences that may influence compassion, such as personality or organizational role. For example, studies on big 5 personality traits (extroversion, agreeableness, openness, neuroticism, and conscientiousness) suggest that extroversion, openness, and agreeableness are correlated with greater feelings of empathy and compassion (Shiota et al., 2006). Similarly, Atkins and Parker (2012) theorized that psychological flexibility, an orientation that refers to mindfulness in the present moment and living out one's values, helps orient individuals to notice another's suffering and attunes them to specific episodic cues that lend toward empathy and compassion. Differences in empathy may also influence compassion (Stellar et al., 2012), but research has been inconclusive (Mercadillo et al., 2011). Additionally, aspects of one's organizational role may also influence compassion at work. For example, the level of professionalization of one's role has been seen to influence expectations around emotional expression at work, where higher levels of professionalism tend to lead to less emotional expression and, consequently, may inhibit compassion (Miller, 2002). Some organizational roles also come with high levels of emotional load, such as working in a call center, which may negatively impact compassion toward coworkers by reducing one's energy to notice and attend to others. individuals who have jobs with high

emotional load may experience fatigue that negatively impacts compassion (Lilius, 2012).

Relational and organizational factors also shape compassion. Relationally, research has found that similarity, closeness, and social power all influence compassion (Dutton et al., 2014). For example, Miller's (2007) study on compassion workers highlights how closeness gave deeper personal knowledge of another's situation, which then facilitated greater ability to recognize suffering and relate empathically. Social power, such as organizational hierarchy or status differences, has been shown to lead to less disclosure by those with less power (Berdahl & Martorana, 2006). In the context of compassion, greater power differences may result in less expressed suffering and, therefore, less compassion (Bento, 1994). Finally, similarity may support empathic feelings and compassionate responses toward others. In one study, researchers found that when individuals perceived themselves to be similar to those who were suffering, they tended to have greater empathic responses (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2011). This aligns with Atkins and Parker's (2012) assertion that how we appraise another's suffering will influence our empathic response; when we perceive ourselves as similar to others, we are more likely to appraise their suffering as valid and therefore want to alleviate their suffering.

At the organizational level, a variety of features have been identified as influential: shared beliefs, shared values, norms, practices, structure and quality of relationships, and leadership behaviors. Shared beliefs and values shape how individuals make sense of their organizational experiences, not only guiding behavior but influencing what is appropriate action. For example, a case study of compassionate action within a

business school showed that beliefs related to showing your humanity at work enabled employees to share about the suffering of others, which enabled a timely and robust response (Dutton et al., 2006). Similarly, other researchers have argued that organizational values of care enable more compassionate responses in the face of employee suffering (Simpson et al., 2013). Norms and practices also serve to influence compassion, especially when they help support the cultivation of close organizational relationships. For example, Lilius and colleagues (2011) conducted an in-depth case study of a highly compassionate work unit within a hospital. The researchers found that this workgroup had developed regular practices (i.e., celebrating co-workers, collective decision-making) and norms (i.e., personal sharing at work, offering help) that enabled personal, high-quality connections with others, which ultimately enabled compassion to flourish.

Scholars also highlight leadership as an important influence on compassion processes, as research suggests that leaders' behaviors play a symbolic and instrumental role in signaling appropriate responses to suffering (Dutton et al., 2014). Within a crisis, for example, leaders not only have access to material resources that could help alleviate suffering but can also frame the crisis in a way that encourages people to share their suffering and express compassion toward each other. The influence leaders have on compassion extends beyond acute experiences of suffering, however. The status afforded to leaders, often accompanied with formal organizational power, gives them significant influence in shaping organizational values, beliefs, norms, and practices, all of which influence and enable compassion within organizations. Additionally, leaders often set the tone in the quality of relationships expected at work. In this way, leadership is better seen

as a core influence that permeates myriad organizational contextual factors that either cultivate or inhibit compassion at work.

Collectively, the personal, relational, and organizational context outlined above help illuminate some of the conditions that may inhibit or enable compassion. However, this research is still relatively limited and in its infancy. A related body of literature within communication stands to help further illuminate how compassion unfolds in context, exploring how emotions have been communicatively constructed within organizational life.

Communicating Emotion at Work

Communication research on compassion has primarily focused on describing the communication of compassion in a variety of organizational settings, extending the process model of compassion, and identifying compassionate communication moves (Clark, 2015; Huffman, 2017; Miller, 2007; Tracy & Huffman, 2017; Way & Tracy, 2012). However, a large body of literature on the communication of emotions at work has significant implications for how compassion may be cultivated. Here, I overview research on emotions and organizations and discuss their implications for cultivating compassion at work.

Despite the fact that organizational life is inherently emotional (Fineman, 2000; Tracy, 2008; Tracy & Malvini Redden, 2019), emotions have a long and troubled history within organizational studies. Early bureaucratic approaches to organizing saw emotions as antithetical to the rational, bureaucratic business model (Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Tracy, 2008), which tended to privilege work identity over personal identity (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005) and therefore consider emotions a private matter not suitable for work.

This led many to exclude emotions at work, as they were seen as largely inappropriate. Emotion research has consistently documented that emotions continued to be eclipsed by rational approaches to business and decision-making, which has led to their exclusion, minimization, and commodification toward organizational goals (Riforgiate & Tracy, In Press).

In many organizations, emotions are perceived as something to control and manage, signaling to employees that they should regulate emotional displays that may interfere with their work. Typically, organizations only welcome positive and moderately intense emotions while restricting overly intense and negative emotional displays (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). Most often, this emotional control manifests through specific organizational feeling rules, where employees are given explicit and implicit messages about what emotions are appropriate for work through organizational socialization and everyday talk (Riforgiate & Tracy, In Press). While individuals may initially test the waters of emotional expression, most quickly learn what emotions are appropriate and expected in their role and self-regulate. Consequently, many individuals actively suppress or hide personal negative emotions at work in order to align with their organization's expectations around largely rational conceptions of professionalism at work.

In other cases, emotions are not only managed but prescribed. Arlie Hochschild's (1983) germinal work on emotional labor illustrates that many organizations go beyond emotional regulation to actively commodify emotions for commercial gain. Emotional labor refers to work demands that require employees to fake outward emotions as part of their job, despite contrasting internal feelings (Hochschild, 1983). First identified in

airline stewardesses, an example of emotional labor would be smiling and acquiescing to the requests of a customer despite their rude, demanding, and condescending communication. Many organizational roles require that employees restrict their emotions in order to perform specific job functions, such as providing quality customer service. In Western culture, this has culminated in Discourses such as “The customer is always right,” which is often used to justify demanding and abusive customer behaviors which employees are not allowed to respond to.

The dissonance between employees’ internal feelings and the prescribed outward performance is personally exhausting for individuals (Tracy, 2017), often leading to high levels of stress and burnout. Burnout refers to a sort of intense stress from work, typically characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization from work, and a decreased sense of efficacy or accomplishment (Tracy, 2017). Though not exclusively tied to emotions, burnout has consistent links with emotional suppression and regulation at work (Boren, 2014). For example, some employees function as toxin managers (Frost, 2003) that serve to listen to, absorb, and reframe the negative emotions of others. Over time, toxin management becomes too much and leads to burnout (Waldron, 2012). Even further, even the perceived inability to express stress at work compounds emotional problems. Boren and Veksler (2015) found that when employees felt they could not talk about stress at work, this *increased* their stress further as a sort of meta-stressor. This finding is echoed in Tracy’s (2004) work that suggests emotional labor is even more taxing when employees cannot see themselves as they wish to at work.

Additionally, recent research suggests that individuals holding traditionally marginalized or minoritized identities may face additional challenges related to emotional

expression at work. Communication scholars have demonstrated that transgender employees often feel constrained at work by the assumptions of cisnormativity, which leads to active censorship and feelings of inauthenticity (Eger, 2018; Jones, 2020). Consequently, one can imagine the constraints transgender employees would feel expressing pain and suffering at work, especially if that suffering was related to aspects of their transgender identity. Race and ethnicity may also influence emotional expression at work. For example, Wingfield (2010) argues that many emotions are racialized, where certain emotions expressed by a white employee may be seen as appropriate but when expressed by employees of color as inappropriate. Mirchandani (2003) theorized similarly, arguing that non-white employees have to regulate emotional expression due to the fact that emotions expressed by minority employees are perceived differently.

When considering the implications of emotion research toward how we cultivate compassion at work, two central themes emerge. First, communication research has documented that organizations have long excluded, controlled, and commodified emotions at work. Consequently, employees are often explicitly and implicitly told to restrict negative emotional displays. In the case of compassion, this research suggests that employees are likely to face significant uncertainty as to whether or not they can express suffering at work. *Is it okay to share something so personal? Will this impact what my supervisor thinks of me? Should I be able to handle my suffering on my own or with my nonwork relationships? Will I be letting the team down if I request time off?* On top of the vulnerability, hardship, and ambiguity that already accompany suffering (Bento, 1994), many employees may get stuck considering the potential impact and fallout of expressing suffering at work, and therefore choose not to share it. If they do share, they may be more

likely to share basic details, which limits others' ability to relate and react compassionately to them.

This uncertainty likely extends to focal actors (i.e., those who respond to another in pain) as well. When personal emotions are restricted at work, employees may have little experience responding to the intimate, vulnerable, delicate emotions often accompanying suffering. Consequently, their lack of experience and clear cues may lead to a variety of questions. *What do I say in the face of such loss? Is it appropriate to hug this person? Will others perceive me as soft for comforting this person? Do I have time to help this person, knowing we have a deadline at 5pm?* In the same way that someone might rightly hesitate to express suffering at work, even when suffering *is expressed* other employees may fail to react compassionately due to the uncertain emotional climate cultivated at work.

Secondly, communication research on emotions argues that emotions at work "are experienced, shaped, shared and interpreted through communication" (Riforgiate & Tracy, In Press). This communication unfolds across the organization at the micro, macro, and meso levels (Giddens, 1984), where everyday talk, formal policies, communication with leadership, and macro-level discourses all constitute emotions and rules for emotional expression. Of particular interest for the current study, micro-level interactions among coworkers and leaders play a significant role in shaping appropriate expectations for emotional displays. Newcomer socialization serves as a significant influence on perceptions of emotional rules (Scott & Myers, 2005), but everyday verbal and nonverbal interactions serve to further shape how employees make sense of appropriate emotional expressions at work.

In order to fully illustrate the impact these factors may have on the compassion process at work, consider a tale of two organizations. In the first workplace, employees only talk about work-related tasks, rarely share information about their personal lives, regularly praise people for their "rational and efficient" decision-making, and offer rewards for productivity, closing deals, and securing new clients. Typical interactions are brief, work-focused, and always include a feeling of being hurried, as if that employee has other important and looming tasks. Employees describe this workplace as a place where hard work is rewarded, people are efficient with their work, and appropriate work-life boundaries exist. In the second organization, people form personal relationships and know about each other's lives outside of work. Employees talk about work regularly but overlap these conversations with talk about personal affairs and follow-up on previous discussions. Typical interactions are warm, and if someone has to rush off, they acknowledge this and say they want to "catch up more later." Leaders praise both hard work and the ways in which employees care for each other. Employees describe this workplace as family, a warm place to be, and where they have fun and get stuff done at the same time.

Simply put, it is not hard to imagine that these two organizations likely cultivate very different expectations around which emotions are welcome and appropriate at work. These rules and expectations are shaped through their interactions with others over time, as coworkers, leaders, and managers shape and reconstitute emotions. Consequently, employees who suffer may feel more comfortable expressing suffering at work, and other employees may feel greater comfortability in responding to their suffering.

To summarize, emotions have long had a problematic relationship with work, where emotions are most typically excluded, controlled, and commodified. When they are expressed, positive and "work-appropriate" displays of emotion are expected, while intense negative expressions of emotion are seen as inappropriate and exhausting. In the case of compassion, it makes good sense that the emotional suppression and management of organizational life likely inhibits an individual's expression of suffering at work and complicates another employee's ability to respond compassionately. These emotion rules are not static or given, however; rather, they are constituted through a variety of communication processes. Through everyday talk and interaction, organizations can re-constitute emotions and emotional expression in ways that cultivate greater compassion by encouraging personal disclosure, the expression of suffering, and personal connection with others. In particular, leaders and managers are uniquely positioned to shape this process through their disproportionate influence on how employees make sense of emotions at work.

Leadership, Emotions, and Cultivating a Context for Compassion

In the case of compassion, leadership stands to have a significant influence. Leadership behavior is often cited as a key influence on compassion (Dutton et al., 2014). Scholars argue that a leader's compassionate behavior and response to others in the face of suffering signals appropriate behavior, which serves to influence how people make sense of compassionate action in their organization. Leaders also influence organizational culture. Given their symbolic influence, the way they communicate often shapes shared beliefs and values, which may serve to support or de-emphasize compassion, and leaders'

hierarchical power allows them to shape organizational roles, the structure and quality of relationships, and distribution of resources in ways that may further compassion.

Worline and Dutton (2017a) recently theorized that leaders can more directly shape compassion processes within organizations through specific discursive moves that create space for expressing suffering at work. First, they claim that leaders can better create spaces for the expression of suffering. This may take the form of tangible actions, such as creating a formal gathering of colleagues in the face of a pandemic or checking in specifically with certain individuals. Secondly, they claim that leaders can work to create “felt presence” with others, a suggestion that aligns with Huffman’s (2017) finding that embodied aboutness (physical presence, nonverbal immediacy, and acts of service) communicate compassion. Drawing on Senge and colleagues’ (2005) conceptualization of presence, they claim that leaders can create change by being present with their time (conscious of the current moment), orienting towards others (active and open listening), and being present to change (being open to changing people and changing identities). Collectively, Worline and Dutton (2017b) argue these actions may give meaning to the expression of suffering and serve to normalize compassion within organizations.

Despite myriad books and articles that cite leadership as influencing compassion, however, there remains very little empirical work that directly explores the connection between the two. As Dutton and colleagues (2014) argue after extensive review of the literature, “to date no systematic empirical studies address how leadership matters in terms of compassion at work” (p. 292).

Research on the communication of emotions *has* documented that leadership significantly influences the way employees make sense of emotional rules and

regulations. Leaders' communication and behavior heavily influence how employees make sense of which emotions are appropriate for work and how they should be expressed (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017; Riforgiate & Tracy, In Press). Additionally, leaders' everyday talk can influence how employees interact, focus their attention, and perceive their environment (DeVries et al., 2010). For example, supportive communication from management has been shown to encourage employee information sharing (DeVries et al., 2010) and connection, which may encourage the expression and recognition of suffering. However, leaders' supportive communication must be more than just empty talk; Hall (2011) found that while many managers *say* they care about their employees, their nonverbal displays and subsequent behaviors often told a different story.

Unfortunately, many employees perceive that management and leadership often articulate a supportive culture but behaved in ways that signaled profits were of utmost importance (Hall, 2011). Ultimately, many leaders fail to recognize this disconnect between their communication and actions, especially as they are given more positional power. This often results in climates of silence, where individuals and collectives fail to speak up about various issues because they are either fearful or feel it will not be effective (Morrison & Milliken, 2003). Together, this research suggests that unsupportive communication and climates of silence are likely to influence compassion at work.

Connecting the Dots: Creating a Context for Compassion

This study seeks to extend our understanding of compassion at work by exploring employees' experiences with highly compassionate leaders. Specifically, this study advances three primary research questions. First, research on the communication of emotions suggests that expressing personal, intense, and negative emotions (i.e., pain or

suffering) at work has long been excluded. This may create a context where many employees feel uncertain about the appropriateness of sharing pain and suffering at work. Scholars have recently theorized about the potential for uncertainty to limit expressed suffering at work (Kanov et al., 2017), but little empirical work has explored this within the context of compassion. My first research question explores this topic by asking:

RQ1: What makes employees hesitate to disclose pain and suffering at work?

Secondly, how leaders communicate with employees stands to greatly influence the ways they make sense of ambiguous organizational realities. Leadership has been shown to influence perceptions of appropriate emotional feeling rules at work (Tracy & Malvini Redden, 2019). With regard to compassion, leadership has been cited as an important influence in shaping the context for compassion (Worline & Dutton, 2017) but has received little empirical attention. Consequently, it would be interesting to understand how employees make sense of their leaders' compassionate communication and its influence on their willingness to disclose pain and suffering at work.

RQ2: What messages and behaviors do employees cite from especially compassionate leaders that contribute to creating a context in which they feel comfortable expressing suffering at work?

Finally, compassion theory suggests that compassion is a relational, dynamic process that is mutually accomplished through interaction (Way & Tracy, 2012; Dutton et al., 2014). However, many questions remain as to how leaders best understand and enact what employees feel would be compassionate. Compassion is inherently subjective, and people stand to want and need different things in the face of suffering. Additionally, organizational contexts and roles may come with different affordances, further

influencing what can be done. It would be interesting to know how it is that leaders work to understand what their employees need and how they negotiate the best response. My final research question explores this dynamic.

RQ3: How do employees perceive their leaders discover and enact compassionate actions in the face of their suffering?

CHAPTER FIVE

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This study utilized qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews in order to explore participant experiences with compassionate leaders. Qualitative interviews were suited for this project as they allow for in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of employees. In this section, I outline sampling and recruitment, data collection, participant demographics, and analytic procedures. All protocol and procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Arizona State University.

Sampling and Recruitment

This study utilized purposive sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017; Tracy, 2020) and positive deviance case selection (Bisel et al., 2020). Purposive sampling is often used in qualitative research in order to "choose data that fit the parameters of the project's research questions, goals, and purposes" (Tracy, 2020, p. 82). In the present study, purposive sampling was used to identify participants that fit the criteria for a positively deviant case of compassionate communication. Positive deviance is defined as "intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways" (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004, p. 829). Bisel and colleagues (2020) identify three ways that researchers can establish a positively deviant case: (a) quantitative methods, (b) historical reconstruction, or (c) strict inclusion criteria.

Given that compassion is an individual process that is subjectively experienced by an organizational member, quantitative metrics are not appropriate in identifying compassionate communication. Consequently, this study used a strict inclusion criteria to define case boundaries. All participants met the following criteria: (1) be able to identify

someone they consider to be a leader at their organization; (2) consider this leader to be especially compassionate; (3) and have personally experienced (been a recipient of) compassion from this person in the face of their own pain or suffering within the last year. Considering that what it means to be a leader is subjective, it was not specifically defined for participants (i.e., leader was not defined explicitly as a manager or supervisor). Although recruitment did not explicitly exclude middle-managers or senior leadership, participants needed to be able to identify a leader they had experienced as compassionate and be able to discuss that relationship and experience. Because I was focused on participants being able to recall experiences of compassion, I also specified that participants must have experienced compassion from their leader within the last year.

In order to recruit participants, I utilized my own personal social networks (face-to-face, email, LinkedIn, Facebook, internal email listserv) and invited them to both participate and forward the call for the research study. Additionally, I used snowball sampling from participants in the study to expand the participant pool and identify additional individuals who fit the sample (Tracy, 2020).

Initially I reached out to friends, family, and colleagues through group text messages, group messaging applications, and email. This initial request, sent out on August 19, 2020, was framed informally but included strict inclusion criteria. The following is an example of this initial script:

> I'm reaching out with an invitation. I'm starting to gather data for my dissertation focused on compassion in organizations. I wanted to reach out to see if any of you may qualify and be interested in an interview for the project.

> In short, I'm looking to understand people's (you all) experiences with compassionate leaders at work.
>
> To qualify, you need to be able to (1) identify and speak about a leader at your work, that you (2) consider to be highly compassionate, and (3) have personally experienced compassion from in the face of pain or suffering within the past year.

I also sent an additional note asking people from my social networks to forward this call to anyone they thought would qualify and, if they were comfortable, to post it on their relevant social media. This initial call yielded 8 contacts for interviews.

Roughly one month later, on September 15, I posted an additional call to Facebook, a social networking site. My membership on this site includes individuals across various educational, work, and personal contexts, who themselves have additional networks. The following post was made to Facebook twice, initially on September 15th and then again on October 5th.

> Have you experienced compassion from a leader at work in a moment of pain or suffering?
>
> If so, I'd love to talk with you about a potential interview for my Dissertation work, where I'm working to expand our understanding of workplace compassion and compassionate leadership.
>
> To participate, your main involvement would be a ~60-minute interview via Zoom or over the phone where you'd share about your experiences with this leader, as well as a short demographic survey and consent form.
>
> All you need to "qualify" for this study is to...

(1) Have experienced compassion from someone you consider to be a leader within the last year, and be able to speak to that situation.

(2) Consider this leader to be especially compassionate.

If you qualify and are interested, please shoot me a message here on FB or email me at ctietsor@asu.edu.

I would also GREATLY APPRECIATE if you shared this widely. I'm hoping to understand a diverse and broad range of experiences across industries and demographics, so the more broadly this can be spread the better.

Thanks in advance for your help in my work and in furthering our efforts to create more compassionate workplaces!

The initial Facebook post, combined with the subsequent post roughly three weeks later, yielded an additional 8 participants, including people within my personal network and those with whom I did not have a previous relationship. Additionally, the same script was shared on my LinkedIn profile on October 5th as well, which yielded an additional 3 interviews.

At this time, with roughly 20 interviews completed, I recognized that my sampling needed additional demographic diversity with regard to ethnicity and LGBTQ+. Additionally, I recognized that, while I had recorded participant gender in my previous interviews, I had not asked about sexual orientation. Sexual orientation was added to the demographics form for all interviews moving forward, and former participants were invited to update their demographics with new information.

In an effort to recruit a more diverse sample with regard to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, I reached out to people who I thought may have greater access to

these demographic groups, including several people I had previously interviewed. With each, I discussed my desire to better represent and understand the diverse perspectives of people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community within my study. Within this conversation, I also asked if they felt comfortable sending the recruitment script along to people who fit within specific underrepresented demographic groups. Additionally, I contacted my personal networks again with a similar request, where I explained my desire to include more underrepresented voices within my study and asked if they felt comfortable forwarding the recruitment script with anyone they knew who identified with the above demographic categories and may qualify for the study. Finally, I brainstormed within my personal social network and loose ties to identify anyone who identified as BIPOC or LGTBQ+ and reached out to see if they qualified for the study. These efforts yielded 10 additional interviews, bringing the total number of interviews for the study up to 31. All participants completed a demographics survey and informed consent (see Appendix A).

Participants

Thirty-one people participated in this study. Participants came from a variety of industries, including education (*n* = 13), business services (*n* = 5), health services (*n* = 4), finance (*n* = 3), social services, (*n* = 2), transportation (*n* = 1), public administration (*n* = 1), pastoral ministry (*n* = 1), and funeral services (*n* = 1). Sixteen participants identified as female, 14 identified as male, and one identified as genderqueer. The majority or participants (n = 22) identified as heterosexual/straight, as well as gay (*n* = 2) and bisexual (*n* = 1). Five participants chose not to disclose sexual orientation. The ethnic and racial makeup of the sample included people who identify as white (*n* = 20; 64.5%),

Asian/Asian American (*n* =3), multiracial (*n* = 2), Latino/Hispanic (*n* = 2), Native American (*n* = 1), Black/African American (*n* = 1), African (*n* = 1), and Middle Eastern (*n* = 1). Participant age ranged from 20 to 42 years (*M* = 31, *SD* = 4.91). Participants held varying levels of education, including bachelor's degree (*n* = 12), Master's degree (*n* = 14), and Doctoral degree (*n* = 5). Median household income was $75,000-100,000 with the highest earning household earning $275,000-300,000 and the lowest earning less than $25,000.

Demographic data was also captured for the "especially compassionate leader" who participants referred to throughout the interviews. Leader ethnicity included white (*n* = 24; 77%), Asian/American (*n* = 3), Black/African American (*n* = 2), Latino/Hispanic (*n* = 1), and biracial (*n* = 1). Twenty leaders were female and eleven were male. Participants reported knowing these leaders for varied lengths of time, with a range of 6 months to 204 months (*M* = 36.00 months, *SD* = 39.00 months, *Mdn* = 25 months). Additionally, participants reported being in their current role for varying lengths of time, with a low of two months and a high of 82 months (*M* = 27.20 months, *SD* = 20.30 months, *Mdn* = 18.50 months).

Interview Data

Before the interview, each participant completed a demographic survey and informed consent. All interviews were conducted over Zoom, which allowed for audio/video recording and aligned with IRB-mandated social distancing regulations. Zoom artificial intelligence transcription services automatically transcribed the interviews, and all interviews were then reviewed for accuracy. In total, the 31 interviews led to a total of 2154 minutes of recorded audio with a range from 42 to 90 minutes (*M* =

69.00, *SD* = 13.42). Transcripts for all participants totaled 359,959 words (roughly 800 single space pages), for an average of 11,611 words (roughly 26 single space pages) per transcript.

Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative interviews are especially well-suited to explore the ways in which participants make sense of and ascribe meaning to their lives, and "provide opportunities for mutual discovery, understanding, reflection, and explanation via a path that is organic, adaptive, and oftentimes energizing" (Tracy, 2020, p. 156). In particular, in-depth qualitative interviews allow researchers to access one's "life world," or their everyday lived experience (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 14). This approach allows the researcher to encourage stories, probe participants' thinking and assumptions, and understand how they are experiencing phenomena from their subjective experience.

Given the focus on organizational members' positive experiences of compassion from a leader, these interviews took the form of respondent interviews. Respondent interviews focus on "social actors who all hold similar subjective positions and have experiences that attend to the researcher's goals" (Tracy, 2020, p. 159). Throughout the interviews, I took the stance of deliberate naivete (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), which focuses on bringing no presuppositions or judgements to the interview and to focus on emergent understandings from participants (Tracy, 2020). Additionally, given the personal and emotional nature of suffering, I drew from responsive interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; cf. Tracy, 2020) in my efforts to conduct the interviews with emotional sensitivity. In line with this thinking, many participants remarked that these interviews

provided a useful space for them to process their own experiences of suffering and compassion at work.

Interview Guide

This study utilized a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix B), which allowed me to attend to my research goals while also allowing flexibility to probe for further clarification and pursue interesting and unexpected aspects of the interview. Most of the questions within my interview guide took the form of *generative questions*, which are "non-directive, non-threatening queries that serve to *generate* (rather than dictate) frameworks for talk" (Tracy, 2020, p. 166). Example questions included, "What does compassion mean to you?" and "How is it that you felt comfortable expressing your suffering that you first shared?" These questions served to shift control of the interview to the participant and let them lead the direction of the conversation.

After roughly 15 interviews, several questions were dropped from the interview. These questions asked respondents to imagine an idealized organization and leader where compassion flourished. Many participants struggled to come up with specifics that contributed to the research study and often deferred back to their own leader and organization. Additionally, some interviews were running close to 90 minutes, so cutting these questions allowed me to continue focusing on other questions while respecting participants' time. For the final interview guide used across participants, see Appendix C.

Analysis

This study used a *phronetic iterative* approach to data collection and analysis (Tracy, 2020). Building on Flyvbjerg (2001), this approach views qualitative social scientific research as a way to "address pressing concern and prompt change" rather than

solely extending theory (Tracy, 2020, p. 6). Phronesis is a form of contextual judgement often referred to as practical wisdom (Flyvbjerg, 2001), and as a qualitative methodology, *phronesis* focuses on contextual practice and the situated, subjective nature of social phenomena (Tracy, 2020). As an *iterative* approach, research "alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories" (Tracy, 2020, p. 209). This approach stands in contrast to purely deductive and inductive approaches, arguing that researchers can honor emergent findings while acknowledging that findings "are driven by what the inquirer wants to know and how the inquirer interprets what the data are telling [them] according to subscribed theoretical frameworks, subjective perspectives, ontological and epistemological positions, and intuitive field understandings" (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 77). In other words, an iterative approach embraces emergent findings as well as the researcher's interests, prior experiences, and knowledge. This approach fit my research question and aligned with my desire to do "use-inspired, practical research, that not only builds theory, but also provides guidance on social practice and action" (Tracy, 2020, p. 210).

When collecting data, I engaged in a variety of techniques that align with a phronetic iterative approach. First, borrowing from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014), I engaged with emergent data along the way before all interviews were complete. This took place in several ways. First, I fact-checked Zoom transcriptions for accuracy which served as a form of data immersion throughout the process. When doing so, I started a document to capture notes of what struck me from my review of the transcript. I also created a document to capture analytic memos (Saldana, 2016), such as connections of emergent findings to previous literature, interesting ideas, or confusing

aspects of the data, and talked through these emergent findings with friends and colleagues. Throughout all of this, I drew upon key sensitizing concepts for this project, including compassion theory (Kanov et al., 2004; Miller, 2007; Way & Tracy, 2012), discursive leadership (Fairhurst, 2007, 2010; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014), and the communication of emotions (Paul & Riforgiate, 2015; Riforgiate & Kamarova, 2017; Tracy & Malvini Redden, 2019).

Before turning to analysis procedures, I will briefly discuss my role as researcher and self-reflexivity as well as ways I attended to these potential influences on my data collection and analysis.

Role and Self-Reflexivity

Central to a phronetic iterative approach is the recognition that "perception is always related to a specific (self-reflexive) subject position" (Tracy, 2020, p. 6). This is true not only for participants but also asserts that researchers themselves cannot maintain objectivity or separation from the data. Consequently, self-reflexivity, referring to a sense of "honesty and authenticity with one's self, one's research, and one's audience," (Tracy, 2010, p. 842), has long been seen as essential in qualitative research. Richardson (2000) argues this must be a central criterion when reviewing qualitative work, as it allows the reader to understand how the researcher came to this subject and how their positionality may have influenced the research project. In this spirit, it is critical that I reflect on the ways that my experiences, methodological and paradigmatic convictions, and positionality (Tracy, 2020) influenced my design and analysis.

I align with what many refer to as the interpretivist paradigm (Deetz, 1995; Tracy, 2020). This paradigm emphasizes that I want to *get it right* (accurately describe what is

going on empirically; Deetz, 1995) but ultimately view knowledge as socially constructed through our communication and therefore local and contextual (Anderson & Baym, 2004). Additionally, I am embedded in literature that aligns with positive organizational scholarship (POS; Cameron & Dutton, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2017), which seeks to identify thriving within organizations. POS also aligns with my commitment to humanistic management (Pirson, 2017), which suggests that organizations should be focused on organizational members' well-being as much or more as they are focused on economic and bottom-line principles. Lastly, my positionality inevitably influences how I experience and see the world. I identify as straight, male, cisgendered, white, partnered, and able-bodied.

All of these – my paradigmatic lens, my commitments around positive organizational scholarship, and my majority identity categories – informed and influenced my design, analysis, and interpretation of this project. In order to attend to this throughout the process, I engaged in several practices to encourage my own self-reflexivity and create accountability about potential biases. First, like any researcher, I anticipated that initial sampling via personal networks may turn toward similar demographics. Such a focus can limit understanding of the subjective experience of compassion and suffering within organizational life across a range of participants. Knowing that my own subjective position may leave me imperceptive to the influences of race and ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, and to explore how demographic differences had theoretical and practical significance within this study, I took additional time in interviews with participants who held traditionally minoritized and marginalized identities to explore the ways that their subjective position may influence their ability to

express suffering and experience compassion at work. When significant experiences based on identity clearly emerged, I engaged in targeted sampling so as to ensure additional demographic diversity in the sample, including a focus on people of color and members of the LBGTQ+ community. Secondly, in order to mitigate any potential to see compassion only as a positive phenomenon (in line with my convictions around POS), I included questions about downsides or challenges related to compassion within my interview. This practice grounded me in the limits and shadow-sides of compassion and illuminated its complexity within organizational life. Third, about half-way through data collection, I started to engage in *member reflections* (Tracy, 2010) to explore my own interpretations of data participants. To accomplish this, I specifically reflected back to participants' interpretations that I had about emerging data and asked them to consider how that matched with their experiences. This not only served to help me accurately interpret and make sense of my data, but also led to valuable feedback that further nuanced my findings.

Coding Procedures

Coding is an analytic technique that involves assigning codes – words or short phrases – to the data in order to symbolically capture what is present (Saldana, 2016). Ultimately, coding serves to reduce the empirical materials so that one can make sense of what is occurring in the data. After 10 interviews, I began first-cycle coding in Nvivo qualitative software, focusing on the question "What is going on here?" (Charmaz, 2014). In this way, first cycle coding focused on what was going on in the data and its emergent properties. The first 10 transcripts led to 377 initial codes. At this time, I started to

organize these initial codes into "sets" within Nvivo software to understand the ways that they may relate to each other, which led to my first draft of an initial codebook.

Before finalizing the codebook, I coded another 6 transcripts with first-cycle coding methods, which yielded roughly 100 additional codes. At this point, with 16 transcripts fully coded I had assembled nearly 500 first-level codes. Next, I took several steps to reduce the number of overall codes. First, I merged codes that were similar and/or redundant (i.e., "door always open" and "she made that door so open"). Secondly, I started to organize codes hierarchically when conceptually similar, in line with pattern coding (Saldana, 2016), which helped reduce the number of overall codes. These two steps led to 111 remaining codes, excluding all codes that contained only a single reference. Finally, I reduced further by eliminating any codes that did not attend to the research questions or connect with prior literatures (Bisel et al., 2014). This led to the creation of a codebook with 42 codes, which included name of code abbreviation, code name, description, and in vivo examples from transcripts.

This codebook was utilized to code the rest of the transcripts while still attending to emergent or surprising new data. Several new codes emerged, especially related to uncertainty for individuals holding traditionally minoritized or marginalized identities, which were subsequently added to the codebook. Throughout the entire process of coding, I made analytic memos within Nvivo on ideas that struck me while coding as well as especially poignant examples within the data. Additionally, I created a running document with analytic memos for reflections, insights, or connections that I had throughout my process of coding and analysis. Many of these memos emerged after

conversations with committee members, colleagues, or friends about coding and initial analysis.

After all data was coded, I engaged in several additional analysis and theorizing activities. First, due to the fact that differences emerged for the experiences of participants holding traditionally marginalized and minoritized identities, I decided to run several analysis of case attributes within Nvivo. Specifically, I ran two analyses to see if there was a significant difference in code frequency based on (1) gender identifications (male, female, and genderqueer) and (2) holding a majority identity (e.g., white, cis gender, straight) versus holding a traditionally minoritized and marginalized identities (e.g., non-white, LGBTQ+). The first case analysis revealed minor differences related to specific codes (e.g., leader expressed suffering, genuine check-in), and among the minor differences, there were no significant thematic connections between codes that suggested gender differences related to the current research questions. Consequently, this was not included in my findings. The second case analysis explored differences between traditionally marginalized/minoritized identity groups and majority identity groups. This case analysis showed that participants holding traditionally marginalized and minoritized identities faced additional uncertainty than majority participants, which gives further support for these differences that had already emerged within coding procedures. These differences are reflected in my findings.

As another synthesizing activity, I engaged in a “loose analysis outline” synthesizing activity as outlined by Tracy (2020). This activity encourages researchers to note their primary research interests and research question and then outline emergent themes that attended to the research question. This helped organize and synthesize the

study's data into coherent themes that attended to my specific research questions. This also allowed me to share my overall thematic findings with key collaborators which allowed for succinct feedback and helped narrow the study's focus on interesting and surprising data that extend current understanding of compassion within organizations.

CHAPTER SIX

THE INHERENT UNCERTAINTY OF EXPRESSED SUFFERING AT WORK

This chapter presents findings related to the first research question, which asked: *What makes employees hesitate to share pain and suffering at work?* Until recently, the idea that individuals would hesitate to speak up about suffering at work has received little attention within the compassion literature. Consequently, much of the compassion literature operates on the assumption that suffering is readily expressed by participants, and that leaders will be able to easily recognize, relate, and (re)act to an employees' suffering.

Research on the communication of emotions at work (Tracy, 2008; Tracy & Malvini Redden, 2019) has documented that organizations are a precarious context to share and make sense of emotions, especially strong personal emotions such as pain, suffering and grief. When applied to the context of compassion theory, this research would suggest that many employees may not feel comfortable expressing pain and suffering at work, especially when it relates to aspects of their lives outside of their workplace role. Recently, compassion scholars have started to explore the potential intersection of uncertainty, expressed suffering, and compassion at work. Kanov and colleagues (2017), for example, theorized that individuals may experience uncertainty about expressed suffering at work stemming from personal, relational, and organizational contextual factors. Collectively, they argue these uncertainties may limit the expression of suffering which, in turn, limits compassion at work. To date, these theoretical propositions have yet to be explored empirically.

My findings offer empirical evidence that employees do indeed experience various uncertainties related to expressing suffering at work, both in decisions to express suffering and the depth of suffering they will disclose. Additionally, my findings demonstrate that individuals experience additional uncertainty even after they express suffering, such as uncertainty about appropriate work requests to alleviate suffering, uncertainty about coworkers' perceptions, and uncertainties related to on-going pain or suffering that is not alleviated quickly. These findings are particularly striking given the positively deviant case selection; by exploring employees experiences with highly compassionate leaders, one could logically conclude this is where employees would be *least* likely to experience uncertainty.[1] Collectively, these illustrate the complexity of expressed suffering at work and the need to further explore its connection to compassion theory at work.

In what follows, I offer empirical evidence that employees hesitate to express suffering at work due to uncertainties about how their expressed suffering will be perceived, which limits compassion process. First, I describe how employee uncertainty

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[1] The use of a *positively deviant case selection* sample constitutes Flyvbjerg (2006) calls a *critical case*. Case study research often notes the inherent limitations related to generalizability due to small samples used in qualitative research. Flyvbjerg argues that particular types of cases may provide greater generalization when chosen strategically. Critical cases are a specific type of case sampling that focuses on extreme examples where particular findings would be most unlikely, which allows for logical deduction to other contexts: "If this is (not) valid for this case, then it applies to all (no) cases." (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). In the current study, one could logically argue that employees would be *least likely* to experience uncertainty about expressed suffering at work within the context of having a highly compassionate leader. In this way, the fact that employees still express various uncertainties about expressed suffering at work gives greater confidence that these findings may generalize beyond this particular case to other organizations and contexts.

is shaped by (1) expectations of professionalism and (2) image management concerns, as well as other situational factors, including stigmatized suffering (i.e., mental health), concerns about specific types of suffering being seen as valid, emerging uncertainty from prolonged suffering, and determining what is appropriate to ask for to alleviate one's suffering. Secondly, my findings evidence that employees who hold traditionally minoritized or marginalized identities face additional uncertainties not experienced by majority participants, including (1) uncertainty when expressing suffering that is directly tied to one's minoritized or marginalized identity, and (2) uncertainty about emotional expression tied to stereotypes and representations of one's minoritized or marginalized identity.

Uncertainty Limits Expressed Suffering at Work

Across my interviews, participants expressed a variety of uncertainties that caused them to hesitate about expressing suffering at work. First, a significant number of these uncertainties stemmed from ideas of appropriate emotional expression related to their understanding of "professionalism" at work. Secondly, and relatedly, participants expressed various image management concerns that created uncertainty about whether or not it was worth expressing suffering at work. Additionally, while the above sources generalized across most participants' experiences, I encountered several situational factors related to particular situations and types of suffering, all of which came with new uncertainties that limited the expression of suffering.

Professional Expectations Limit Expressed Suffering

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many employees shared uncertainties about expressing suffering at work due to perceived ideas and expectation of what it means to be

"professional" at work. Past research has documented the ways that employees are often socialized to understand professionalism as largely excluding personal, strong emotions (Ashcraft, 2000; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Within my findings, professional expectation that served to limit emotional expression stemmed from (1) past work experiences, (2) leadership and supervisory dynamics, and (3) specific organizational contexts.

Expectations from Past Work Experiences. Many participants described how prior work and life experiences have conditioned them to consider disclosing pain and suffering at work a risky endeavor. Elinor, a 33-year-old high-school teacher, highlighted this dynamic when she reflected on whether or not she should disclose a romantic breakup to her leader. While deeply personal, Elinor also quickly recognized that the breakup was not only personally challenging but was also impacting her ability to do her job. Despite all of this, her initial thought was that her breakup was not appropriate to share with her boss.

> I was struggling with something that happened outside of work, but it was interfering with my work. And I did feel initially, "Oh, this isn't something I should communicate with my [leader], it's very personal and…I just wasn't sure if it's appropriate."

As Elinor noted above, previous experiences taught her that these types of personal challenges may not be appropriate to share at work, which created hesitation. Eventually, Elinor did decide to share about this challenge. When I asked her how she decided to share, she noted that part of it was her new headmaster's own disclosure behaviors. During covid, her headmaster had consistently started meetings by sharing about the personal and professional challenges of Covid. This started to re-shape Elinor's

expectations that perhaps this kind of personal sharing was welcomed. Her boss's disclosure, coupled with her inability to hit her job standards, eventually influenced Elinor to share with her boss.

> Hearing her and what she was saying at the meetings, and honestly, knowing that I wasn't meeting the standards of what I want to do and that it would become very obvious soon that I wasn't up to that standard, I did feel comfortable to write her an email. And her response was very incredible and very empathetic and affirming.

Although Elinor finally disclosed this to her boss, she had waited an entire week to do so. When I inquired more about why she waited so long, she continued to reflect on the uncertainties that emerge within professional environments.

> I think my experience has told me that it's best not to bring too much of your personal life to work. And I have worked for, as I said, three other [leaders] beforehand - all very good people, always busy, you know, with 40 irons in the fire doing a million different things…So [why I didn't bring it up right away was], number one, some of my embarrassment and pride, you know, because it was so very personal. And it's like, I don't need to bother them. There's a pandemic going on, you know, there's so much going on. This is not something that needs to be addressed. So there was some of that embarrassment that there is something personal going on in my life and it's really not pleasant, and then I'm feeling that it wouldn't be appropriate to throw another thing on [this leader's plate].

As Elinor notes, the uncertainty in this situation is multifaceted, including ideas around professionalism, what constitutes appropriate disclosure at work, and some of her own pride related to work achievement. Elinor's note about her boss being too busy is also striking, as it must be contextualized within the space of professionalism and personal suffering. All leaders are likely busy, but in Elinor's logic, managing or listening to the suffering of employees does not fall among work-appropriate tasks for leaders.

Dakota reflected on similar dynamics within her own experience of expressed suffering at work. In our interview, Dakota shared about her experience encountered significant challenges in her marriage that were having both personal and professional impact. As she reflected back on how these emotions were managed at work, she echoed ideas of professionalism and emotional suppression.

> I have always been extremely professional, and I try to put on my mask and go to work and get stuff done. That's what you're trying to do right? You go to work, and your job is about kids, and taking care of them and their needs come first.

Dakota invoked imagery of putting on a mask to suggest that one has to hide aspects of their own personal lives in order to fulfill her professional role. Even more striking was the way in which she casually shared about this; in her view, this kind of professionalism was assumed, and she did not appear to disagree with it (or at least had not in the past). She goes on to reflect how ingrained this expectation was within her past work experiences. "[At my previous job], it's a very nine-to-five situation - you don't bring your personal life to work. And if [my personal challenges] had been there, it would have been a very different scenario." Dakota states plainly that the context of her previous job would have precluded her from sharing about these work challenges, and therefore, she

would not have received the compassion and care that supported her through a difficult season.

Other participants further affirmed the impact of professionalism on personal and emotional disclosure. Parker, a 31-year-old healthcare worker, noted a similar dynamic at his work, where people generally don't share as much about topics like personal breakups. "In some ways we do keep some level of professionalism or workplace boundaries. Then you may be a little bit more reserved about things or less candid." Samantha extended this view of professionalism, noting how unique it was that she felt she could relate to her leader in the way that she did. As a 32-year-old working in finance, the organizational context came with high levels of professionalism.

> I mean it was a very buttoned-down place. And so I could kind of sense it, you know? Not as much with [my leader], but I kind of knew that it was a privilege to be able to relate to her in the way that I was, and I knew there is a level at which it's not appropriate to get into.

As Samantha demonstrates, she perceived clear levels at which it is not appropriate to share, and also recognized that her candid relationship with her leader was unique within the industry and organizational context.

Together, these dynamics created a culture for many participants where they felt they must suppress personal emotions and pretend that they are okay. Mackenzie, a 37-year-old who works in marketing, talked about the culture of professionalism at her work and how it leads people to suppress their authentic emotions.

> There's so much in the work culture where – and I get it, right, you go to work and you are a professional, and you go to work and act professionally - but there's

> a lot of like, what does professional mean? And when someone says, “How are you doing today?” should you be honest and say, “No, I’m having a shitty awful day” or do you say, “Oh, you know what, I’m fine Susie, everything’s great, butterflies out the butthole.”

Mackenzie’s reflection exhibits her own frustration with how professionalism often creates a false paradigm where people often suppress their authentic emotions. This, in turn, makes it increasingly difficult for people to disclose when they *aren’t* doing well. She continued to discuss how Covid may be disrupting this pattern.

> I hope maybe that some of this Covid quarantine stuff helps people to understand where life and work intersect. You know, people can’t get away from the fact their kids are working or schooling from home. And so you have to balance that. And hopefully people see that. I think it’s important for people to see the personal side, the human behind the coworker.

Mackenzie’s language here reflects not only what she hopes for the future, but also her current assessment of the realities of this professionalism; rather than seeing each other as humans, many people only see others as coworkers. And being a “coworker” means you only bring your “professional” side to work.

These findings suggest that past research illustrating that professionalism excludes strong, personal, and negative displays of emotion (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017; Riforgiate & Komarova, 2017) extends to the expression of pain and suffering. In turn, this evidence shows how professionalism may hinder the compassion process by signaling to employees that their personal pain and suffering is not appropriate to share at work.

Expectations from Leadership Dynamics. Many participants shared that this professionalism at work was also influenced by dynamics with their supervisors and other leadership. Past research has illustrated that leaders, especially when occupying supervisory or hierarchical roles, have a disproportionate impact in shaping emotion rules (Fineman, 2006; Riforgiate and Tracy, In Press). Additionally, leaders are often unaware of the power dynamics that exist within hierarchical work structures (Hamel & Zanini, 2017), which leads many to be unaware of the impact their language may have in signaling cultural expectations of professionalism and appropriateness.

Dakota talks about how leaders she previously worked with seemed to create "imaginary lines that you just don't cross," signaling a clear level of hierarchy and professionalism. "You just don't talk about certain topics, they don't joke about certain things, and they don't show up to the little staff barbecues or those kinds of things. There's always this imaginary line. It's kind of us against them, which is ridiculous, but that's kind of how it feels." Regardless of the leaders' views on professionalism, Dakota's clear perception based on their interactions with employees suggests that they want to keep professional boundaries that exclude personal disclosure, which reinforces uncertainty about what is and is not appropriate to express at work.

Gage provided another example of this. As a 31-year-old director in the technology industry, he reflected on the challenges of expressing to leadership that people are struggling, saying that it is often challenging to be taken seriously even when sharing direct feedback. When I asked him about his own experiences disclosing personal suffering, he shared that he tried to express this himself as well as advocate on behalf of others who felt uncomfortable disclosing their struggles personally.

> I know that I've tried to communicate [suffering] about myself. I've definitely communicated about [others as well], like "Hey, I'm hearing this [from others]." [Leadership] doesn't really respond well to those kinds of things in general, and I get it. The whole "people are saying this" approach to making a point generally doesn't go over well for executive leadership because it sounds like a hollow point. But I also think that people in general are afraid to vocalize how they actually feel. So I think that there's a lot of issues caught up in that.

Gage captures the double bind that can occur within organizational contexts. On the one hand, expressing general suffering on behalf of other people may not be received well by upper leadership due to its generalized and anonymous nature. On the other hand, individuals often do not feel comfortable disclosing their personal struggles honestly. Consequently, these dynamics become self-reinforcing, where lack of specifics creates less buy-in from leadership to address issues and lack of action on behalf of employees reinforces the belief that leaders do not care, which may in turn make employees even less likely to disclose their own challenges.

Camille also experienced uncertainty with her leader but for different reasons. Camille has a positive relationship with her leader and shared many instances when her leader exhibited great care and compassion toward her. However, Camille also indicated that her leader presented herself as the "consummate professional" at work, which made her wonder how her leader perceived her when she did not match this level of professionalism.

> As I mentioned, she is the consummate professional. I mean, never a hair out of place, dressed very professionally, never late to meetings, and kind of that calm,

> cool collected person who very rarely gets ruffled, angry, or upset. So it could be that I'm projecting that onto myself, but I wonder if she judges me because she does appear that way.

As Camille vulnerably reflects, her leader's consistent projected image as the "consummate professional" makes her wonder how her own struggles are perceived. Given the positive and caring ways that Camille described her leader, it seems unlikely that her leader would judge her based on having a rough day or disclosing personal hardship. However, despite the consistent care and compassion, Camille *still* wonders what her leader thinks. By always maintaining this image of the calm and collected professional, this leader may be unintentionally communicating a sense of expectation that leaves Camille wondering if that is also how she should present herself at work, which has added new uncertainties to expressed suffering and compassion.

Hierarchy can also present other inherent uncertainties related to professionalism and interaction with leaders. Maeve recalls some of the challenging dynamics with her leader with regard to age and gender. When I asked her to reflect on the types of actions this leader did to alleviate pain and suffering, she started by talking about some of the challenges related to that dynamic.

> And again, it's a funny dynamic between us. He's in his mid-to-late 40s, and so there are dynamics that you just kind of have to watch, where I'm the "young receptionist in her 30s." It's a weird dynamic that you want to be really careful with. And so things like offering a hug - I feel like that dynamic particularly is really, really tricky in a workplace when you're also managing dynamics of

> gender and age and supervisory positions, and all of those things with power dynamics.

As Maeve noted, personal suffering and the ways we might work to alleviate it outside of work (hugs, physical affection, and other gestures of intimacy) become more challenging within expectation of workplace contexts. Hierarchy and power dynamics, age differences, and gender dynamics are important to monitor, and employees need to feel their leader is not forcing behaviors that make them uncomfortable. At the same time, one can see how this may create uncertainties for employees (and, for that matter, for leaders) who might make them hesitate to provide support in ways that otherwise may have unfolded naturally.

Expectations from the Organizational Context. Lastly, participants also described how certain organizational contexts signaled varying expectations around professionalism and appropriate emotional expression. For example, research on service work suggests that professionalism often takes the form of emotional labor (Tracy, 2008), where employees must perform certain emotions for the sake of their job (i.e., maintaining positive regard in the face of an angry customer). Oftentimes, these expectations of professionalism and emotional expression occur through socialization processes as members enter a new organization (Scott & Myers, 2005), where individuals learn expectations and then often participate in reinforcing expectations of professionalism.

Alexis, a 32-year-old medical resident, described how medical school and residency often reinforce values of excellence and accuracy, which then make it difficult

to acknowledge when you are not perfect. Alexis reflected on how this dynamic emerged when she lost a patient at work.

> The personality of medical schools is you want to do things right all the time, and you want to get praised for that too. And whether or not that's a good thing, that's the environment that you're in during medical school and it continues into residency. And so I don't know if it was the right part of me that needed to hear it, but it did help to hear [from my leader] that I did everything right.

Alexis shared that it was incredibly important for her leader to emphasize that she made all the right medical decisions when working with this specific patient. Interestingly, as Alexis continued to talk about this case, she did acknowledge that deep down she knew she did not make any incorrect medical decisions that caused this patient harm. Still, the organizational culture of residency made her feel as though she could not openly process her feelings of making a bad decision. In this case, even allowing her to process these emotions was an incredible act of compassion from her leader.

The impact of professionalism and organizational culture are not without consequence. Dakota reflected candidly on how these expectations intersected to create a dynamic at work where it seemed no one is struggling. Throughout much of our conversation, Dakota talked about the deep contrast of her current work (with her compassionate leader) and how this experience would have unfolded in her previous organization.

> I would have been able to make it through the year and it would have ended up okay. But [being at this new organization] made it okay for me to be human. It made it okay for me to have feelings and not feel like a crazy person.

Dakota's language is similar to Mackenzie's, where the complex dynamics of professionalism, hierarchy, and organizational context can make one feel that they are not allowed to bring their full humanity to work, especially when it includes intense personal feelings like pain or suffering. In organizations where expressions of struggle are not welcomed, it can make one feel like a "crazy person" because one might feel that they are the only one struggling.

Collectively, past experiences, leadership dynamics, and organizational context work to create specific expectations about professionalism that often exclude personal and emotional disclosure at work. Within the context of compassion, these expectations of professionalism cause employees to hesitate when considering if they should share personal pain and suffering at work, which serves to stifle the compassion process. Additionally, these professional expectations can also trigger image management concerns, which may further impact employees' willingness to express suffering at work, to which I turn next.

Image Management Concerns Limit Expressed Suffering

In addition to the expectations associated with professionalism, many participants acknowledged that their own image management concerns played a role in whether or not they expressed suffering at work. Undoubtedly, many of these perceptions intersect with (and may stem from) ideas around professionalism. However, they also reflect the personal image management that employees engage in at work, often linked to pride, ego, and a desire to be perceived competently. Parker, a 31-year-old healthcare worker, reflected about how his own personal insecurities and preferred image at work often caused him to suppress emotions at work. When asked about the role of trust in

expressing suffering with his leader, he affirmed that trust was important but noted that it also required vulnerability on his part.

> I think trust is a big piece for sure, but I think also a big piece has to come from that individual and what they think is going to happen when they do share those personal issues. So for me and [knowing my personality type], I care a lot about what other people think about me and I'm very goal driven. I also place a lot of value in what I feel I can achieve....and need to feel I am a worthy piece of that group… So when I'm in a less healthy developed state I don't want to share these things because I'm worried about what they're going to think about me and think that I don't have it all together.

Parker often withholds personal challenges because he fears that disclosing his struggles will impact the way others perceive him. As he continued to reflect, Parker recognized that disclosing challenges at work meant needed to push through his image management concerns.

> I think it's being okay with tapping into vulnerability and caring less about what that other person is going to think…And I think I tried to work on that a lot in the last couple years, embracing vulnerability a little bit more. And so for me it's being okay with that vulnerability and saying "How you react or what you think is important to me, but it doesn't impact me as much as it used to."

For Parker, expressing suffering at work is not only about navigating professional expectations but also addresses his own desire to be seen positively by others. This makes expressing suffering inherently vulnerable for Parker, where he recognizes that he needs to care less about how others may or may not perceive him. Although Parker

acknowledges that his concern for what others think of him still exists, over time he has worked to not let it completely limit him from expressing struggles at work.

Camille reflected a similar notion of managing perceptions of competency and self-image at work. When reflecting on an experience where she broke down in tears in front of her leader, she wondered about what image she may have portrayed.

> So it leaves me wondering sometimes if she worries about my competency, especially when I … [broke down into tears]. I did wonder, “Does she think I’m weak?” or “Did I show too much?” Or “Do I have to make up for this?” And there are still times when I hesitate to show everything because I’m still worried about a perception of not being strong enough or not being competent.

As Camille notes, she left this experience unsure of how she was perceived and the potential long-term ramifications of her tearful interaction. Even though this leader has never explicitly affirmed these image management concerns, they still cause Camille to hesitate to show pain or suffering at work for fear that she will not be perceived as competent.

Elinor’s experience further illustrates the cascade of image management concerns that may quickly overwhelm an employee. Elinor had endured a painful breakup that caused such distress that she struggled to carry out her day-to-day job tasks. Even in the face of such acute suffering, she waited over a week to disclose the breakup to her leader. When I asked how she made sense of waiting, she said she hesitated due to how this may impact her self-image at work.

> And clearly the only response she could have [to me disclosing my breakup], from any feeling human being, would be, “I’m so sorry.” I knew that her response

> wouldn't be "Get to work!" …I guess I just didn't know how it would be perceived. "Am I trying to get out of work?" or "Am I not tough enough to work through this?" So I guess what I'm really saying is it's all me, those were all my perceptions. Because again, [my leader's] response was so incredibly understanding. But I was thinking about the scenario of "How would this change your perception of me?" Of course she's going to be understanding. But would she also think she can't rely on me in another situation? Or, would this undermine my credibility as someone that can balance multiple things and balance them well.

You can see how Elinor herself struggles to fully articulate how this would be perceived, highlighting the implicit ways employees wrestle with image management concerns. What's more, these concerns emerged even amidst confidence her leader would respond compassionately. In other words, even though these "were all [Elinor's] perceptions," she still found herself running through potential scenarios of how this might negatively impact how her leader viewed her. Ultimately, Elinor did disclose her suffering and was met with a compassionate response. However, Elinor's story highlights the extent to which people work through image management concerns when considering expressing suffering at work, and how they might *still* remain uncertain about the ways this could shift their leader's perceptions of them related to competency, credibility, and reliability in other situations.

In other cases, participants reflected that they had constructed certain workplace images that may have not been realistic. Kelly describes how she had cultivated an image for her leader where she could "do all things," when in reality, this image did not include space for her to experience disruptions or challenges in life. When Kelly and her partner

were pursuing foster parenting, they described how the emotions, uncertainty, and extended timetables impacted them at a deep level. For Kelly, one way this pain manifest was an inability to complete all of the work-related tasks that she had shouldered over the years. She shared more about this dynamic when I asked her if there were particular topics she did not feel comfortable disclosing to her leader.

> I would say there were [before] and there aren't now. Two years ago, especially with the fostering process and the weirdness of that, I just couldn't [do everything in my job I had committed to]. Part of it was my own pride. But, I wasn't ready to admit to [my leader] that I couldn't do all the things I said I was going to do…I wouldn't say I felt like he would shame me or that it was inappropriate to ask…but he wasn't really inviting that type of feedback.

As Kelly reflects, personal pride limited her willingness to share personal struggles with her leader. Consequently, when her leader does not explicitly invite her to share specific struggles at work, this uncertainty may easily cause her to withhold sharing her struggles. In Kelly's case, her leader did learn to ask better questions and invite various types of sharing at work which enabled Kelly to feel more comfortable. "So now even if I was hesitant, he asks enough questions that it would come out, whereas before, he would listen to it, and you'd have to really let him know what you needed him to do." This simple ending reflection beautifully captures how delicate it can be to express suffering at work given the uncertainty of how they may be perceived.

Situational Factors Limit Expressed Suffering

Although the majority of uncertainties related to expressing suffering at work stemmed from professionalism, workplace appropriateness of emotional expression, and

image management, there were several other distinct sources of uncertainty that participants described related to expressing pain and suffering at work. These included (1) stigmatized suffering, such a mental health, (2) appraisals of suffering, or uncertainty about their suffering being seen by others as valid, (3) emerging uncertainty related to prolonged suffering, and (4) uncertainty related to what employees can ask for to alleviate suffering at work.

Stigmatized Suffering and Image Management Concerns. First, certain types of suffering may be stigmatized at work and carry specific image management concerns beyond those identified above. One poignant example of this relates to the stigma of mental health challenges at work, and how mental health specifically could be tied to competency and one's ability to do their job. Francesca, a 25-year-old working in business operations, described how she felt uncomfortable disclosing the specific nature of her health challenges to her leader because of uncertainty of how it would be perceived.

> I didn't want to tell her [specifically about mental health challenges] because I was nervous she would think of me differently. And now looking back, I know she wouldn't have but because we were at a work setting I decided to not let that out beyond HR. I don't know…some people have different stigmas toward it and it's just "You're at work, do your work." …So I think that was more just a work decision and that I wasn't sure how she would react because I'm not sure how anyone would react.

In this example, you can see that Francesca is still processing the *why* behind her not disclosing this information, as she knows that her boss "wouldn't have" seen her

differently. However, in her view, mental health and its associated stigmas created dynamics that she deemed too risky to navigate at work. Consequently, this led her to minimize specifics and only disclose that she was struggling more generally, which may limit her leader's ability to fully understand and support her through her specific challenges at work.

In another striking example, one participant shared about a deteriorating sense of compassion from his leader specifically related to empathizing across mental health challenges. Gage reflected on how his own depression and anxiety were exasperated by the pandemic. Rather than feeling support from his leader, he felt that they were not adapting their own management and interaction with Gage through this new season. When I started to pick up that Gage had changed the level of disclosure he had with his leader, I asked Gage how he made sense of changing to more strategic disclosure within his relationship with that leader.

> Yeah, I think the turning point for me was as somebody who has struggle with anxiety and depression for at least the last decade - probably longer, actually, I just didn't know what to call it - I think I had this moment that shifted my thinking of like, "I don't think that this person fully understands differences in leadership style, or the idea of a leadership style versus a one size fits all, or that there's a right way or a wrong way. And he would never say it like that, he would never ever say it that way. But functionally, you know…And so I think once I realized that I was like "Okay, I need actually be really careful about what I share." Because the solution is going to be, "Well just do this."

As Gage notes, even when he tried to disclose some basic challenges related to his mental health his boss was not able to adapt in his management practices and went directly to solutions, which Gage felt were often unhelpful or even problematic. Gage also felt this this inability to empathize across differences broke his sense of trust and care with his leader.

> A failure to empathize across differences, and to not understand what it's like to struggle with anxiety or depression, or, you know, as some other people have talked about, 'Oh male leaders not really being able to fully realize what it's like to be a woman in a certain role.' So to me it's okay, even if I go deeper, I don't think there's going to be an understanding and I actually might be making the situation worse for myself.

Throughout our conversation, it is clear that Gage already struggled to share about his mental health because of the challenges of doing so at work. Unfortunately, his leader seemed to affirm some of his fears when they were unable to empathize with the challenges of mental health and adapt their leadership and supervision to match that. This inability in itself may highlight the ways in which leaders assume that their "ideal employee" is not dealing with mental health challenges, and the assumption that therefore all employees can be supervised in the same way.

Concerns About Suffering Being Seen as Valid. Secondly, some participants reflected uncertainty about what "counted" as suffering at work, unsure if others would perceive their suffering as valid. Suffering is inherently subjective, and some expressions of suffering may fail to engender empathy if appraised as invalid or the fault of the sufferer (Atkins & Parker, 2012). In the present case, participants hesitated to express

suffering at work when they were unsure that others would perceive suffering the way that they did. For example, one participant described losing his dog several months after losing his grandma. When reflecting on how he got close to his leader, Amir shared that it was actually the way in which she honored his dog passing that cultivated a greater sense of trust with her.

> I'd say I began to get more comfortable with her when my dog passed away. I [had been] in the position for about four and a half months at that time, and you know, I'd say normally the way I would even respond to [someone's dog passing] would be like, "Oh sorry, you know, you lost a pet. I'm sure they were near and dear to you," and, "You know, if there's anything I can do let me know." You know, the pretty standard stuff. But then for her to go, "Losing a pet is not easy. How's your mom doing? I know that when you lose a pet, you just remember loss that you have in your life. This probably reminds you of your grandma. How is all that?" [Her ability] to remember little details and ask you about it, it helps me feel like she cares about me not just as a number…

As Amir notes, even *he* would consider losing a dog as a more minor event that does not warrant a compassionate response on the level of losing a family member. However, his leader both honored this loss as significant *and* recognized how this loss may be interconnected to the loss of his grandmother. As Amir shared later, losing his dog *was* surprisingly difficult for him, but he did not think it was significant enough to warrant sharing at work.

Gage reflected a related sentiment that only larger, more broadly acceptable types of suffering are typically noticed, honored, and responded to. At his work, Gage shared a

growing sense that only bigger, more acute, "tragic" types of suffering were honored with grand gestures and increased work flexibility, while other types of pain did not seem to be met with the same level of compassion.

> I think there's this feeling where it seems like a lot of people get these really cool experiences [in response to suffering] that I don't get. And not the tragedy piece, obviously, I don't want that. But where is that level of care for me or for other people who I know are suffering but maybe there's a higher explanation of what work and stability and what version of themselves is this person going to bring to the table…

In Gage's mind, his work *does* respond compassionately to many employees in the face of more widely accepted and easily understood types of suffering, such as the loss of a loved one or a family member that receives a cancer diagnosis. In these cases, he shared that leadership had led efforts to provide tangible resources, such as time or meals, and made appropriate work accommodations for people to have time off to care for themselves and their families. However, Gage felt that there were many other types of suffering that were equally valid but more nuanced, needing a "higher explanation" of how it impacted work. For Gage, he was personally experiencing lack of recognition for his own mental health struggles and the ways these challenges were impacting his ability to do his job. In these cases, he felt the organization had failed to respond in appropriate ways by not recognizing this as pain or suffering. As Gage further reflected, he now feels that *only* major experiences of suffering would be met with compassion. "I think that if there was a very extreme situation that would happen there would be that level of flexibility and compassion, because I've seen it, you know, I just have. There have just

also been things that have been really difficult where I wish I felt I could talk about it, you know."

Across my interview with Gage, I could sense the precarity he felt in even discussing a sort of *comparison* or rank-order of suffering. Gage appeared uncomfortable in the interview even suggesting that he deserved a specific compassionate response, as if this might take away from the suffering others were feeling. Nonetheless, Gage still feels as though his own and others' suffering doesn't "count" and isn't recognized in the same way, and therefore will not be met with the same compassionate response as other types of suffering.

Prolonged Suffering and Emerging Uncertainties. Third, some participants who experienced more long-standing suffering (i.e., chronic health issues) noted that this brought additional uncertainties that emerged over time. Put simply, someone may express suffering and receive a compassionate response initially. Over time, however, new questions emerge about how this person and their leader navigate ongoing issues related to their suffering, such as extended time off, inability to perform essential work functions, or other accommodations. Even further, participants reflected that they felt uncertain about perceived limits of compassion, where missing too much work may be seen negatively. Mackenzie found herself in this type of situation as she navigated a second round of brain surgeries. As she shared, her organization responded to her disclosing the need for surgery compassionately and conveyed to her that she could take "all the time [she] needed." However, even though she perceived this to be an authentic message, "all the time you need" is still subject to uncertainty and interpretation.

Mackenzie started to feel the weight of this uncertainty after her initial surgery and recovery.

> I think when I first got done with surgery, there was still worry that even though they said "Hey, take all the time you need," there's still that question of, "Am I taking too much time?" Or, you know, feeling like I've been gone for so long. There was still that anxiousness to get back to work. And so I would login from bed now and again, even though I wasn't supposed to, and I was checking my outlook from my own hospital bed. And it wasn't that I felt like I needed to. I think that was just my own worry that in the past, that's how it should have been.

Despite her organization's explicit invitation to take whatever time she needed to take care of herself, Mackenzie still found herself feeling pressure to get back to work and minimize the potential impact for others. This feeling was so great that she even found herself checking emails from the hospital. As you can see in Mackenzie's reflection, this feeling goes against both the explicit messages she was receiving, such as being instructed not to login during her recovery time, and her own feeling that she didn't need to log in. However, past experiences taught her that she needs to be cautious about not being perceived as taking advantage of time off and minimize work impacts. In a particularly vivid example, Mackenzie reflected on her previous employer, during which she had also received several surgeries. "There was a time at [my] previous job where I had to go in for a surgery, and instead of my boss at that time saying, 'Oh my gosh, no, you take the day off or whatever' they said, 'Can you still get me that report before you go in for surgery?'" To Mackenzie, this conveyed that many organizations may say they are caring but only to the extent that it does not impact their work, especially over time.

Now, even in her new organization where she feels a sense of authentic compassion, she still navigates the uncertainty of how she should balance her own recovery with job-related pressures.

Uncertainty about Actions that Could Alleviate Suffering. Finally, participants shared that their uncertainty continued after they expressed suffering, as many participants felt unsure of what could be done or what was appropriate to ask for to alleviate their suffering. Kelly described this tension with her own leader when she was relatively new in her role. When asked how her leader responded compassionately to her, she described how her leader had gotten better at asking questions and offering solutions (a theme expanded in later findings).

> When I first came to [the University] it was just kind of resting on asking what you need and then not offering anything. And so sometimes, especially if you're newer to the place or you don't feel comfortable yet in a professional relationship to say, "I actually just need a day off or a day away," that feels unprofessional to ask for. So he's trying to do both where he hears specific needs and is willing to try and meet those that he can, but also offer up, "Hey, could I do this, this, or this for you. What one of these things have been helpful." And a combination of those seems to be the most helpful.

This sentiment from Kelly echoes the myriad ways that participants shared of the uncertainties of professionalism and image management for expressing suffering. In Kelly's case, this uncertainty extends beyond expressed suffering and also impacts what she feels comfortable requesting from her employer. In other words, one may finally feel comfortable sharing that they are struggling with mental health issues and cannot focus

on their work. But now, they ask a new set of questions: Is it okay to ask for time off work? Can I skip a critical meeting this week? Can I change the target deadline for this project? Depending on the organizational context, there may be many tangible and intangible ways to alleviate suffering, but employees may feel uncomfortable asking for fear of how it could be perceived by their leader or if certain actions are realistic.

Oftentimes this uncertainty stems from the organizational culture itself. Alexis highlights this dynamic as she navigated patient loss during her medical residency. After disclosing the difficulty she was having after losing this patient, Alexis recalls that her leader shifted her schedule to give her less intense patients without asking her. When I inquired whether or not Alexis would have asked for this, she quickly and forcefully noted that she would not have for fear of how it could be perceived.

> I wouldn't ever have asked. … I feel like her asking me, and me saying, "Yes, I want you to give me an easier case load," that's bad in my eyes. But me initiating that and asking is so much worse. That's just kind of a culture in residency. You just don't want to be seen as a person who's turning away learning opportunities and shirking responsibility.

In Alexis's case, this uncertainty was so persistent that Alexis took this as truth – if you ask for less intense patients because you are struggling, others will perceive you negatively. Indeed, Alexis also shared that her leader taking action without talking to her was the most compassionate way to address this, as she would have turned this offer down. "I actually think that's the best thing she could have done…just doing it without asking me, or even telling me she was going to do it, you know. Within the culture of

residency, that's probably the most compassionate way she could have navigated that, because it didn't really give me an opportunity to say no to doing that, she just did it."

As evidenced above, expressed suffering at work is imbued with uncertainty. Even within the context of relationships with highly compassionate leaders, employees still navigate significant uncertainty about professional expectations of appropriateness, image management, stigmatized suffering, and others. Taken collectively, many participants did choose to withhold certain types of suffering or to disclose in more guarded ways, where they shared ambiguous details about struggles they were having. My findings also demonstrate that individuals holding traditionally minoritized or marginalized identities faced additional uncertainties about expressed suffering at work, to which I turn next.

Individuals Holding Minoritized and Marginalized Identities Face Additional Uncertainties that Limit Expressed Suffering at Work

Many individuals who hold traditionally minoritized or marginalized identities face additional uncertainties about expressed suffering at work. Specifically, my interviews with participants who held traditionally minoritized and marginalized identities revealed that this population faces additional uncertainty related to (1) expressing suffering when it is directly tied to aspects of their minoritized or marginalized identity (i.e., a Black participant talking about emotional suffering related to the police shooting of an unarmed Black man), and (2) emotional expression and impression management for group identities. In what follows, I outline key examples from participants about the uncertainties they faced expressing suffering due to their marginalized identities.

Within the compassion literature, little work has explored how compassion and suffering may be differentially experienced by individuals holding traditionally marginalized or minoritized identities. Research in sociology suggests that many feeling rules are racialized, where some emotions are only accepted as appropriate when expressed by white employees (Wingfield, 2010). Although emotion scholarship has interrogated ideas of gender and masculinity (Mumby & Putnam, 1992), scholars have noted that work on emotions in organizations still have work to do in fully accounting for the impact of race and traditionally marginalized identities (Mirchandani, 2003). As my findings show, employees holding traditionally marginalized and minoritized identities face additional uncertainties that create even more challenges to express suffering at work which, in turn, limits their ability to receive compassion at work.

Suffering Stemming Directly from Minoritized Identities

Across my interviews, it became clear that participants who held traditionally marginalized or minoritized identities felt uncomfortable sharing suffering when it related to or stemmed from an aspect of that identity. For many, they described how core aspects of these identities were inherently framed as "political." When framed as political, this suffering may not be seen by all people as equally *valid*, as people may consider it tied to political and/or ideological differences where opinions differ. For example, few would hear of someone's grandma passing away and consider this invalid suffering or inappropriate to disclose at work. However, a Black person may not experience the same broad validation if they are suffering due to the events surrounding George Floyd's 2020 murder by police and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests. Even though their personal suffering is their own, Black Lives Matter has become a political topic that

draws varying opinions. In this way, a Black person experiencing pain because of these events may not be able to assume that their coworkers will understand and validate their specific suffering due to its political nature.

Many participants acknowledged that their leaders (and others) were not inherently uncompassionate if they held differing views. However, awareness of differing politics and ideologies did create an environment where they had to consider if it was worth it to share when they knew their suffering may be assessed through these political and ideological lenses. Additionally, other participants shared that, because many events that triggered suffering were deemed "political," they were often not seen as workplace appropriate to discuss.

Azi, a 26-year-old Black male, discussed candidly how he did not talk about pain or suffering he had related to being Black. Throughout the interview, Azi talked openly about how compassionate his leader had been to him throughout health issues and other challenges within work and life. However, when I asked Azi about the types of suffering that he withheld from his leader, he was quick to note that there were many topics that he did not share.

> Yeah, there are personal things that I don't think I would share. I don't know, I'm just the kind of person where I feel certain things just you have to keep to yourself, right? So for me, I feel there's certain things on political issues or racial issues or certain things [that I don't talk about]. Even though we talk about meditation and mental health issues and stuff like that [at work], I feel there's always a line where I don't want to personally cross because we're in a professional environment. So I always try to remember that.

Many other participants talked about certain lines of professionalism that they did not cross at work, as well as the inherent challenges of discussing race or politics at work. It is interesting, however, that Azi talks openly about meditation, mental health, and spirituality at work, all topics that others suggested likely would not be work-appropriate topics. What's more, not discussing race or politics at work has different implications for Azi than for others. Not being able to discuss race or politics at work means that Azi does not feel as though he can express suffering related to these topics. He shared specifically about how he did not feel as though he could discuss Black Lives Matter at work.

> So for instance during the summertime when everything was going on with Black Lives Matter and everything, my boss, although she agreed with social justice and everything, it wasn't the same. It just was not the same. And so, I understand we're cool and your heart was in the right place. But...for me, it's not my family, and I don't necessarily know George Floyd, but it is still painful. It's still hurtful. So yeah, it does add a dynamic to sharing stuff and going through pain and choosing to disclose certain things.

Even though Azi's leader was on board with "social justice and everything," he still perceived that somehow her views on social justice (as a white female) differed from his views and experiences on social justice (as a Black male). Consequently, he did not feel as though he could talk to her or disclose the pain and suffering he felt during the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests.

As my conversation with Azi continued, I reflected back to him that it seemed as though there were additional layers of uncertainty that he navigated related to expressing

suffering that stemmed from aspects of being Black. In the following excerpt, I shared some of this as a way to get his feedback on whether or not this captured his experience.

> Cris: So you might think [when you're experiencing suffering], "Oh, do I actually want to share this, I'm not sure," because it just all adds that extra layer or maybe multiple extra layers.
>
> Azi: Yeah, I definitely agree with that, it definitely adds extra layers of things. And it's kind of like, I don't know if you know who W. E. B. Dubois is, but he has the concept of the "double-consciousness" for Black people in America. And even though I'm an immigrant from Ghana, I still find myself going through that. So for me, it definitely adds a layer. But at the same time, it's like I don't let it affect me, you know? I gotta thrive. You know, we gotta thrive. I don't want to just survive; I want to thrive. So yeah, it is what it is, keep moving, you know.

In Azi's experience, he experiences additional uncertainties and hesitations when he considers whether or not he would share suffering related to his marginalized identities. Azi compares this to W. E. B. Dubois's concept of the "double-consciousness," (1897; 1903). Here, Dubois suggests that the Black experience is not understood and thus hidden from white people, but that Black people also have to move in a white society. In this way, they must always be conscious of both – moving in white dominant society, and also recognizing that their experience is fundamentally different. For Azi, he seems to be navigating this dynamic related to suffering at work; when Azi suffers in a way that stems from his Black experience, will people in dominant white society be able to understand this *other consciousness,* so to speak?

Other participants extended Azi's view of these additional layers of uncertainty. For Casandra, this reality has become so ingrained through prior work experiences that it now extends to all leaders who do not hold marginalized identity categories. When asked how she made sense of experiences where she did not feel as though she could express suffering at work, she shared the following.

> Yeah, I think for me with her, she was someone where we were just kind of on the same wavelength in regard to social justice and all of this stuff. And I think that was, you know, she was a white woman…and so there's always that "Can I actually trust you?" kind of thing.

Casandra has developed an inherent distrust related to working with white leaders given her experience that they often do not fully understand, welcome, or validate her experience as a Black and Latina biracial woman. In one poignant example, she reflected on immediately after Donald Trump was elected president in 2016 -- a time when she and many other students were hurting. During a faculty discussion about acknowledging this pain within a freshman large-lecture course, she recalled that several faculty did not want to address it because they had a policy of not discussing politics in class. To her, this felt like an inherent disconnect between the white experience of the election and the experience for people of color and other individuals holding minoritized and marginalized identities.

> It is the politicizing of compassion. What does empathy for personhood mean? And it was a lot of old white men saying that you can't be who you are and that I get to say who you are. And that was just super frustrating for me and I couldn't take it anymore, so I kind of snapped out a little bit. But, you know, people were

> like, “Oh, we’re not going to mention it.” [That can’t be a thing], you can’t just not mention something that is heartbreaking for half your community, you know? So, yeah, it’s definitely very frustrating to see that, especially in higher education where it’s supposed to be this coming together of ideas. And then to even say that this is a liberal agenda. No, it’s just education. I think that people learning about different experiences creates empathy.

Similar to Azi’s experience, Casandra reflects how majority culture assumes certain ways of acting (i.e., not talking about politics) without fully understanding the impact these actions might have for others (i.e., not validating the pain of many minorities and marginalized identities). Over time, these messages work to create a climate that defines certain types of suffering that are privileged and accepted at work. In the case of Casandra, a climate developed that privileged majority experiences of suffering, which led to her feeling as though she couldn’t express certain types of suffering at work.

Other participants also felt they could not discuss race or other aspects of their marginalized identity at work, but for different reasons. Sekani, a 31-year-old graduate teaching associate, told me that she does not share about her Black experience with her leader because she knows he cannot relate. When prompted to reflect on if she had ever shared any of her minority experiences with this person, she told me the following.

> I haven’t shared any of my minority experiences, especially the negative experiences, with this person. But I think part of that is because I found people who relate more with my experiences and I share certain experiences with them. And again, I haven’t shared with him, so I don’t know how they would have

> responded. I'd like to believe he would have responded positively, but I haven't shared, and the reason I did not share with this person is that he might not relate.

As Sekani notes, part of her not sharing is that she has others in her life who can relate and will be able to understand. However, what happens when she experiences suffering related to being a Black woman that interferes with a work deadline that she then needs to process with her leader? Perhaps most interesting is that as Sekani continued, she noted that she was also worried that her leader's inability to relate may lead to feelings of discomfort, and therefore does not share in order to protect her leader's image.

> Sekani: I also don't want to put someone in that position where they have to give me a different image.
>
> Cris: What do you mean by that?
>
> Sekani: Sometimes you share experiences with someone, and you can tell they understand what you're saying but they can't be empathetic enough because they probably don't know exactly how that feels... they can't tap into the actual feeling. So, there's all these [times that my leader told me] "Let me know if you need anything" and all this positive talk. But then it doesn't really help because you're like, I actually feel like I shared vulnerably with this person, but I still don't think they got it. And it's not their fault. It's just that these are experiences that you just don't know about. And they just can't get it.

Similar to other participants, Sekani reflected that she has tried to share some of these experiences with this person but feels that they do not fully understand. To Sekani, this lack of understanding is no fault of their own – their positionality simply inhibits them from being able to relate. Because of all these experiences, Sekani now actively works to

manage *her leader's* image so they do not feel awkward, even if doing so may impact her ability to receive compassion.

> Sekani: Again, I value authenticity, so I don't want them to feel like they have to project a certain image.
>
> Cris: Oh interesting. So you're worried that if you share about, let's say pain or suffering specifically related to being Black, and they don't know how to respond, you're actually wondering if they will feel awkward, not knowing how to respond to someone talking about racial suffering in a way that they can experience. It's almost like image management for [the leader].
>
> Sekani: Yeah, and especially when you have other people who could easily identify and relate with your experiences. Cause it's also someone I care about. Caring is not just one way, even though I have experienced it more from them than I have given. Again, I don't want to put him in those awkward situations, like, "Oh, how am I supposed to act right now," you know. And it probably wouldn't even be an issue. They'd probably just ask "how can I best support you," because they're good at trying to understand and help you from your point. But again, I haven't shared my minority experiences with [my leader].

Ultimately, this not only led Sekani to avoid sharing these experiences to protect the image of her leader but also minimize what she shares when he initiates discussion. For instance, her leader did check in surrounding the events related to George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests, but she still chose to only share minimal details. "You know, when the George Floyd stuff and everything was going on, at that point he was like,

'How are you doing in the midst of everything?' …But even [when they checked in], I wasn't raw…I gave an edited version."

Cesar echoed this sentiment when talking about the inability for people to see beyond their own cultural contexts, which often makes them unable to fully understand the perspective and experience of those who hold marginalized identities. As a 30-year-old queer Latino, Cesar recalls a specific moment in which he was overwhelmed by the inability of his coworkers to recognize experiences beyond their own. When I asked about times that he did not share fully how he was doing, Cesar recalled a weekly meeting where he experienced a profound disconnect between the experiences of his white colleagues and himself as a person of color. For context, Cesar shared that there were only two other people of color on staff along with a majority of white colleagues. Many of these white colleagues had family who were police officers, so they had a more positive "context for policing, whereas for the three of us who are the people of color, we come from cultural contexts where interactions with the police were bad." Due to these differences, Cesar felt that many white colleagues did not feel or experience the pain that he and other colleagues of color felt at that time. This disconnect culminated in a meeting about three months into the pandemic, where employees were struggling with the ongoing uncertainty of whether or not they would be able to go back into the office.

> I'll never forget the week after that conversation, the topic of the week for our staff meeting was what everybody wants to do when we go back to normal life. And I just remember I literally had to log off because everybody was just like "Oh my gosh, I'm just so tired. You know, I can't." and "I'm so excited to go to the store and not have to wear a mask and do all these things." And I don't know why

> it stuck out to me, but I think it was one of those moments where most of my time had been spent organizing to keep people safe and figuring out ways to keep businesses open. And one of the things that I was working on at the time was LGBTA+ domestic violence survivors. There was a growing need to figure out resources for folks coming out of same sex couples who had abusive partners, you know, and there was no housing for them and their children. And so we're trying to figure out all those pieces. And yet, the conversation at work was "What do we want to do when everything goes back to normal." All that to say, I think the significance for me was, it was just that everyone had different understandings and cultural contexts.

Cesar's experience points to a deeper reality for many marginalized employees at work. Given that they are rarely in the majority, typical check-ins or proactive inquiries about how people are doing frequently exclude challenges they may be experiencing. As such, and evidenced in Cesar's case, this exclusion may then add additional pain or suffering by the very nature of other people's sharing; when someone is talking about how difficult it is for them to not wear a mask when not recognizing the much deeper pain and challenges of other communities, it may feel like minimization and lack of empathy for experiences different than one's own.

Cesar noted that although this is not the fault of people at his work, it does create further exhaustion and a difficult situation for them to speak up about their own pain or the pain of their community.

> And it's not that they wouldn't be able to understand, but they just didn't have the understanding or weren't able to approach it in the same way that I was. And I

> think that's what made it difficult to move forward in conversation with folks because it felt like they were so wrapped up in the cultural context. I mean, we all are, right, we all have that. But because that was the only reality that they've known, it was hard to come into the space and say, well, "You know there are 50 people right now that are suffering in a way that you're not suffering. Just because you're tired of it doesn't necessarily mean that somebody else has the luxury of being tired of it. Somebody's been living this reality this entire time."

In that moment, Cesar felt that it would have been difficult to share the pain of another community because doing so may be dismissing someone's experience or invalidating the suffering they are sharing in the moment. At the same time, the disparity between notions of tiredness, suffering, and pain frustrated Cesar in a way that it furthered their own pain, and ultimately led to them needing to leave that meeting. Even then, Cesar shared that they made up another excuse to leave, as they still did not feel comfortable sharing the real reason they felt overwhelmed.

While many participants shared about the ways they withheld suffering at work, another participant's experience sheds light on how this politicization and difference of experience can cultivate a latent potential for suffering even when someone is not experiencing it. When talking with Mason, a 34-year-old gay man, he shared that he did not have many examples within his current leader relationship where he withheld information related to pain or suffering. In part, Mason explained that his sexual orientation was clear from the start of his role and therefore has not been a problem. However, as he continued to reflect on this experience at work, he shared that he is

recognizing there is complexity around other aspects of his life that could create challenges in the future. He continued to share.

> There are layers of it too. One of the stressful conversations that I've had with some folks around my sexual orientation has been about the idea of adoption, as [my partner] and I are exploring starting our own family. We're learning that some people might be accepting of people having partners of the same gender, but then it's not okay when they're choosing to raise children. And so that's a conversation that I've been a little more sensitive about bringing up with some folks. And I mean, I've not brought it up with folks at work, but also [my partner] and I aren't talking with a lot of people in general about it. So I'm just trying to think, am I not talking about it because I'm concerned or because we're just not best friends. So we don't talk about those things.

As Mason points to, acceptance around his sexual orientation has not been a problem, but even he is discovering that acceptance has layers. In this case, his discovery that people may not be as broadly accepting of a gay couple adopting has stirred up new uncertainties and hesitations. Toward the end of our discussion on this topic, you can hear how Mason is wondering to himself if he is avoiding these types of conversations at work because of how his coworkers might react, or because he and his partner are processing the topic with close friends only. Most important, though, is that Mason's uncertainties mean that if he does start to experience pain or suffering throughout the adoption process, he may hesitate to share that suffering at work for fear of how it will be perceived or processed by others.

Representing One's Minority Group Limits Emotional Expression

As outlined above, people holding minoritized and marginalized identities face uncertainty when expressing suffering directly tied to those identities. However, I found that people holding minoritized and marginalized identities faced additional uncertainty about general emotional disclosures at work, often stemming from fears of how their disclosure will represent their identity group or confirming stereotypes. Consequently, many participants described that expressing *any* emotions at work is accompanied with increased uncertainty.

Azi described a perceived double-bind related to expressing strong emotions at work. When asked about how his identity as a Black man influenced his willingness to disclose suffering at work, Azi shared the following.

> Yeah, I'm definitely aware of the dynamic of what things to disclose… I'll give you this example. For me, I feel like if I show emotion, it's a bad thing, and if I don't show emotion, it's also a bad thing. So living with that mentality, sometimes I do have to put a face on and not care what people say. And then sometimes I have to be vulnerable and being vulnerable is hard. So yeah, it does add a dynamic to sharing stuff and going through pain and choosing to disclose certain things. It's a catch 22 – if I share emotion, I'm weak, and if I don't show emotion, I'm a stereotype of a Black man who doesn't show emotion.

Azi's reflection shows the challenges related to emotional expression at the intersections of his identity categories. On the one hand, cultural pressures suggest that men should not show emotion or, as Azi shares, he may be perceived as "weak." On the other hand, Azi is acutely aware of the stereotype of the "Black man who doesn't show emotion." In this

way, he feels as though he is caught in a double bind that makes it impossible to know how to express strong emotions at work.

To navigate this, Azi talks about the idea of vulnerability, where sometimes he has to be willing to open up not knowing what the response might be. However, vulnerability does not carry the same weight for Azi as if he were a white man, for example. For Azi, he also has to contend with stereotype threat (Spencer et al., 2016), which is when members of a marginalized group face negative stereotypes that could be applied to interpreting their behavior. In this case, Azi is worried that he may trigger the stereotype of an emotionless Black man, which then increases his uncertainty related to navigating emotional disclosure at work. In his view, he is caught in catch 22 where he cannot win.

Samantha's experience is different from Azi's but also reflects the heightened awareness related to emotional expression when one is worried about how it may represent their identity group. During her transition from male to female, Samantha noted that she was keenly aware that she may be the only trans person that her coworkers know. Consequently, she talked about feeling a sort of burden of representation for how she navigated dynamics, fearing that whatever she did would reflect on the broader trans community. When discussing the public nature of her transition within the field of finance, she noted that she felt like "the form I took at that time was going to be in some way immortalized," and so she was "very cognizant that [she didn't] want to screw it up for the next person." In what follows, Samantha talks about navigating challenges and frustrations associated with being misgendered for fear of how it would reflect on the trans community.

> So for example, when [an executive] misgendered me, I wouldn't jump down their throat about it because I was worried that I would seem ornery. And then, by extension, trans people would seem ornery. There's sort of an ambassadorship effect that happens when you're the only one of that type that people have interacted with. So, for a lot of people in finance, when they think of trans people they probably think of me.

In this case, Samantha actively withheld expressing frustration from being misgendered. However, the rationale is key. Rather than just being generally worried about how this executive would act, Samantha describes being keenly aware of what she calls the "ambassadorship effect," where anything she does would likely reflect on how people at her work viewed the trans community. Consequently, Samantha always had to carry this additional burden of representation when considering the cost-benefit of sharing how she was really feeling across her work experience.

Collectively, my findings illustrate that employees who hold traditionally marginalized or minoritized identities face an additional burden of uncertainty as they consider the risk of expressing pain and suffering at work. This uncertainty leads many employees to choose not to disclose suffering related to those aspects of their identity and to actively manage its impact at work. In doing so, leaders are limited in their abilities to recognize their suffering, relate to them empathically, and react compassionately to their suffering at work. This creates a double burden of suffering. First, these employees already carry the burden of additional uncertainty and emotional labor to manage their emotions at work. Additionally, this emotional labor *also* serves to make it even more unlikely their leaders will recognize and react to them compassionately. In turn,

employees who hold traditionally marginalized or minoritized identities may receive less compassion than those holding dominant identities when suffering within their organizational context.

CHAPTER SEVEN

EMPHASIZING PERSONAL WELL-BEING AND CREATING SPACE FOR SUFFERING

As evidenced in the previous chapter, expressing suffering at work is accompanied by significant uncertainty, even when done within the context of relationships with highly compassionate leaders. Despite these uncertainties, many people do express suffering at work. So, how do leaders cultivate space for the expression of suffering in the face of uncertainty? Research question two explores this dynamic: *What messages and behaviors do employees identify from especially compassionate leaders that contribute to creating a context in which they feel comfortable expressing suffering at work?* My findings suggest that leaders are able to cultivate a relational context where employees feel cared for as people with complex, multifaceted lives, where their own personal well-being mattered as much or more as their work productivity. This relational context works to reduce uncertainty and create space for the expression of suffering. In line with my research question, leaders cultivated this relational context primarily through two lines of messaging. First, leaders consistently communicate messages that privilege personal well-being over work-related productivity. Secondly, they use a variety of messaging strategies to craft emotion rules which invite broad personal and emotional disclosure and normalize the expression of pain and suffering at work.

Before detailing specific aspects of leaders' communicative dynamics, two vignettes highlight the distinctiveness that this more open and personable relational context creates for employees. In what follows, two participants share that this

relationship with their leader *did* influence how much they initially disclosed when struggling (as well as whether or not they disclose at all). Maeve, a 33-year-old woman working at a funeral home, recalls how her relationship with her boss influenced how she expressed suffering in the wake of losing her grandma.

> And so I got a call, you know, at six o'clock in the morning just saying that grandma had died and that, you know, it was done, and they were taking her body to the funeral home she was going to be cremated and all of that. And I think my husband was my first phone call and [my leader] was my second. And I didn't know… for most other bosses, for one thing, I wouldn't have called. I would have just texted, or whatever, and said "I can't come into work, family emergency." But for [my leader] in that moment, he was a person that I was able to call sobbing and just say, "Hey, my grandma has died. I'm not coming into work today. I don't know when I'm coming into work. I'm not okay."

Maeve's reflection highlights the sharp contrast of this compassionate leader and previous bosses; rather than just texting to share generally that a family emergency occurred, she felt comfortable calling her leader to not only share more fully what had happened (her grandma passing), but in a raw emotional state. As she continues, she notes that she also felt comfortable "just wanting to get off the phone" and knowing "that was fine too."

Maeve's choice to disclose details of her suffering not only indicates her comfortability with her compassionate leader, but also highlights the different response these details enabled. When informed that someone is going through a family emergency, leaders are likely to respond compassionately, but may not know the degree to which

their employee is struggling, what can be done to help, and how to make sense of the work accommodations they may need. In this situation, Maeve's leader's initial reaction matched the severity and needs of the situation.

> If there were three parts to [my leader's] response, it was just basically "Oh shit, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." The second was, "don't worry about work, that's done. That's fine. Take it off your plate." and the third was, "What can we do? Just please tell us if there's anything that you need from us."

Maeve's decision to disclose that her grandma passed enabled her leader to respond in a way that met the moment; strong empathy and emotional acknowledgement, communicating clearly that any work obligations will be handled for the foreseeable future, and an open invitation to help in any way possible.

Nancy, a 21-year-old business manager, recalls a similar contrast in her level of disclosure with her own leader comparative to previous contexts.

> We're on a work trip in Puerto Rico and I got a call from a friend, one of my very close friends, who had been hit by a car in Seattle and was at Harborview. And honestly, I said, "Oh my gosh, this is horrific!" And I'm in a taxi with him on this phone call, and I said, "Okay, here's what we're going to do this, here's who we're going to contact next, blah, blah, blah." And he said, "Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry that happened."

This story alone is not striking; Nancy received a call while on a work trip, and because her leader was with her in the taxi, she takes the call and then discloses what happened. However, as the interview progressed, Nancy emphasized that she is typically a private

person at work. When I asked her to reflect back on this situation, she elaborated that she never would have shared this with previous leaders.

> For sure, because [in previous work situations], what I would have done had I gotten that call is I would have said "I'm 10 minutes from a hotel, and I will call you back." And I felt, you know, [my leader] can handle this. At that moment [when I shared details of what was going on], he said, "Do you need to go home?" And I said, "No, I'm fine, thank you." Again, proposing an action, just out of compassion. And again it would have been really bad for the business if I'd gone home at that point. And he said, "I just want to make sure you know that your friend's been hit by a car and he's at [a trauma hospital]. This is really bad, you need to go back." And I said, "I've got it covered, it's all good."

Due to the compassionate and open relationship she had with her leader, Nancy operated differently in this situation of acute suffering than she would have in previous situations. Doing so opened the door for her leader to respond with an offer that, in her own words, "would have been really bad for the company." Additionally, Nancy's disclosure enabled her leader to follow-up in ways that would not have been otherwise possible. As Nancy implies above, in other situations she would have kept this suffering private and separate from her work life.

Together these vignettes highlight the ways leaders can create a relational context that enables employees to share openly when they experience pain and suffering. Additionally, this relational context enables employees to share greater details of their suffering without fear of how it will be perceived, which provides greater context for leaders to respond with appropriate urgency and accommodations. In what follows, I

detail specific findings about this relational context and the communicative dynamics that contribute to it.

Emphasizing Personal Well-Being at Work

The most significant theme that emerged across my interviews with participants was that participants felt that their leaders cared deeply about their personal well-being *as much or more* as their work-related performance. Many participants used language which suggested a perceived dichotomy between their work-related selves and personal selves. In line with that thinking, they often said that their leaders cared about them as “human beings” and not just as “employees.” Additionally, leaders often conveyed a privileging or hierarchy of needs, where they saw being a human being as more important than their role as an employee. In what follows, I outline evidence related to the relational orientation which emphasizes personal well-being before turning to the specific ways that leaders crafted emotion rules that cultivate space for the expression of suffering.

For Erin, a 26-year-old graduate teaching associate, this emphasis on her personal well-being started at the beginning of her relationship with this leader. Before formally joining the organization, Erin recalls how this leader made her feel during their interactions. “She definitely gave off the impression that she cared about how I felt, and that she cared about me as a human, and not just as a potential [employee].” This feeling was validated when Erin lost her mother right before starting her new role. As she reflected on her leader’s response, she shared not only about how her leader embraced her personal emotions, but also how this contrasted with others in her organization.

> I think that she just responded in a way that was very emotional and emotion forward. She made it very clear that even though this is a professional relationship

- and I know that a lot of other folks have been like, I can't tell my [leader] anything personal - that she was very willing to enter this space with me [about losing my mother] to understand my emotions and what I was going through, and to support that.

Given the uncertainties outlined in chapter six, it may be unsurprising that many of Erin's colleagues felt they could not share personally with their leaders. By contrast, Erin's leader helped create this level of comfort by emphasizing her care for her as a human being and not just an employee. Additionally, when Erin did disclose details with her leader, her leader was sure to honor what she said by responding in a way that validated this emotional disclosure and offered support.

Dakota, a 41-year-old special education director, reflected a similar sentiment about her leader, saying that he regularly emphasizes to employees that taking care of themselves as people is more important than their work. "He's not going to let things slide if it's impacting you as a human being. He puts that as a priority over whatever your job is. Whether it's me coming to work or having a rough day, that's more important to him than me getting my job done." In her own words, this leader puts the "human being" as priority over the job. This emphasis on personal well-being took on new meaning when Dakota struggled over several months with challenges with her partner. The situation took such a toll on her, she realized it was having a tangible impact on her work.

And the reality of it is, not to toot my own horn or anything, but I'm a very professional person and I give it 150%. When I'm in I'm all in. I will give everything that I have to give. And during that time period, I just didn't have...the ability. I had reached my maximum capacity to do my job. You know when

> you're when you're struggling to get to sleep at night? You know when you're when you're struggling to get to sleep at night, all of those things, they impact you. So, to realize that "Hey, it's okay if a few balls drop, it's not the end of the world," you know, that someone actually values me as a human being over my work…it was just nice to know that it is okay to breathe for a second. And in the end, to be really honest with you, it makes you much more motivated to do your job.

Dakota's reflection illustrates two key elements. First, she shares that she felt valued "as a human being over [her] work." This value beautifully captures the sentiment that nearly all participants conveyed, which is that they had this overarching feeling that they were not just an employee, but a human being. Secondly, participants described that this relational orientation which emphasizes personal well-being implies a recognition that life issues that may impact work negatively do occur. In Dakota's case, her personal suffering did not allow her to do her job in the same way that she had been able to in other seasons.

Many other participants echoed the importance of being seen as a whole person. For Natalia, her leader told her that it was important to "take care of your mental and your physical well-being" before her work, which "creates space where I can talk about me not being okay." Casandra shared a similar sentiment when reflecting on how her leader interacted with her. "I feel like she looked at you as whole person versus you're just my employee and we're only going to talk about work things. I think that there was a huge emphasis on making sure that the relationships in my life were going okay, you know."

For Garrett, a 32-year-old teaching professional, this meant prioritizing his own needs over work. Garrett found himself in a challenging situation living with family who were immunocompromised. If he taught in person, as was expected of him, he risked exposing his immunocompromised family to COVID. After processing this situation with his leader, Garrett said his leader made clear that he needed to do what was best for him and his family.

> So his ability to say, “You know what, it’s all good [regardless of what you decide for in-person or online teaching]. You have to do what’s best for your family.” He was quick to convey that we would figure it out and that family safety would be prioritized over whether or not I was at school in person. And so he quickly communicated that there was a hierarchy of needs and that family was above the needs of being in building at school.

For Garrett, emphasizing personal well-being meant elevating his own priorities above work-related aspects of his life. “So when he elevates my priorities over his own, that’s another thing that conveys genuine compassion [to me] as well.” Ultimately, this kind of behavior across their relationship led to his feeling that he was a person first, which always came before the work. “The sentiment was helpful and conveyed that he cared about my well-being, again, over and above the product that I would bring the next day in class.”

In some cases, feeling cared for beyond one’s work productivity was so profound that participants described their leaders in ways that made them seem other-worldly. When I asked Jackson, a 34-year-old finance professional, what set his leader apart, he could hardly contain his awe and respect for her.

> She's just an exceptional person. From the minute that I started on her team, it was clear that she cared a great deal. Obviously about the work products that I was producing and the outcomes that I was creating, but also how I was doing personally and what was going on in my context outside of work.

Throughout the interview, Jackson continued to come back to times in which his leader made clear that she cared about him as a whole person, including checking-in on him and celebrating personal milestones, not just work-related tasks.

Sebastian, a 31-year-old faculty member, said his leader's ability to care for his personal well-being was almost beyond words. Sebastian used the term "ethic of care" multiple times to describe the sense he felt from his leader. When I asked him to expand on this, he shared the following.

> I feel like this ethic of care stretches across so many boundaries because I think care is so much more than just caring for your work or caring for those in the context of work. What I mean is... she will go out of her way [to care for you]. And I know she has experienced so much burnout in her role and being in academia for God knows how long. And I still feel that care. It is so elastic and flexible in the sense. She cares not only about how I'm doing in my position, but she just cares [about me], and [she would say things] like, "Hey, like how are you and your partner doing?" and "How is your new job?" I feel like this ethic of care - I don't want to say genuine, but I just feel that it's so transcendent.

Sebastian struggled to find the words to express his leader's compassion. Throughout the entirety of our interview Sebastian had such respect for the care that he felt and received from his leader, which extended beyond his work to how he is as a person.

For another participant, her leader expressed care to her in a way she had never experienced within a workplace context. Elinor recalls the response of her leader when she finally disclosed about a heavy breakup, which she had hesitated to share for over a week. When she disclosed this, her leader's response went beyond merely understanding or validating.

> You know, [after I shared about my breakup], she could have said a lot of things. But she really did go with the path of understanding. And this is very unusual, but she did say she loved me. And it wasn't weird. So somehow, that was something that she felt, especially because what I had been communicating with her was outside the bounds of school, and she did feel comfortable and said it. I never had that experience at work ever. It's very unique to her.

Admittedly, leaders expressing love toward employees in the face of suffering was unique in my data. However, this depth of emotional expression captures the sense across participants that they were cared for in ways that diverged sharply from how they had been cared for in the past. In this case, this included an expression of love toward another who is enduring significant pain, suffering, and confusion amidst romantic loss.

This theme, which describes ways that leaders conveyed a sense of care about their employee's personal well-being and its related expression were so consistent across my participant data that it had nearly twice the number of references as the second most common theme and was present in nearly every single participant's experience. Many other articulations captured the same idea, such as when employees felt their well-being was elevated over work productivity (often when pain or suffering was expressed), when

leaders showed an understanding of life circumstances, when leaders were quick to affirm the employees' value as a person beyond their work role and cultivating of care.

When reflecting on participants' descriptions of how their leaders' expressed care about their personal well-being, it is clear that this forms a sort of relational context and orientation in the relationship that goes beyond specific messages or behavioral actions. In other words, while my data did highlight specific messages and behaviors that leaders use to emphasize personal well-being and enable the expression of suffering, the whole (a relationship of authentic care) was greater than the sum of its parts. Some participants shared that they could not remember the exact messages or nonverbal cues that were used in particular situations, but they still felt a sense of care from their leaders. Put simply by one participant, "I don't know the words, but I know the feeling I felt when she reacted. And when she reacted, it was very compassionate." In this way, compassionate leadership forms a sort of relational orientation that emphasizes the wholeness of employees in ways that extend beyond work and encompasses all of who they are. Once established, this orientation cultivates a sense of safety where employees are able to express suffering and receive compassion at work.

Still, my data also suggest that there are specific messages and behaviors that cultivated a sense of care for one's personal well-being, as well as to open space for them to feel comfortable expressing suffering. Next, I outline unique ways that leaders accomplished communicating this sense of care and crafting emotion rules that allow for the expression of pain and suffering at work.

Crafting Emotion Rules that Cultivate Compassion

Given the uncertainties already outlined in Chapter Six, many participants shared that leaders cultivated expectations about emotion rules at work. In particular, participants described that they could both share about their personal lives at work (and therefore cross over typical work-life boundaries), as well as share difficult emotions such as pain and suffering as well as anger, frustration, or upset. Rather than one universal method for crafting emotion rules that allowed for the expression of suffering, my findings suggest that leaders use several strategies across their relationship, including (1) inviting personal and emotional disclosure, (2) sharing their own pain or suffering, (3) honoring employee disclosure and emotions, and (4) managing work challenges with care. Additionally, my findings suggest that leaders use a specific discursive move to create space for the expression of specific pain points, a concept I refer to as *anticipatory compassion*.

Inviting Personal and Emotional Disclosure

First, many leaders invite personal disclosure at work and, in some cases, give explicit permission to share vulnerable emotions. One primary way leaders cultivated this space was to invite personal sharing within regular check-ins. Brandon, a 30-year-old technology executive, talked about how this became a regular part of his rhythm with the CEO, which worked to value and emphasize him as a human. "I do feel that she's genuinely interested in hearing how life is going in one-on-one check ins. We often go through a full half-hour meeting where she's just kind of exploring how life's going and what I'm processing as a human being [as opposed to talking about work]."

Jordan described a similar experience with his leader. As a 27-year-old new to his role in social work, he was keenly aware of the emotional load and work-life balance

challenges that often occur in his industry. He has weekly meetings with his leader that can last up to four hours, with a significant portion of that time focused on checking in on him personally. When I asked how his leader created space for him to feel comfortable expressing suffering, he pointed to these meetings.

> The supervision [meetings each week]. Just the fact that she makes it four hours long and that we often don't talk about cases until an hour into the meeting. I think it is a great example of how she creates that environment. Even in our unit meeting [with others], it definitely always begins with a check in, which I'm sure most meetings do. But it's definitely a space where I feel comfortable.

As Jordan goes on, he notes that she always checks in on him personally because she believes his well-being outside of work is incredibly important. "She's really vocalizing well-being a lot. She says, "You can't do this job well if you're not taking care of yourself. And I want you to take care of yourself.'"

In other instances, leaders crafted this culture of welcoming personal lives into the workplace in their regular meetings and one-on-ones. Mason describes how his leader does this within their team context by sharing and modeling personal disclosure, but not pushing it on anyone. "She doesn't push about the personal life stuff, but I think what she does do is offer her own personal life things and then allow space for others to share personal life things…" In many instances, participants described that these patterns became so ingrained that, even in a leader's absence, people checked-in with each other. Camille, a 39-year-old administrative professional, recalls what happened when their leader missed meetings for a few weeks while out of town. When talking about how this

leader proactively creates space to check-in with how people are doing personally, she shared the following.

> Yeah, and to the point where it's almost created a norm and we had a team meeting. Maybe last week we had a meeting, and she couldn't be there. We held the team meeting anyway, and one of the team members said, "Well, I know [our leader] would ask this, so I'm going to ask it. How's everyone doing? Is anybody struggling. Is there anything we can do to help support each other?" So even in her absence, it's created that culture.

Personal check-ins where leaders invited and shared about their personal lives was consistent across my data. While varied in the level of personal disclosure they were comfortable with, it was clear that all knew that the expression of suffering was welcomed at work and they often did choose to share.

Of particular note, I was surprised how many participants were also quick to emphasize that these personal check-ins had a sense of authenticity and genuineness to them. Sekani, for example, shared that her leader was someone "who seems like they genuinely care," which allowed her to "be 100% open." For Dinesh, this authenticity was seen in the follow-up, which affirmed that his leader was not just offering support for the sake of sounding compassionate. When sharing how his interactions unfolded after he disclosed his father's heart attack, he specifically highlighted this sense of authenticity of his leader.

> She checked in with me, and even subsequently after the fact, not only just making a passing comment when I first came back to work but continually

> throughout the rest of the days that followed, her just asking about my dad and asking how I was doing. Yeah, that shows that she wasn't just saying it to say it.

As Dinesh alludes to, he believes that many people use expressions of compassion, but these expressions fall short because they fail to create space to follow-up or continue caring. For Dinesh, this feels inauthentic because the care is limited to just the moment.

Others conveyed a similar sense of realness and authenticity. Gage, a 31-year-old technology director, talked about the difference between a sort of perfunctory check-in and one that is authentic. When discussing how his leader works to create space for expressed suffering at work, he said it was primarily a "willingness to have space for a 'How are you doing?' conversation and *for that to be actually real,* you know. It doesn't have to just be in terms of performance. In fact, it would be kind of awkward if that's all it was, you know?" The emphasis on "for that to be actually real" conveys a similar note to Dinesh, where many people can ask that question or say they are thinking of you, but you can get the sense that it is not genuine. Garrett stated this even more plainly. "I think we both know when somebody is just saying something versus somebody who is saying something with all of the unsaid ways that you can, and it feels more genuine."

Beyond personal check-ins and generalized invitations, participants also shared moments where their leaders gave explicit permission and direction about feeling comfortable sharing personal and challenging emotions at work. Riley, a 26-year-old working as a church pastor, described how her leader set this tone early by pushing her to be open as much as she felt comfortable. Especially given the overwhelm that can often accompany church and non-profit work, this invitation was intentional.

> Well, from the beginning of when I've worked there he has always said that he wants me to be able to share openly and honestly about how I'm doing. Especially since he knows that this role has been really hard and a lot of ways and hasn't always been what I've expected it to be.

For Riley, this created space where she could feel just a bit more comfortable sharing when hard emotions emerged because her leader had made it so clear that this can and should be a part of the relationship. A similar situation arose for Mackenzie, when her leader explicitly created space for her to feel comfortable sharing. Mackenzie, a 37-year-old marketing director, started her work with a somewhat unique context, as she knew that she would be having additional brain surgeries in the near future. Knowing the challenges that would likely be associated with this, her leader started their relationship by explicitly inviting as much openness as she would be willing to give, thereby honoring her agency but also making it clear that she could and should share events that were impacting her.

> So a lot of the conversation at the very beginning [of my job], it was always him saying "Tell me everything you feel comfortable telling me. Tell me the things that will help me help you." And it sounds so cliché, but I mean, it's true, right, no one's going to know how they can help another person if they don't say it…So a lot of that was just him asking me to be honest and asking me to be as comfortable as I was willing to be with him.

Mackenzie felt that this continued follow up from her leader conveyed authenticity, where these were not just empty words without intention or care. By explicitly inviting

this, it allowed Mackenzie to open up early. Then, by honoring that disclosure when it did occur, her leader further created a sense of safety for her.

For some participants, explicit permission sometimes took on the form of inviting deeper levels of disclosure in busy seasons where a leader knew they may not have as much space to reach out to a suffering employee. Kelly, a 32-year-old residential higher education professional, talked about how higher education can have busy seasons that simply do not allow for the same level of personal check-ins and proactive follow-up that a steadier schedule might. In anticipation of that, her leader invites employees to share what is going on in their lives, knowing that their own busyness and lack of check-ins may make that more difficult.

> Additionally, I'd say in the moments where he knows he can't [check-in] …So, for example, there are seasons during the year where he has no space even for one on ones. So he'd say, "I don't have time to ask you this, but I want you to always come tell me if any of you are experiencing something in this category that's happening in your world. So even if I don't ask can you please tell me?"

When reflecting back on the myriad uncertainties that exist for participants to share about struggles in their life, one could easily assume that one might hesitate to share knowing their leader is in a particularly busy season of life. By explicitly giving permission and requesting that she share her struggles during this season, the leader made it safe for Kelly to move beyond those uncertainties and share emerging challenges.

As evidenced above, one way that leaders craft a sense of care for one's personal well-being is through inviting and honoring personal disclosures. These function to normalize personal sharing at work, including the disclosure of pain and suffering. In

addition to inviting pain and suffering, my findings also found that leaders may share their own personal challenges as another way to signal the appropriateness of disclosing personal pain and suffering at work.

Leaders Express Personal Suffering

Second, findings also suggest that leaders shape rules for emotional expression at work by expressing pain and suffering themselves. Given the role that leaders have with regard to setting norms and expectations within culture, it may be unsurprising to find that leaders' expressed suffering positively shapes emotion rules. However, leaders also navigate risk about how expressed suffering could be perceived by their employees. Jackson, a 34-year-old finance professional, described how his leader's expressed suffering conveyed a sense of confidence for him because it showed that the leader did not worry about the employees' perception of her. When asked about his leader's expressed suffering at work, he shared the following.

> I actually thought that when she does this, it conveys confidence to me because she's not concerned with how we would perceive her, right. As a leader you could sometimes think – and I struggle with this sometimes even now being a new leader. "Oh, I shouldn't show people how I'm really feeling, especially my direct reports, because then they might perceive that as weakness on my part, or I don't have an issue together. But in actuality, I discovered with her that it can bring even more confidence because she wasn't concerned about, "Hey, now my direct reports are going to judge me in such a way that I'm weak or that I can't handle my stuff." So, I really appreciate that about her.

As Jackson conveys, leaders may rightly hesitate to disclose personally as it may signal that they do not have it all together, an area in which Jackson himself wrestles with his new leadership role. However, as Jackson discovered, a leader's expression of suffering cultivates greater trust and reduces uncertainty in his own emotional disclosure; by seeing his boss share and not worry about perceptions of competency, it allowed Jackson to do the same. When asked what made him feel comfortable sharing personal emotions at work, Jackson stated that "the biggest indicator was just that she was willing to do that with me."

Within a different organizational context, Chloe shared a similar sentiment when describing her own leader's emotional disclosures. As a 27-year-old social worker, Chloe deals with significant emotional overload at work. When meeting with her leader during regular supervisory meetings, it is essential that she feels comfortable sharing about her own challenges, both personally and professionally. Throughout our conversation it became clear that trust was essential for her to feel comfortable, but trust did not capture the entire dynamic. She said her leader's vulnerability was also essential.

> I think her vulnerability helps. And yes, I'm aware she is my supervisor, and she does have power over me, but it doesn't feel like this weird power dynamic where I can't say anything because there's a level of self-disclosure that she has had in which she's been vulnerable and said, "I have a hard time with self-care too" and, "I am bad at time management and sessions too, and it's not an easy fix." So I think her being vulnerable has been really helpful and really encouraged me to continue to share and keep coming back with problems.

By vulnerably sharing that she also struggles with many of the challenges Chloe is wrestling with, Chloe's leader both validates Chloe's experience and invites her continued disclosure while also reducing power dynamics by humanizing the leader.

Sekani echoed this within her own relationship with her leader. When I asked her how she felt comfortable sharing about her own personal struggles, she replied that her leader had modeled that for her before.

> I think one of the ways he created that safer climate was he did not try to be the perfect person. And then when he was also going through [hard things], he shared them. I remember the first day he shared something with an entire group, it wasn't just with me. [It was] personal stuff. And I was like, first of all he is sharing in a group setting [he was] giving me a human image. And that makes me comfortable enough to also project a human image to you if I'm going through stuff. Sometimes I feel that people go through things and they want to keep this strong image that things are fine, and you tend to feel pressure to do the same, even when you're experiencing things.

In Sekani's relationship with this leader, she did share how much her image mattered to them and to others in her organization. But, because her leader was willing to show that he also struggled and was not perfect, giving off what she called a "human image," it allowed her to do the same. Even this imagery of the "human image" evokes a sense that we typically aren't able to bring our humanity into the workplace, which this leader actively worked against by breaking the mold and sharing his own pain points.

Many other participants shared sentiments that their leaders' own personal and emotional disclosure conveyed a sense that it was okay for them to bring their own

emotions to work and encouraged a greater back and forth. For Mackenzie, this included that her leader explicitly wrote that he had therapy appointments on his calendar (rather than just saying "personal meeting"), which "encouraged that back and forth of being able to be open and honest with each other." For Francesca, her leader's personal sharing "helped her understand what I'm allowed to tell her," which ultimately allowed her to "know that [she] can express her weaknesses and fears to her because she [also shared her fears and weaknesses]." For Brandon, a 30-year-old tech executive, seeing his leader "cry with other employees and not be afraid to get vulnerable" and "show empathy in hard situations" has "allowed other people to feel open and vulnerable with sharing their opinions and thoughts" at work.

Clearly, leaders' expressed suffering shapes emotion rules and conveys to employees that it is appropriate to share vulnerably at work. However, several caveats should be noted with regard to leader-expressed suffering. First, many participants stated plainly that their leaders *did not* share vulnerably or disclose personal suffering at work. In this way, this does not appear to be a required trait of compassionate leaders but one strategy that can signal what is appropriate for emotion rules. In other words, leader-expressed suffering often does signal to employees what is appropriate to share at work, but many leaders were able to craft these emotional rules in other ways while not personally disclosing. Secondly, leader-expressed suffering may also have some risks involved. Several participants described a sense that they were unsure of how appropriate it would be if their leader disclosed personal suffering, and if they did, they felt it should be vague and without details. So, while this may be a powerful strategy to signal

appropriateness of emotional disclosure, leaders should know that it may carry risks with how employees will perceive it.

Honoring Personal and Emotional Disclosure

Third, participants describe that a significant factor in crafting emotion rules was the ways that their leaders responded to their employees' personal and emotional disclosures. In particular, participants described that leaders routinely honored disclosure and validated emotional expression. In fact, when pressed, many participants shared that they could not think of a single instance where they shared and did not feel validated. By honoring and validating disclosure, employees get a sense of what is and is not appropriate, and typically continue to share more as the leader continues to validate their disclosure.

In line with other work on compassion and social support, validating one's feelings and acknowledging suffering when it is shared is not a surprising finding. Indeed, my findings suggest that compassionate leaders overwhelmingly work to acknowledge and validate suffering when it is expressed. Of course, these moments of acknowledgement do work to shape emotional rules for expression, but my findings suggest that this sense of validation and acknowledgment extend beyond acute moments of suffering. Put another way, compassionate leaders validate and acknowledge pain, suffering, and personal disclosure across their relationships, in both large and small moments.

Natalia reflected on this within her relationship with her leader. When discussing how her leader created expectations for what she could share, Natalia immediately discussed the pattern of validation across their relationship.

> She always validated my feelings, which I really appreciate. And another thing I just thought of, she never once has made me feel like, "Oh, this is a small thing," and she never once made it seem that what I was going through was not as big of a deal. It wasn't, "Oh my God, you're going through this. Why aren't you doing this, this, and this," you know. She never tells me what to do. She just listens and gives stories and offers expertise.

As Natalia notes, her leader is not making a big deal of small things or being overbearing in advice. Rather, her leader honors and validates Natalia's feelings, regardless of how large or small those feelings *could* be perceived. Even when Natalie asked what she called "stupid questions," her leader still worked to convey a sense of dignity and importance to her. "It's all the other things that when I disclose it, her reaction makes me feel important. Sometimes even when I have to ask the stupidest questions." Natalia points to a deeper sense of validation, where even *small moments* of disclosure and vulnerability create a sense of trust, dignity, and safety. By honoring these small moments, her leader created space for the larger moments later.

For others, they described the importance of continuing to honor this openness that had been created. Camille talked about how critical this was for her in our discussion of maintaining safety within the relationship.

> I think one is that she's never violated that space. I have never felt that if I were to bring up something it wouldn't be welcomed, or that she would cut it off or say "Well, that's not appropriate" or "Well that's nice and everything, but what we're here to talk about today is blah, blah, blah." Right, so the first thing is, once she established it, she's never violated it.

Camille points to the delicacy of crafting this space. A hierarchical relationship that welcomes the expression of suffering takes time to create and can also be broken quickly. In this way, compassionate leaders are cautious not to violate the spaces they create.

Jackson, a finance professional, talked about the incredible way his leader continued honoring this space of validating feelings even when also giving him difficult feedback at various points.

> For instance, maybe there was an instance where I wasn't being generous with the reputation of somebody else, you know, or an organization, and she would lean in on that and say, "Hey, you know, you might want to consider how you're speaking about that person." But there was never a sense of I'm shutting this conversation down because of how you're feeling. Yeah, she's, I don't know, even as I'm describing her, I'm like, "Man, she's just a master."

As Jackson had shared with me earlier in our conversation, "leaning in" was code for when his leader wanted to give tough feedback that she felt Jackson needed to hear. And yet, his leader was able to do this in a way that still never made him feel invalidated or shut down, speaking to the incredible ways she is able to navigate this tension. At the end, you can tell that Jackson himself is in awe of his leader's ability to balance giving tough feedback while still not making the other person defensive.

Other participants described this similar feeling as a sense of not feeling "judged" at work, where it becomes a sort of "no judgement zone." By doing so, this minimized the ways that people might have to put on a "mask" or a "perfect façade," all of which create greater inauthenticity or walls that may make them hesitate to share suffering at later times. Collectively, leaders can help tear down those masks by working to validate

and acknowledge personal sharing as well as expressed pain and suffering, both the large and the small.

Manage Work Challenges by Assuming Positive Intent

Lastly, several participants alluded to the inherent challenges of maintaining this sense of validation and openness when having to deal with work-related challenges or project failures. As briefly seen in Jackson's story above, giving hard feedback to employees may threaten the sense of openness, trust, and validation that employees feel with their leaders. In this way, compassionate leaders must handle these sorts of situations with care, working to address potentially problematic behavior while still maintaining openness and trust in the relationship. My findings suggest that leaders approach these situations by assuming positive intent (i.e., work challenge may stem from undisclosed personal challenges rather than poor performance) and utilizing moments of challenges as an opportunity to check-in on the employee to understand other sources of pain, stress, or suffering.

One unique example of this was the way in which a leader took an opportunity to validate someone's anger when she could have otherwise reprimanded her employee. Brandon found himself upset with the organization's approach to recent Black Lives Matter events and exploded during a meeting with other executives in ways that he knew were inappropriate. However, when he reflected back on his leader's response, he noted how she used this as an opportunity to validate him rather than punish him in ways that could have decreased safety.

> [The CEO, as] this authoritative figure could have made me feel bad about [my outburst]. But instead, she said, "No don't apologize. You were just speaking your

> truth." It allowed me to know that it was okay to express my emotions no matter what I'm feeling, whether it's anger, sadness, happiness, you name it. And it was just a signal to me that the spectrum of my emotions is okay to put on display, while continuing to try to process those in a healthy way versus being totally erratic, of course, and in a way that's not inappropriate. She's really about bringing our whole selves to work, and I think that's a big part of it is people feel like they can express themselves.

As Brandon alludes to, he already knew that his outburst was an inappropriate way to respond and had apologized to his CEO. This acknowledgment and apology may have allowed her to skip over any sort of discipline or hard conversation. However, this is still a unique example of how this leader had many options of how to handle and process this situation. Not only did she not reinforce a sense of punishment or wrongdoing, she actually validated his reaction as an expression of his own passion and truth, and said that he needs to feel comfortable bringing his whole self to work, *including* moments of anger or frustration. In doing so, this leader transformed a moment that could have fractured trust into a moment of *deepening* that trust with Brandon.

While Brandon's example was unique, many other leaders conveyed this more simply by assuming positive intent when checking in about missed deadlines or work challenges, as well as being understanding when mistakes are made. Jordan, a social worker, also recalled how understanding and empathic his leader was when he made mistakes or responded emotionally at work. When discussing how his leader did hold him and others to high standards, he never felt it was punitive or cumbersome.

> But I'm never worried that if I did [something wrong] that she would be on me or that I would be in trouble. Yeah, so I think it's nice to not have that fear. She's super understanding, and when I make mistakes, I'm like, "Hey, I fucked up. I did something stupid." And she says, "Oh, I totally understand why you did what you did in this situation based on what you were thinking." Sometimes I come into conversations with her and I'm feeling super down about making some mistakes on the case or something and I leave the conversation [feeling validated] that, "Oh, I did what I thought was right at the time. And now I know maybe what I could have done [differently in the future]."

Jordan's leader is able to affirm mistakes and empathize by expressing that he likely did what he thought best in the moment. By doing so, she normalizes mistakes and even encourages Jordan to have some self-compassion and recognize that he can do better in the future. Most importantly, though, Jordan says he is able to discuss mistakes openly without being afraid, an essential aspect of continuing to create openness across their relationship.

In other cases, participants describe that leaders use moments where they miss a deadline to check in personally rather than just emphasize their missed work. In other words, compassionate leaders assume that missed deadlines or poor work are a product of the employee's situation rather than their character. and then use that as an opportunity to check in. Sekani recalls a specific situation in which she completely failed to hit a deadline with her leader. When her leader reached out, they expressed compassion and even asked how she was doing, as this was "atypical" behavior for them.

> Even before I explained the [things I was going through], he noticed that I usually respond to emails as soon as I am able to but this one I totally spaced out. And I forgot one of the tasks I was supposed to do. And then when you notice that he told me "I realize you didn't do this and that is not typical of you. Is there anything going on in your life?"

Sekani's leader specifically chose to assume positive intent and recognize that missing a task deadline without acknowledgement was not typical behavior. When doing so, they then also used this as a moment to ask how they are doing, assuming that there may be deeper struggles and creating space for them to share about those potential struggles.

Many other participants shared similar ways that their leaders checked in on missed work tasks or atypical behavior, but always doing so in ways that assume positive intent. For Riley, she said her leader "always gives people the benefit of the doubt and always assumes the best intentions in people." Mackenzie also shared that her leader checked in with them when she noticed they may be off but did so in a way that "wasn't accusatory'' but was to "be a nice person." Francesca shared this similar sentiment as well. When she missed a few tasks at work, her leader did not come to her "saying things like, 'What the hell's going on?' She was just, 'Are you doing okay?' and She would ask me if I'm doing okay before she'd be mad about [the work]."

Table 2

Leader Strategies for Crafting Employee Emotion Rules at Work.

Strategies to Craft Emotion Rules that Cultivate Compassion	**Description**
Inviting personal and emotional disclosure	Leaders explicitly invite employees to share about their personal lives and the range of emotions they may be experiencing, making clear that this kind of disclosure is appropriate at work
Leader sharing personal pain or suffering	Leaders share their own personal pain or suffering with employees, such as personal loss or struggling with mental health
Honoring employee disclosure and emotions	Leaders honor and validate employees when they share personal aspects of their lives, display emotion at work, and express pain and suffering
Managing work challenges by assuming positive intent	Leaders manage performance issues by assuming positive intent and using it as an opportunity to check-in on how the employee is doing personally

In practice, leaders utilize a combination of these strategies to craft emotional expression rules that contribute to a context in which they feel safe to express personal emotions at work. When combined with a relational context in which one feels cared for as a whole person, participants shared that these served to reduce uncertainties related to emotional expression so that they could more readily let their leader know when they were not doing okay.

Anticipatory Compassion

In addition to the above ways that leaders created a sense of safety for expressing suffering at work, my findings also suggest that leaders use a specific discursive move to create space for the expression of suffering as well. This move, which I am titling *anticipatory compassion,* is when leaders proactively name specific pain or suffering that people may be currently experiencing (but have yet to disclose) or may experience in the

future. By doing so, leaders are (1) conveying a sense of empathy and awareness for likely pain or suffering, (2) attuning the employee to potential pain or suffering they may experience in the future, and (3) proactively creating space for expressing suffering related to this if it is (or does) occur.

Consider Parker as one example. As a 31-year-old healthcare worker, Parker had worked directly with patients for most of his career. More recently, he started to take on more administrative work within the hospital, which reduces the time he had to work with patients directly. During this transition into a more administrative role, he reflected on the ways that his leader proactively attuned him to this and cared for him in the midst of it.

> You know she was really good in the early phases of me transitioning to being a manager about recognizing [and sharing], "I know that this is an exciting opportunity for you. But it's also mourning the loss of being completely clinical and having that time with patients and you know, it just creates a different feeling when you're at work and now you're a part of the leadership team. So some people may treat you a little bit differently."

Parker's leader had also made this transition to management, which attuned her to the complexity involved. On one hand, a chance to grow into a new role and responsibilities at work is exciting. On the other hand, such changes may cause the mourning of so much time with patients, which is often what draws people to healthcare initially. Additionally, team dynamics might change. Parker's leader explicitly articulated that these changes would likely be challenges for him, and that he may feel a sense of loss throughout this transitional season.

Parker continued to share how his leader's communication did indeed make it easier for him to talk to her about these challenges, especially with her intentional follow-up. He also shared that his leader's communication actually attuned him to the challenges of this transitional season in ways he may not have otherwise noticed, where he indeed was "super excited" but "also kind of sad" to lose the patient-contact side of his job. Not only did this *anticipatory compassion* allow Parker to make sense of these emotions and attune himself to the challenges throughout the experience, but it created space that he knew he could process with his boss in ways he may not have otherwise felt.

In another unique situation, Francesca described how her leader reached out to her before a trip with their CEO and CFO. Francesca, as a younger female, would be traveling with two older male executives. Her leader, also female, proactively reached out to her to discuss her comfortability with the situation and made sure that she knew she did not have to go on these trips.

> So I would travel with our C suite. So our CFO and CEO are all gentlemen, and all great people. I never had any sort of nervousness, you know, being in the same place as them, but she as a woman came to me and said, "Hey, you're allowed to say no to any of these trips and if you ever feel anything wrong, you say something." And nothing ever did happen because I would have definitely spoken up or would have stood up for myself. But she was very proactive about things. She contacted the CEO who's she's super close with and was like, "Hey, I'm going to talk to her, just so she knows as a young woman that she's able to, you know, we want to make sure we're being careful on both fronts." [Our CEO], I know him, and he's really awesome. He's another one of my mentors and so [my

> leader] told me, "Hey, I talked to [our CEO] and we just kind of went over some things and he proposed a few things. "Hey, let's just never get in an elevator when it's like not business related. If it's after a long day of work, I'll stay down in the lobby and she'll go up."

In this case, Francesca shared that she never had any issues and had a positive relationship with the CEO. However, her leader's ability to be proactive in caring for her in what could be a challenging, painful, or precarious situation accomplished multiple objectives. First, Francesca shared how her proactivity conveyed a sense of care and empathy. Secondly, by explicitly naming this potential tension or situation, she allowed Francesca the ability to say she did not want to go on these trips if she did not feel comfortable. Additionally, if something were to happen in the future where she did feel uncomfortable, one would likely assume that this explicit proactive conversation would make her even more likely to share with this leader in ways that might otherwise have felt uncomfortable. Lastly, one can reasonably assume that this attuned Francesca to these dynamics on the trip in ways that she may not have otherwise considered, especially given the ways that her leader also reached out to the CEO and proactively considered ways that they could make sure Francesca felt comfortable.

In another relatively straightforward example, Jordan recalls how his leader pulled together several recent events to see how he was doing. After enduring a breakup and being denied a transfer to another city, Jordan was feeling overwhelmed to the point of wanting some time off. However, he had yet to disclose the depth of his pain from the breakup or how that suffering was compounded with his transfer denial. When setting up

their one-on-one, she acknowledged these events specifically and said they would likely be challenging, which then allowed Jordan space to open up about them.

> And then she called me kind of know or maybe we had our supervision or something. And she pointed out those moments. She's like, "Hey, I know you really wanted to go to Spokane, and I know you're struggling, kind of going through the breakup. And I noticed that you took some time off. "How are you doing?" So she just kind of pointed out a few things that she had noticed over the last couple weeks and then gave me the space to say "How are you?"

As Jordan reflected back on this moment, he said he had not shared in-depth about these situations and had only generally shared that he was not doing so great. Recognizing these interconnections, his leader was able to articulate events in Jordan's life that could be causing suffering, which then created space for him to share if he needed. "That moment was super impactful" to Jordan because she was tying together so many little moments and observations to really recognize that he was struggling and then proactively create space for him to really share about them. But, he noted, "it's not like she defined how I'm feeling, but it gives me that space."

Together, these stories show how *anticipatory compassion* can be utilized by leaders to name employee pain or suffering that has yet to be disclosed or even name pain or suffering that someone may experience in the future. In doing so, they communicate a sense of empathy and care, create explicit space for employees to share about that pain or suffering if encountered, and attune employees to pain or suffering in ways that they may have otherwise not fully understood.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DISCOVERING AND ENACTING COMPASSION: NAVIGATING DIALECTICAL TENSIONS

This chapter outlines key findings related to the third research question: *How do employees perceive their leaders discover and enact compassionate actions in the face of their suffering?* Prior research has largely assumed that the process of reacting compassionately unfolds with relative ease, where there are clear actions available and agreeable to both parties that work to alleviate suffering. Indeed, my findings support the idea that in many situations an appropriate response *does* unfold with relative ease. For example, many cases of expressed suffering are more broadly understood across society (i.e., losing a loved one) or are common within a specific context (i.e., losing a patient in healthcare). Despite the challenges associated with these types of suffering, both the leader and the employee are likely to have basic scripts that guide appropriate compassionate actions, such as time organizational affordances such as having built-in time off for the employee or systems to shift work responsibilities.

Many cases of pain and suffering, however, are more complex, and may present challenges for how leaders work to understand the best way to react compassionately toward their employee. My findings suggest that many situations do not have straightforward or obvious actions to alleviate suffering, both in the acute (immediate) response and over time (on-going suffering that may continue to evolve). Consequently, leaders and sufferers engage in a dynamic process where they work collaboratively to discover, negotiate, and enact specific actions that will best alleviate suffering. Across my data, I found that these dynamics may appear to be in tension, highlighting the

delicate nature of effectively conveying care and compassion while simultaneously working to understand actions that will best alleviate their suffering. Specifically, I found that highly compassionate leaders navigate the following dialectical tensions in order to connect with employees and discover how to best alleviate suffering: (1) defer to employees preferred levels of disclosure *and* ask probing questions to discover the depth of their pain/suffering, (2) invite requests and employee perspective on what they believe would work to alleviate their suffering *and* propose potential solutions, and (3) insist employees accept actions that will alleviate their suffering *and* honor the employee's agency in the process. In what follows, I expand on these dialectical tensions and offer evidence from participants' experiences with their leaders.

Defer to Employees' Disclosure Preferences *and* Ask Probing Questions

Previous work within the compassion literature has established that personal and emotional disclosure is a key enabler of compassion, both across the relationship and within acute moments of distress. Miller (2007), for example, found that *noticing* suffering went beyond noticing obvious cues of pain (i.e., crying at work) but included active information-gathering to establish a personal context for their life. Lilius and colleagues (2011) also found that personal and emotional disclosure was key in enabling workplace compassion. In their study of a highly compassionate work unit, they found that employees regularly shared details and challenges about their personal lives (which they termed *dynamic boundary permeability*), all of which enabled them to better notice subtle cues of pain and respond in ways that were seen as compassionate.

Across my interviews, leaders navigated a distinct dialectical tension in letting employees lead the level of disclosure at work while also recognizing that certain

situations may require the leader to probe for more information. This dynamic presented itself both generally across the leadership relationship, where employees had varying levels of personal and emotional disclosure with their leaders, as well as within acute moments when employees disclosed suffering. Within the context of acute expressed suffering, this dynamic becomes even more nuanced and complicated; even if the employee has an open relationship with their leader, their specific situation may introduce new uncertainties, such as wanting privacy on a specific type of suffering. Additionally, acute suffering often puts employees into a challenging emotional state (e.g., grief; Bento, 1994), where they may not be able to or want to disclose details with their leader in the moment. Due to these factors and others, many participants shared a desire to be ambiguous in disclosing suffering at work.

At the same time, leaders often needed to understand details about the situation in order to best provide support and compassion to the employee, both in the acute moment of disclosed suffering and over time. Some employees may also unwittingly minimize their own challenges through ambiguity; by only disclosing vague details of their suffering, it is possible leaders may not fully understand the seriousness of the challenge and therefore not respond with the appropriate urgency, follow-up, and organizational accommodations. To navigate these complex dynamics, leaders enact compassion in two seemingly distinct ways: by letting employees lead the level of personal disclosure and by asking questions to invite additional details that may serve to help coordinate a compassionate response.

Defer to Employees' Disclosure Preferences. First, my findings demonstrate that highly compassionate leaders defer to employees' preferred level of disclosure that

they are comfortable with rather than pressuring for details. Leaders accomplished this in a variety of ways, including various nonverbal (i.e., tone of voice and nonverbal immediacy) and verbal messages (i.e., “Do you want to talk about it?”). Across all cases, participants said they felt it was up to them if they wanted to disclose more details related to their pain and suffering. Additionally, when the leader did ask questions, the employee never felt like questions were invasive or inappropriate.

Natalia, a 35-year-old graduate teaching associate, reflects back on how her leader responded when she disclosed sensitive personal health challenges.

> [Once I disclosed my challenges], it became instantly more of, “Forget about everything else, let’s talk about you.” But it’s if you want to talk about it…she never explicitly asked, “Do you want to talk more about this?” But she just lets you disclose however much you want to disclose without pushing or asking anything else.

In this instance, Natalia first reflects the ways that her leader honored her disclosure by shifting the work-related conversation to talk about her health challenges. However, shifting the conversation did not mean her leader pressed for details. Rather, Natalia highlights that her leader created space for her to disclose details in ways that felt comfortable through gentle open-ended questions and active listening. Rather than pushing her for personal details, this leader let Natalia *choose* how much she was comfortable disclosing in that moment based on her own needs.

Other participants shared a similar level of control in how much they disclosed about their own personal hardship. Dakota, a 41-year-old special education director, found herself in a challenging situation when her partner began struggling with alcohol

addiction again. This situation not only strained her marriage but also created an unpredictable environment for her daughter at home. After her daughter called several times expressing fears of her safety, Dakota decided she would bring her into work. Within a week Dakota had brought her daughter into work on several occasions, prompting her boss to express concern and ask how she was doing.

> So I picked her up. I think this was the second or third time and brought her into the building, and he just asked if I was okay. And you know he didn't ask for details. He just, you know, asked, "Are you okay? Is she okay?" And I told him, "Yeah." And I went to him I think the next day and just let him know, things are getting pretty intense at home. And I didn't give him very many details at the time.

Clearly concerned, Dakota's boss checked in with her and made clear that he noticed the changes and was concerned for her. However, in the midst of her navigating her difficult circumstances, he did not pressure her for details or demand justifications for her behavior. As Dakota explained how this situation developed over the coming weeks, she affirmed that throughout the entire situation (which lasted several months), she felt that her boss honored her ability to disclose as she felt comfortable.

> I didn't ever feel like he was prying or that if I said the wrong thing, you know, I would be on some kind of suspension of disciplinary action. That wasn't ever the vibe he gave me. It was always, you know, whatever you need. And he just let me talk and let me describe what I was going through. And the level of comfort that I had sharing with him, that was 100% up to me.

Dakota's situation was both personally and professionally intense. Additionally, this was not a situation with clear answers or that could be resolved quickly. On the personal side, she described the immense emotional burden this took on her as a partner, a parent, and as a person. At the same time, this situation had very real business impacts, including taking her daughter to work, leaving work at a moment's notice in cases of emergency, and finding herself distracted and less productive at work. Given the widespread impact of this situation and the length of time this extended, one could easily imagine that leadership would be curious to know more details or want justification for the impact this had on her work. However, Dakota consistently affirmed that she was able to dictate the level of her disclosure and never felt pressured to go beyond her comfort level.

Dakota and Natalia's situation might be seen as extreme examples given the scale of their personal suffering and its private nature (i.e., personal health and relationship challenges). However, I found that other leaders also let their employees lead the level of disclosure across various levels of personal suffering. Many times, this balance emerged through minimal questioning that conveyed care but did not push for details. Dinesh, a 24-year-old healthcare worker, recalls how his leader interacted with him when he disclosed his father's sudden heart attack.

> Yeah, she just listened in silence when I'm sharing, and she makes you feel comfortable in the space. And she won't ask all these questions… I feel like that would have been overpowering. And she wasn't asking questions to get information that she could use or to get all the specifics. You don't really care about the specifics - you care about wanting to meet me where I was at and know how I was doing. And her line of questions would reflect that…she was just

curious about how I was going through it and just asking minimal questions and letting me talk a lot.

Even though Dinesh's leader did ask questions in this situation, the leader also created a feeling tone that met him in his suffering and communicated care. Additionally, she let him talk and lead how much he wanted to disclose, where her questions served as an opening rather than an inquisition.

Chloe, a 27-year-old social worker, reflected on how her leader interacts with her during regular check-ins in a similar way. As Chloe describes, social work is punctuated by significant levels of emotional investment, which often leads to stress, overwhelm, and burnout. At the same time, she has to navigate serious challenges in her own personal life, which can hinder her ability to engage her clients at work effectively. Chloe also expressed that there should be specific boundaries within her work context, and that it was important to "maintain those boundaries" when it came to personal disclosure. When expressing personal challenges at work, she says that she typically disclosed "more generalities of stuff that's hard right now, and that [she] feels really stressed and overwhelmed." But, she also notes that "personal details are not helpful, and I think I would feel weird to kind of share that with her because she's still my supervisor." Her leader, she says, "[wouldn't] ask because professionally, she's aware that she's not my therapist…so you have to maintain those boundaries."

However, as Chloe goes on, she indicated that she often vents about personal challenges and the broad overwhelm with the current "state of the world." These instances are not general moments of venting but convey acute pain she is experiencing that has personal and professional consequences. Her leader creates space for her to

disclose personal aspects of her life and to express how she is doing, while also honoring the level of personal details that Chloe wants to disclose in those settings. By doing so, her leader is able to understand when she needs to give advice or make accommodations to alleviate her pain but still allows Chloe to feel comfortable with her own personal and professional boundaries at work.

Ask Probing Questions. In addition to letting employees lead the level of disclosure related to their personal suffering, many leaders also ask specific probing questions to understand the situation more fully. Probing questions represent a line of inquiry that specifically explores details about a sufferer's situation rather than deferring to their lead. While probing questions may be both open-ended and closed-ended questions, this line of questioning *could* be perceived as more personally invasive or challenging for the employee in moments of acute pain. Across my interviews, leaders asked probing questions in order to better understand the details of the situation and gain greater context for how they might respond compassionately.

Mason, a 34-year-old higher education administrator described a painful situation where his work mistake caused significant hurt and confusion for students. When a student was found to have vandalized a Black Lives Matter memorial on campus, Mason found himself leading the conduct and reconciliation efforts. Over the course of several meetings, Mason worked with the specific student who committed the vandalism as well as Black student leaders on campus to work towards appropriate reconciliation. Before one final meeting, Mason was asked to check on whether or not specific sanctions would be allowed within this case. This information was critical, as much of the conversation was focused on deciding specific sanctions and next steps. Unfortunately, he forgot to get

this information. When the meeting came and he acknowledged that he had failed to get that information, the meeting was largely unable to move forward. Given the emotional nature of this event, many students and co-facilitators were hurt and upset.

Mason felt a great emotional burden, not only from potential work-related consequences but in his feelings of personally responsible for creating additional distress for Black students on campus. When he shared this with his boss, he described how she inquired with more questions about the situation.

> She would lean in with more questions than she would answers, and I think she wants me to be able to work through it and she wants to know more about the situation or more about how I'm feeling and how I'm processing it, you know. It's not just "Give me more information so that I can answer it," but more of, "Give me more information about how you're thinking and processing through it so you can come to your own solution." Or so that…you can come to your own sense of peace about it. You know because…some of it is really practical. Here are these issues with students that I need to figure out help like help me with that. But then there's also, you know, the issue that I was talking about with you and feeling like I really failed…

In this situation, Mason's leader recognized that much of the pain he was experiencing was directly related to how he was making sense of the current situation as well as his *future* sensemaking regarding this situation. Rather than defer to his lead, the leader utilized questions to draw out and understand details of the situation in an effort to help. Although it was likely challenging for Mason to disclose additional details and process

this painful situation, the process helped this leader support her employee in how they made sense of a difficult situation.

Similarly, Alexis described a challenging situation she navigated with her own leader. A Resident Physician in her second year of residency, Alexis was struggling with a recent loss of a patient who passed away during surgery.

> I think I got upset while telling her about what had happened [with my last interaction with the patient who passed away]. And we started talking about it from there and she asked me specifically what had upset me? She said, "Well, you did everything right for this patient… I know it was hard, but what are you taking responsibility for here?" She could tell that I felt responsible. I think the way I was expressing the whole situation to her was probably that I felt like I had done something wrong.

In this situation, Alexis shared one of her most painful losses at work. Although this is related to Alexis's professional role, Alexis was clear this had a deep personal impact on her. Again, rather than defer to Alexis in deciding how much she wanted to disclose, her leader pressed her with specific questions to further understand why this was weighing so heavily on her. Similar to Mason's experience, part of this leader's compassionate response was to support (and in this case, challenge) how Alexis was making sense of this situation, as feelings of guilt and responsibility would only further exacerbate her pain. Her leader went further. "And she was like, 'Well you didn't [do anything wrong]. You did everything right. So, what specifically are you taking responsibility for?'" Alexis's leader was able to help by pushing her to dig deeper into the ways she was

processing and making sense of the situation, which helped her move past it in ways that she otherwise would not have been able to.

In other situations, participants recalled that probing questions were used to discern the level of pain employees were in and, consequently, the appropriate response. Kelly, a 32-year-old residential higher education administrator, described how she faces regular crises within her work with students, ranging from simple roommate disputes to alcohol abuse, emergency medical situations, and suicidal ideation. Moreover, Kelly lives on-campus for her role, meaning she *lives* at work. Consequently, Kelly regularly found herself navigating acute and on-going pain associated with professional and personal situations. In the midst of navigating complicated systems of pain, Kelly describes how her leader regularly uses questions to discover the depth of pain and severity of the situation. “Yeah, and just pushing a little bit, kind of leading, ‘Is it this bad?’ or ‘Are you doing this well or not.’ And letting us kind of correct him into figuring out, or for me, how I’m actually doing. I mean, it’s counseling techniques, but it’s actually really useful.” Through more closed-ended questions, this leader probed to gather greater details of how Kelly was doing, knowing that discovering the depth of suffering would scale his urgency of response. As she continues, Kelly notes that her boss is typically “gentle at first” and “was feeling out if this is really difficult,” but through questioning and picking up on tone, he could typically see that “this is really difficult, so we’re going to dive into more care for this now.” By using closed-ended questions and probing into Kelly’s experience, her leader was able to understand her emotions and respond appropriately in order to alleviate her suffering.

Other lines of questioning are used by leaders in order to understand *how* they can help. When given vague descriptions about moments of suffering, leaders may not have enough details to understand *how* to help or give practical considerations. Garrett, a 32-year-old public school teacher, describes how his leader regularly "asks follow-up questions to kind of investigate a little bit deeper," which enables him to collaborate on solutions to help alleviate the pain associated with different situations. And, as will be seen more fully in the next section, leaders often use this line of questioning to discover how they can help and what solutions may best alleviate their employees' pain.

One final note must be made about how leaders navigate the dynamic of letting employees lead the level of disclosure and also probe to understand the situation. Although the above examples might suggest that leaders utilize deference to employees and asking probing questions as separate strategies, most leaders blend a combination of these practices across and within interactions. In other words, leaders often utilize a variety of open-ended and closed-ended questions to create space for the employee to disclose personal details but do so in a way that honors their experience, which the employee often interprets as caring. Across these interactions, participants tell me that even when their leaders' do utilize probing questions, the tone of their leaders' engagement is one of care even though the questions may be difficult to navigate or process at the moment.

In addition to gathering information and creating space for employees to disclose personal pain, leaders also must navigate between inviting employees' perspectives on what they believe would help alleviate their suffering *and* propose potential solutions, to which I turn next.

Invite Requests for Help *and* Propose Potential Solutions

Given the breadth and depth of how suffering can manifest in one's life, a question emerges: how do leaders work to understand the specific actions that will *best* work to alleviate someone's pain and suffering? Previous research highlights the mutuality of compassion between focal actors (Dutton et al., 2014; Kanov et al., 2017; Way & Tracy, 2012), but to this point, I know of no research that investigates the communicative dynamics of how leaders come to discover and enact actions that will alleviate pain or suffering with the focal actor.

My findings suggest that compassionate leaders often invite employees to make specific requests related to what will help alleviate their suffering. At the same time, these leaders also propose solutions, possibilities, and ideas of how they might be able to address that need. While inviting employee requests and offering solutions can, at times, be in tension, compassionate leaders utilize both to find the best way to alleviate one's suffering.

Invite Requests for Help. Inviting requests from employees about what would help in the face of their suffering emerged as a consistent theme across my interviews. Garrett, a 32-year-old public school teacher, found himself in a distressing situation balancing his required in-person teaching duties with his current living situation, which included family members who were at higher risk for serious complications due to Covid-19. In this case, a compassionate response is more complicated, as potential ways to alleviate pain and suffering may be at odds with realistic work accommodations. However, Garrett's leader still worked to understand his situation and invite his own perspective.

> And [my leader] was able to say…tell me about that. How much interaction do you have with them daily, and what are some possible solutions? What can we do? And he was able to walk through a conversation in a way that showed he was very interested in what was concerning to me…

Inviting Garrett's perspective is not without risk for this leader, as it may increase the potential for their disappointment and further distress if they are not able to offer one of those solutions. Even still, this leader makes a concerted effort to understand Garrett's situation and to invite potential solutions Garrett thinks may work best. By asking Garret for his "possible solutions" and what he thinks "we can do," this leader is creating space for Garret to have agency in expressing his preference for how this suffering could be alleviated. For Garrett, these questions extended to other instances of compassion, where his leader readily asked questions to understand what the employee needs across diverse situations and circumstances. "I think what [my leader] is good at is being willing to ask what is needed in [various] circumstances."

By asking what employees perceive that they need, leaders not only work to uncover potential solutions but also convey a sense of care and honor that these employees know what is best to alleviate their suffering. This strategy also recognizes that leaders may not know what their employees need specifically, and therefore should not assume what will work best. Parker, a 31-year-old healthcare worker, recalls how his leader supports her workers in a fast-paced healthcare context punctuated with regular loss, time-pressure, and stress. While Parker acknowledges that his leader does a good job of listening and validating the strong emotions they are going through, the leader pushes further.

> Also giving people the opportunity of saying, "What would you want to see moving forward?" or "What do you want from me to help in this?" or "What are some solutions that you could see moving forward?" I think putting it in their court a little bit too, depending on what the issue was, and not assuming what they need.

In some situations, it may be that no clear solutions exist. In other situations, however, this leader invites employees' perspectives rather than assuming she knows what will be most helpful.

Similarly, other participants highlighted how a one-size-fits-all approach does not work with many types of suffering. Maeve, a 33-year-old funeral home administrator, suggests that a strength of her compassionate leader is to ask what someone needs because it allows them to learn the unique ways that people experience care and compassion within the workplace. When reflecting on how she was cared for in her own experience of losing her grandma, she notes that this type of open-ended inquiry extends to the rest of the staff as well.

> And then at an appropriate time when I had gathered myself a little bit, [he asks the] follow-up question, "What is actually helpful for you right now?" And I see that he has that relationship with all of his coworkers where he knows it's not just a blanket strategy of "Here's what I do when someone's grandma dies." But it's kind of like, "I know that [this employee] needs a hug and then for me to leave her alone. And I know that [this other employee] needs me just to completely leave him alone. But [this employee] needs me to sit and talk with her and come up with a beautiful ceremony to do together to commemorate the thing. And

> everybody has their thing, and [my leader] definitely has that... he's learning all of the different people.

Knowing that Maeve works within a funeral home, she noted several times that her and others were intimately attuned to grief. This has also attuned them to the wildly varying responses that people have to loss and grief, and therefore what may actually work to alleviate pain and suffering in response to that grief. By asking what is needed, leaders can learn in the moment what an employee needs and convey compassion in a way that best fits them individually.

Propose potential solutions. While many leaders utilize open-ended questions to best understand what will be useful to alleviate their employees' suffering, my findings also suggest that there are many situations where open-ended questions are not useful in accomplishing compassion, especially as a singular approach. In these cases, leaders proposed solutions and ideas of what could be done or what they thought would be best and let the employee give feedback about those potential solutions. This strategy appears to be effective due to two factors that make open-ended questions about what is needed challenging: first, people often do not know what they need in the shock of acute grief and overwhelm, and second, employees may not feel comfortable asking for certain affordances or know what is possible within their organizational and relational context.

First, as highlighted before, suffering and grief can take many forms, and consequently, individuals experience varied reactions to it both in the acute moment and in their processing over time. Because of this, many of my participants who experienced significant loss described how difficult it was to process the situation initially. Maeve

explicitly highlights this tension of being asked what you need in moments of acute grief as she reflects back on her experience losing her grandmother.

> That was kind of a recurring theme in the time that I spent working for [my leader] is just that sense of "What is actually helpful for you in this time?" And it's funny because that's not always a really helpful question. To say, what can we do for you is … often useless in a moment of acute pain because the person doesn't know. You are not generally sitting there in that moment feeling like you know what all your needs are.

In Maeve's situation, her initial grief was overwhelming enough that she informed her boss of what was going on and hung-up. In subsequent discussions, her leader not only asked what she wanted and needed but offered work-related options, information on bereavement leave, and even potential options of how they could help with the logistics of her mother's passing (given the context of work being a funeral home).

Secondly, in addition to the overwhelm of acute grief, many participants described challenges related to knowing what can be done or what is work-appropriate to ask for in order to alleviate pain, especially depending on the organizational context. Kelly highlights this challenge as she reflects on how her leader shifted his engagement with her in challenging moments over the course of their relationship.

> When I first came to [this organization] it was just kind of resting on asking what you need and then not offering anything. And so sometimes, especially if you're newer to the place or you don't feel comfortable yet in a professional relationship to really say, "I actually just need a day off," that feels unprofessional to ask for. So he's trying to do both where he hears specific needs and is willing to try and

> meet those that he can, but also offer up, "Hey, could I do this, this, or this for you. What one of these things have been helpful." And a combination of those seems to be the most helpful.

As Kelly notes, many employees may know what they need in the moment (i.e., a day off to catch their breath) but do not feel comfortable asking for it within their organization. Many participants highlighted that they had hesitations and uncertainties related to what they could or could not ask for, both for how it would be perceived by their boss and the potential perception by others within the organization. In this case, Kelly notes that his offer of potential solutions conveys a sense of permission that these actions are appropriate and therefore does not put her in a position of asking for something she feels uncertain about.

In another powerful example of compassion, Dakota recalls how her leader proposed a significant policy change within the school she worked at as a way of potentially alleviating some of the challenges of her situation. In the following excerpt, she recalls how her leader invited her into a conversation about how she was doing after she brought her daughter to work for several weeks.

> And I would say a couple weeks went by. And I don't know if, at that point, [my leader] was aware of what was going on. I think he just knew something was going on. But he pulled me into his office with [the co-founder], and he said, "Hey, I just wanted to check in with you. We're noticing your daughter's coming in every day and it's not super healthy for her to be sitting in your office all day. So, what would you think about just letting her come to school here?" She's a fifth grader, and we only have sixth grade students [at the school], so he offered

> for my daughter to come to school at a school she was not able to go to on the books. They wouldn't even…I mean, you're talking about, if this information gets to the state department, it's not a great thing.

In my conversation with Dakota, she elaborated and said she would *never* have asked for such an accommodation, even though it was incredibly helpful in alleviating challenges with her current home situation. As she notes, this was a major policy exception that actually flirted with state regulations about who could attend the school. Consequently, Dakota says she would not have dared make this request, even if she thought about it.

Similarly, Casandra, a 35-year-old education administrator, reflected on how her leader reacted when she finally quit her job. Casandra found herself caught in a job that was "not how it was portrayed to [her] in interviews." Because of this, Casandra said she experienced anxiety "all the time," ultimately leading to the first panic attack in her life. Throughout the fall, her leader tried to support her, but Casandra eventually decided to quit because she simply could not handle it anymore. As we discussed her leader's compassion within our interview, Casandra specifically recalled how she responded when she finally told her she had to quit. Before they got into discussing specifics of when and how this would play out, her leader proactively offered a way that this could unfold that may best help alleviate some of the challenges she would face with quitting a higher education job in late November.

> She was like, "I don't want you to be stuck and I want you to get paid through January. So would it be okay for you to stay through until after the new year through the end of break?" And she was like, "I don't want you to feel like you

have to move away, you know...I want to give you that time. I know what it's like…moving sucks any time, but especially the holidays, it's just really awful."

Casandra says this response made her feel "so cared for," given that "there were so many ways [her leader] could have reacted." Casandra explained that quitting at the end of November created significant challenges for her place of work (and therefore this leader). Within the context of higher education, most hiring happens on a yearly basis and the hiring pool would be more limited to get someone on short notice. However, despite the challenges that this created for her leader, this leader still emphasized that she wanted to make sure Casandra had a place to stay and got paid through the holidays, knowing how that may add additional stress to Casandra's suffering. Had this not been actively volunteered, Casandra may not have felt comfortable dictating the terms of her leaving, especially in ways that center on her needs rather than the needs of the organization.

This theme extended to other participants as well, who describe more subtle ways their leaders proactively make suggestions and ask open-ended questions. Chloe, a 27-year-old social worker, says that her leader "asks [what she needs] before offering up any type of advice or solutions." The advice and solutions are "helpful, because then I can tell her 'yes' or 'no' or whatever to the things that she might offer. So, she's pretty good at asking, 'how can I help? 'What can we do?' and, 'what do you think would be helpful?'" Sebastian described a similar dynamic when his leader asked about a challenging work situation. Similar to Casandra, Sebastian, a 31-year-old assistant professor, found himself in a job situation that was not as advertised. When his leader followed up to check in on him, she did not rely on open-ended questions, but also included simple suggestions of logistical solutions that could be helpful for him. "You know, and then on the

compassionate and material side of things, you know, she just checked in. She was like, 'Hey, how's your process going? And what can I do to help you? You want me to read over anything? You just want to chat?'" In other instances, one can imagine that Sebastian may not have thought to ask for this help or considered it to be an imposition, given that this leader was also busy with an academic job. However, by offering these as ways to help, it reduces potential uncertainties that may cause Sebastian or others to hesitate.

Malachi reflected a similar sentiment in a simple description of how his leader reacted when he found himself in a difficult situation. As a sales associate, Malachi described that his job was fast-paced and filled with pressure, where taking time off typically resulted in his work having to be picked up by others on the team. Within this context, Malachi reflected on a time he received a call from the principal of his kids' school that asked for him to come check-in immediately. Not knowing the circumstances, Malachi called his leader and explained a bit of the situation.

> For example, the instance with my daughter, when the principal called. He's like, "I've never had that happen with our kids, and I'm sure this is really stressful. Let me know if you need anything. But, you know, you gotta do what you gotta do, and I realize you may be in a situation where you're not going to be able to focus. So take whatever space you need to figure out the situation."

While the above reflection may seem mundane, this leader implicitly gives permission for Malachi to take care of his situation by acknowledging its potential impact ("I realize you may be in a situation where you're not going to be able to focus") and giving permission for him to "take whatever space" he needs to take care of the situation.

Though simple, this works to give Malachi assurance that he can take time off that day to address the situation.

Other participants shared stories from their leader that further highlight this implicit permission that is given to employees, often through proactive suggestions and general affirmations. Mason recalls that when he disclosed that his family had COVID and he was unsure of how to handle the situation, his leader was quick to affirm the appropriateness of missing work to process and be with family. "Well, I mean, if you need to take time, or if you need anything, let me know, keep us updated." As Mason reflected on this, he was grateful she "acknowledged the reality" of the situation, where he may need time or other resources to navigate this challenging situation. Mason went further to suggest that this leader cultivated a supportive work environment through this kind of language as well, where "there are times where you are just either sick or you just need a mental health day, and there's a complete understanding and support for those sorts of events. There's not any question about the need or value for that."

Mason's simple reflection that "there's not any question about the need or value for that" is not one to move by quickly or be assumed; across my research, it became clear that employees often *would* wonder about the appropriateness of taking time off, how much time they could take off, or the impact that could have on others (i.e., shifting workload to coworkers or leaders). By emphasizing support in daily messaging, this leader shifts any uncertainty or hesitation Mason might have to take time off if he feels it is needed or appropriate.

In other situations, leaders made their offer even more explicit, where they would give permission for certain actions explicitly. As Kelly recalls, her leader would often

respond to work-related pain by offering to take away work responsibilities, recognizing the difficulty of putting work aside given the residential nature of her work.

> The second he picks up on something's not right, there's always an offer of alleviating some responsibilities, or asking "Do you need some space." [because] knowing that for us as [Resident Director]'s, sometimes the hardest part about experiencing trauma or difficulty is that you're surrounded by your job all the time… "Can I take something off your plate?" or "Can I give you permission to cancel meetings today?" That sort of thing [really helps].

Here, this leader moves beyond proactive offers and actually highlights the nature of permission that is attached to these. In this way, proactive offers may not always be about tangible resources but about *giving permission* to employees to shift work in order to create space to deal with pain or suffering at work. Without this, employees may question the appropriateness of taking time.

Insist Employees Accept Solutions *and* Honor Employee Agency

Lastly, my findings suggest that in some instances leaders *insist* that their employees accept certain actions or solutions that they believe would be best for them. This extends beyond offering solutions. In these instances, leaders were more vocal about their suggestion that certain actions be taken and, when employees resisted, continued to insist they accept their proposals. However, in all cases, leaders ultimately honored the employee's agency and their wishes about how to proceed in the situation. Leaders seemed to navigate this tension by insisting employees accept actions they believe are best for their well-being and working to uncover their motivation for resistance while still ultimately honoring the employee's agency to make the final decision.

Insist Employees Accept Solutions. When leaders insisted their employees accept certain compassionate actions, they often had already offered up potential solutions that were rejected. In particular, leaders tend to insist employees accept compassionate action when they suspect that their employee may be minimizing their own needs in service to the organization or others. For example, Riley felt tension between her own well-being and work-related needs when she experienced significant physical pain due to an ongoing health challenge that was proving difficult to diagnose. Working within a church context on a small team, any time that she took off meant that her work had to be picked up by her leader and other co-worker. Because of this knowledge, Riley continued to try to work from home and show up to work functions, despite the fact that she was still in physical pain and on bedrest as well as navigating misdiagnosis and what she perceived to be poor treatment from multiple doctors. Across this experience, Riley reflects on how her leader insisted she take care of herself rather than worry about the work implications.

> I kept saying, "Oh, I can work from bed, and I can do my emails and texts and stuff." And he was like, "Are you crazy? Don't worry about it. We can pick up the slack, we can do this." And I was still trying to show up for Sunday mornings. The first two Sundays of January I just did not show up, and that was actually [my leaders]'s idea. And I was like, "I can try to rally and make it." And he said, "No, you clearly have a big medical problem going on, so you should stay home and try to recover."

Riley felt pulled between work obligations, her physical condition, and navigating a proper diagnosis. Despite the physical pain, Riley perceived that she *could* do some work

from home or try hard to make it to “Sunday morning,” a major program responsibility within her role. However, her leader insisted she stop working and let others take on her work, both by actively telling her not to come to church and by affirming that taking care of herself right now is more important than work. Riley acknowledged that she did some work from home but that her leader’s messages gave her greater permission to take care of herself and remove the guilt of knowing her work was either left undone or fell onto others.

Nancy’s experience with her leader further highlights the real tension that participants often navigate between actions that prioritize their well-being versus actions that minimize the potential impact on the organization and other coworkers. Nancy, a 21-year-old technology manager, found herself overwhelmed at work one morning when she received devastating news. For context, her family had previously been involved in exposing someone within their work for sexually assaulting and impregnating an underage woman, which ultimately led to his arrest and imprisonment. Several months prior, they had been informed that this person had hired a hitman from jail to murder Nancy, her father, her mother, and the judge. Although that case was resolved by the FBI, on this particular morning Nancy found out that both this hitman *and* the person they helped put in jail had been released on parole, which they later discovered was done by accident.

As one might imagine, Nancy was completely overwhelmed. Her response to this situation was to go into problem-solving mode. When her leader eventually noticed she looked distressed and inquired about how she was doing, she opened up about the entire situation to him, despite acknowledging that she is typically a private person at work.

Nancy's situation is an extreme case of shock, pain, and suffering that few people ever experience, and working with Nancy through this situation was sensitive and multifaceted. However, one particular exchange highlights the challenges that employees may face in making sense of what they should do to alleviate their employees' pain and how pain might impact the employee's work.

As Nancy recalls, the complexity of the situation led to "a little bit of negotiation" on several items. Her leader's initial response was to outline what could and could not be done, and she reflects that "he basically said, 'Okay, so the first thing I want to talk about is safety. Here are 17 options for what we can do. I would prefer if we did these three…and then these are some others.'" Later, her leader suggested that they should pass along the photos of these men to security in order to secure her safety, which she was hesitant about due to concerns about potentially exposing the FBI investigation. But, as she recalls, "he pushed me pretty hard on that. He's like, 'You know what, let the police do what the police do. We're in Seattle, Washington. What I care about right now is your safety. We've got priorities.' And so we aligned on that and ultimately we did."

As the conversation continued, her leader continued to suggest many other solutions that Nancy felt were above-and-beyond expectations, including changing company policies, giving special access to the building, and insisting that she take Uber to and from work at the company's expense. Nancy recalls thinking that "it was crazy. It's not the company's problem. It's not the company's fault for me to expense [car rides]. It was, for the company to do that, incredibly generous and even unnecessary. And he was like, 'so these are the things that you're going to do.'"

As she later reflected, her leader insisted she accept these changes because he suspected she was not prioritizing herself adequately in this situation.

> My priority at that moment was to minimize the effect of this on the company and on the building. So I was like, "I'm going to minimize the impact." And he was like, "that is not the paradigm we're working through right now, we are maximizing your security and safety." And we actually had a little bit of back and forth on that…I tried to sort of minimize the effect on the company and he was like, "You're wrong, that's not how we should be approaching that at all."

One can imagine the delicacy of navigating this situation, and how potentially risky it could be for a leader to insist an employee accept their suggestion when they are in complete shock. However, Nancy's leader recognized that she was filtering these decisions through the wrong paradigm (minimize the impact on the company) and therefore needed to shift to a new paradigm (prioritize your personal safety and well-being). By insisting on these solutions and actively naming the paradigm that they should be operating from within this situation (personal safety), he was able to encourage her to accept actions that she later recognized were important and useful for her. In this way, the leader's insistence also serves to take on some of the responsibility and alleviate any guilt Nancy may have for the impact on work. Within this already challenging situation, this is an undeniable act of compassion.

In one unique example, a participant reflected that her leader took action on her behalf without seeking her permission. Alexis, a resident physician, recalls the days after she had disclosed her emotional loss of a patient to her leader. Without her permission,

her leader intentionally shifted her schedule to avoid overly emotional or challenging patient cases.

> When we were dividing up patients for the day, I think she steered things a little bit so that I wouldn't have too many sad patients at one time. And it definitely was helpful because residency is difficult because hard things happen all the time and you don't really have time to process them because it's the next day you're back and there's a new heart patient or there's a new really sad patient and you don't have the time to think about anything or work through it emotionally or just process it. And so I think she [made some shifts], you know. And I was still getting the same number of patients. I wasn't being coddled or anything…

Of important note in this excerpt is Alexis's insistence that she "wasn't being coddled or anything." As she further described, residency has a cultural pressure where you "kind of just have to be stoic and just deal with things and get through it." There are also cultural pressures about asking for a lightened load, which can be perceived as turning down opportunities to learn. Alexis notes that this made her extremely grateful for her leader doing this *without* talking to her about it, as she would have felt pressure to say no.

> Yeah, she didn't ask me if I wanted that done, she just did it. And again, that was good because honestly…If she had asked me, "Hey, do you want me to redistribute patients so that you have a little bit of emotional breathing room in the next few days?" I would have said no. Because I feel in residency it's not a good look…it's really easy to be seen as turning down learning opportunities even if you're not.

Alexis goes on to emphasize how wise and compassionate this action was. “I actually think that’s the best thing she could have done… just doing it without asking me, or even telling me she was going to do it, you know. I think within the culture of residency, that’s probably the most compassionate way she could have navigated that.” Given the cultural constraints, this leader recognized the potential risk of perception and worked on behalf of her employee so that she did not have to consent to what others might label as coddling.

Honor Employee Agency. Although leaders insisted that their employees accept compassionate actions within certain contexts, participants emphasized that their leaders honored their agency throughout the process. Even in the case of Nancy, where her leader insisted on various safety measures, she still had agency to make the final decisions. She recalls some aspects that she was grateful for, and others that she ultimately said were not helpful.

> I’m so grateful that he pushed me [to accept certain compassionate actions]. He pushed on the right things. And then other things, you know, not so much. He was like, “I really feel like we should bring in our VP of product.” And I was like, I really don’t want you to do that. I do not want [the VP of product] to know this. And he was like, “Okay, well, we’re not going to tell him.”

It was clear in my conversation with Nancy that her leader not only insisted for her to accept certain actions but had *many* ideas of what should be done. Much of this, as she notes, was incredibly helpful, but it never came at the expense of Nancy feeling as though she did not have agency in the situation.

In other cases, honoring agency was more subtle. Natalia notes that her leader often made proactive offers and recommendations of what she thought should be done in various situations. However, these recommendations never feel as though she is dictating the terms of the situation or pressuring Natalia. "It's always this gentle, 'Hey, if you ever need this, here you go.' And it's this extending of a hand, but it's always, 'Do you want to take it or not?' It's completely up to you. And there's people who they want to help a lot but they're so intense about it I feel uncomfortable. [So I appreciate] her gentle way of offering compassion and help." As Natalia notes, many people are so eager and forceful with their help that it can make people uncomfortable. This kind of discomfort is only more likely if someone is in a place of shock or overwhelm.

Garrett notes a similar affirmation of his agency when he was negotiating how to handle in-person or online teaching. In this situation, his leader had to navigate practical challenges related to teacher wants, student needs, and realistic accommodations. Throughout the conversation, his leader asked questions and explored possibilities. Garrett said he also reaffirmed something he had shared previously, which is that "the way that [Garrett] contributes to the [school] culture is net positive." In this case, that would mean that Garrett moving to online teaching would be a loss for the school. "And so, in his view, me not being in the building would be a negative thing for the students and the staff." Sharing this is, in many ways, a compliment to Garrett, but it also puts pressure on him that by moving to online teaching he is taking something away from the kids and the school. Ultimately, Garrett said he "got me to a point where I would not worry about it anymore" because he ultimately affirmed his agency. "Look man, if you need to formally request to teach from home, we'll have students that will need to stay

online…and you know, it's all good, because you gotta do what's best for your family." So, although the leader pushed him to consider the implications of his decisions for students and the greater community, he was quick to convey that whatever decision he made, his leader would support him.

In summary, this chapter highlights that compassionate leaders navigate complex relational and communicative dynamics in their efforts to support employees in acute pain and suffering within the moment and to discover what will alleviate their pain most effectively. As they do so, highly compassionate leaders balance three primary dialectical tensions: (1) deferring to employees' disclosure preferences *and* asking probing questions to discover the depth of their pain/suffering, (2) inviting requests for help from the employees *and* proposing potential solution that may work to alleviate suffering, and (3) insist employees accept action that will alleviate their suffering *and* honor the employee's agency in the process.

CHAPTER NINE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of leadership in communicating compassion and enabling the expression of suffering at work. To do this, I investigated the experiences of employees who had experienced pain or suffering in the workplace and how a leader they identified as highly compassionate communicated compassion within their organizational context. To frame and understand my research, I drew on the process theory of compassion (Kanov et al., 2004; Miller, 2007; Way & Tracy, 2012), the communication of emotions at work (Tracy, 2008; Tracy & Malvini Redden, 2019; Waldron, 2012), and discursive leadership (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008; Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). Building on this work, the findings of this study offer important theoretical and practical implications. This chapter discusses how these findings extend previous understandings of compassion at work, as well as discusses practical implications, research limitations, and future research.

The first research question explored the role of uncertainty in expressing suffering at work: *What makes employees hesitate to disclose pain and suffering at work?* Two important findings emerged related to this question. First, this study empirically illustrates that employees face myriad uncertainties related to how emotional disclosure would be perceived that, in turn, create hesitancy to disclose pain or suffering at work. Secondly, people who hold traditionally marginalized or minoritized identities face additional uncertainties about expressing suffering at work, especially when their pain or suffering is tied to aspects of their marginalized or minoritized identity.

The second research question explored the ways that leaders created a context in which their employees felt comfortable expressing suffering at work. Two findings emerged related to this research question, which specifically asked: *What messages and behaviors do employees cite from especially compassionate leaders that contribute to creating a context in which they feel comfortable expressing suffering at work?* First, my findings suggest that leaders create a relational context that invites employees' multifaceted selves at work, where participants described messages that their personal well-being was more important than their work productivity. To do this, leaders utilized various communicative moves that served to emphasize this multifaceted identity and craft rules for personal and emotional disclosure. Secondly, my findings reveal a unique discursive move that leaders employ which serves to convey care and create space for the expression of pain and suffering, which I am calling *anticipatory compassion*. This came in the form of, for example, naming pain an employee may be feeling from particular events or sharing potential pain from an upcoming work transition.

Finally, research question three explored how leaders come to understand and enact compassion once suffering is expressed within organizations, specifically asking: *How do employees perceive their leaders discover and enact compassionate actions in the face of their suffering?* My findings suggest that this dynamic process is punctuated by dialectical tensions that leaders navigate in order to discover and enact what would be perceived as compassionate for employees across wide-ranging experiences of pain and suffering.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study extend previous research in five main ways. Specifically, this study (1) demonstrates that uncertainty related to emotional expression and disclosure limits employees' sharing of personal suffering, which then shapes and limits compassion processes, (2) illustrates that individuals holding traditionally marginalized or minoritized identities face additional uncertainty related to expressing pain and suffering, (3) highlights a relational orientation that emphasizes personal well-being as enabling the compassion process, (4) outlines *anticipatory compassion* as a specific discursive move that conveys care and opens space to express specific pains and suffering, and (5) empirically illustrates three dialectical tensions that punctuate the dynamic interactions between leaders and employees when relating and (re)acting, suggesting that it is not always easy to understand and enact what would be perceived as compassionate for employees in their specific organizational context.

Uncertainty Related to Expressed Suffering Limits Compassion

My findings illustrate that employees face significant uncertainty related to emotional expression at work. These uncertainties limit and constrain the expression of pain and suffering; many choose to withhold suffering completely, while others may disclose suffering but do so in a way that minimizes or downplays their feelings and needs. Consequently, uncertainty about expressed suffering at work not only inhibits compassion from unfolding (i.e., compassion is constrained or even stunted when suffering is not expressed), but also shapes and limits the individual subprocesses of recognizing, relating, and (re)acting.

My findings offer empirical support that uncertainty related to personal disclosure and emotional expression limits employees' sharing of personal suffering, which in turn limits compassion at work. In line with theorizing by Kanov and colleagues (2017), this uncertainty influences the compassion subprocess at multiple levels. First, as they theorize, sufferer uncertainty constrains or inhibits expressions of suffering at work. Even within the context of highly compassionate leaders, I found many participants withheld experiences of pain and suffering from their leaders completely, or if they did share, often gave vague descriptions that avoided specifics. Kanov and colleagues (2017) also theorize that this uncertainty may further inhibit compassion by influencing the ways that sufferers respond to compassion providers' recognizing, relating, and (re)acting. My findings also offer empirical support for this claim; uncertainty limits employees' disclosure of suffering, which, in turn, results in decreased ability for leaders to recognize, relate, and react.

Uncertainty about expressed suffering may also stem from additional contexts beyond the personal, relational, and organizational contexts. Specifically, current research does not attend to predominant Discourses related to professionalism, rationality, and appropriate emotional expression at work. Communication scholars have documented that historical d/Discourses related to emotions at work have largely privileged rationality over emotionality and professional identities over the personal (Tracy & Malvini Redden, 2019). Collectively, this has led to the exclusion of personal sharing and intense, negative emotional displays at work, such as personal pain or suffering. In the context of compassion, these d/Discourses go beyond the personal, relational, and organizational context with which compassion unfolds and suggest that

many employees in the U.S. are likely to enter organizations with implicit theories which assume expressing personal pain and suffering is a risky endeavor.

Lastly, my findings suggest that sufferers face additional uncertainties even after they have expressed suffering at work, which may limit and constrain their ability to receive compassionate action that alleviates their suffering. Participants described that once they had expressed suffering to their leaders, they encountered additional uncertainties that made them hesitate to ask for what they needed and, at times, even caused them to reject offers of compassionate action. Prior theorizing on compassion outlines that relating and (re)acting are dynamic, mutual processes but has yet to explore in detail how the sufferer and compassion provider initiate the process of discovering and enacting compassionate actions. Specifically, scholars have yet to account for the inherent uncertainty that exists for the sufferer (and compassion provider) at this stage of compassion, largely assuming that once pain or suffering is expressed, compassionate actions will be obvious and readily available.

By contrast, my findings suggest that many participants navigate new uncertainties about what is appropriate to ask for (i.e., *Can I ask for two days off work or to delay submitting a project?*), how compassionate actions will impact their leader or others (i.e., *Will others be frustrated if they have to take on additional work?*), uncertainty about image management (i.e., *Will people think less of me if I need this much help for what they may perceive to be a minor issue?*), and uncertainty related to prolonged suffering (i.e., *What if my pain/suffering is not resolved right away and I need more time off in the future?*). Certain types of pain and suffering also lead to shock and uncertainty on their own, such as grief due to sudden loss (Bento, 1994). In these cases,

sufferers face additional uncertainties of how to navigate their own loss and what could be helpful, regardless of uncertainties that stem from navigating loss within their organizational context.

In summary, employees face significant uncertainty related to expressing pain and suffering at work and asking for action that would alleviate suffering, both of which shape and limit compassion subprocesses. These uncertainties stem from personal, relational, and organizational contexts as well as d/Discourses related to professionalism and appropriate workplace emotional expression. In order to cultivate compassion at work, we must attend to the uncertainties that inhibit emotional expression at work and craft environments where employees feel safe to express their pain and suffering.

Employees Holding Traditionally Marginalized and Minoritized Identities Face Additional Uncertainty Related to Expressed Suffering at Work

My findings also demonstrate that employees holding minoritized and marginalized identities face additional uncertainties related to the emotional expression of pain and suffering at work. More specifically, participants discussed feelings of uncertainty related to sharing pain or suffering that related to specific aspects of their marginalized or minoritized identity due to its intersection with "politics." In other words, aspects of minoritized and marginalized employees' identities connect to broader conversations that many perceive as political (i.e., racial injustice or trans rights). Given that many organizations explicitly and implicitly try to avoid sensitive conversations around politics or religion, many participants then felt as though it would not be received well if they were to disclose pain or suffering tied to political events. In other cases, participants described various pressures around *how* they expressed emotions due to their

identity, such as a Black man not wanting to reinforce Black male stereotypes or a trans woman feeling as though she is an ambassador for all trans people at work, and therefore regulating emotional expression in ways that would be perceived positively by others.

Previous research on emotional expression suggests that race, sex, and class often intersect to create additional challenges for minoritized and marginalized organizational members. McCluney and colleagues (2017) found that many Black employees failed to create space to acknowledge pain and suffering after police violence against the Black community. As they argue, many end up “calling in Black” to take time off of work in order to avoid the potential for their pain or suffering to be misunderstood or invalidated. Wingfield (2010) found that many Black professionals feel pressure to only express positive emotional displays, such as cooperation or likeability. This limited and positive expression not only limits other forms of emotional expression, such as pain or suffering, but becomes an additional burden when many Black employees must hide anger or frustration from racism they experience at work. Mirchandani (2003) affirms this finding, arguing that many marginalized individuals feel pressure to regulate emotions in order to reshape perception of their social group.

Others have found similar challenges extend to additional minoritized groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, Baker and Lucas (2017) found that LGBTQ+ individuals face constant threats to their dignity and identity, which often create a sense of uncertainty about how to authentically share emotions at work. Taken collectively, minoritized and marginalized individuals face myriad additional uncertainties related to emotional expression, authentic identity expression, and sharing pain and suffering at work.

Within the context of compassion, prior theorizing has yet to account for the ways that traditionally marginalized or minoritized employees may experience compassion differently at work. My findings suggest specific challenges for traditionally marginalized and minoritized employees related to compassion at work. First, as noted above, these employees will face additional uncertainties related to emotional expression which inhibits their expression of pain and suffering at work.

Second, this restrictive feeling that one cannot share about pain or suffering related to a core aspect of their identity may serve as a meta-stressor. Similar to work on communicatively restricted organizational stress, which found that not feeling safe to share about work-related stress served as a compounding meta-stressor (Boren and Veksler, 2015), employees holding traditionally marginalized and minoritized identities may experience additional stress simply because they feel they *cannot* express pain and suffering at work.

Third, my findings suggest that leaders who hold majority identities are less attuned to the experiences of traditionally marginalized and minoritized employees and therefore are less likely to recognize when they are suffering. Last, my findings suggest that even when traditionally marginalized and minoritized individuals express suffering at work, others may not perceive it as valid or deserving of compassion. This, in turn, may limit employees' compassionate action toward one's suffering.

Collectively, more work needs to be done to further explore the ways in which traditionally marginalized and minoritized individuals' express pain and suffering at

work, perceive that feeling rules are constructed in racialized or political ways, and how compassion is experienced differently across the subprocesses.

Relational Contexts Which Emphasize Personal-Well Being Enable Compassion

One of the most consistent themes that emerged across my interviews related to the ways that employees said their leaders cared deeply about their personal well-being. Employees said they felt their “whole selves” were welcomed at work, that leaders asked about them as the “person, not just you the worker,” and ultimately were seen as “a whole person versus just as an employee.” Employees routinely talked about how their leaders stressed being a “human being” was “a priority over whatever your job was,” where leaders “elevated [employees] priorities over [their] own” and ultimately were focused on “the greater good for [employees].” Messages which emphasized personal well-being, partnered with messages that invited and validated personal and emotional disclosure, served to create a relational context which enabled the expression of suffering and enhanced the compassion processes.

My findings extend our understanding of the relational conditions which enable compassion at work. Although prior research highlights the inherent mutuality and relationality of compassion, little is known about the relational contexts that best enable compassion. Building on prior research, my findings (1) extend our understanding on the role of personal and emotional disclosure at, suggesting unique boundary conditions in leader-follower relationships and (2) illustrates a relational context which moves beyond positive regard to emphasizing personal well-being. Collectively, this orientation enhances the compassion subprocesses in specific ways.

First, my findings suggest that leaders craft emotion rules in a way that allows for the expression of suffering through several strategies. Past research has highlighted the importance of *dynamic boundary permeability* (Lilius et al., 2011), which refers to normalizing personal emotional disclosure at work. This is *dynamic*, as what is and is not shared may be influenced by a variety of factors (i.e., individual preferences), and it has *boundary permeability* in that it allows people to share across typical work-life boundaries. My findings affirm that normalizing personal and emotional disclosure at work and deferring to employees' preferences about their own personal disclosures works to enable the expression of suffering and compassion at work. At the same time, my findings suggest that there may be unique boundary conditions within the supervisor-subordinate relationship. At face value, one might assume that dynamic boundary permeability implies a mutuality of disclosure. Conversely, my findings suggest that within leader-follower relationships, many leaders *did not* reciprocate with the same level of personal and emotional disclosure that employees did. What was important was not that they *reciprocated* this dynamic boundary permeability, but that they *invited* disclosure across any perceived boundaries and *honored* those disclosures when they occurred.

Secondly, my findings suggest that relational contexts which support compassion privilege personal well-being over one's work-related tasks. Previous research has highlighted the importance of *high-quality connections* (Lilius et al., 2011) in enabling compassion at work, defined as relationships punctuated by mutuality and positive regard. However, mutuality and positive regard do not imply a sense of care beyond one's work-related role. By contrast, my findings suggest a particular type of mutuality

and positive regard which *explicitly* emphasizes one's personal well-being as equally important or more important than one's work-related roles.

Research on workplace identity gives further context to these findings. Many people conceptualize identity as dichotomous, where people often perceive "real" and "fake" selves. Within the context of organizational, Tracy and Tretheway (2005) argue that discourses of managerialism and entrepreneurism often privilege work-related identities, which orients the needs of the organization *over and above* the employee's personal needs. When framed as "real" and "fake" selves, this encourages employees to bifurcate personal and work-life, often self-managing at work in ways that reinforce inauthentic identities. As a contrast to these dichotomized identities, Tracy and Tretheway (2005) draw on poststructural conception of identity to suggest that identity is better seen as a *crystallized self,* where individuals have multifaceted aspects of who they are. This suggests that identity does not have to be either/or, but may be both/and.

In the context of my own study, this highlights the need to move beyond mutuality and positive regard and to actively invite multifaceted aspects of employees' identities at work. Given the preexisting discourses of managerialism and entrepreneurialism which have stressed work-related identities as the "ideal organizational self" (Tracy & Tretheway, 2005, p. 223), leaders in my study actively privileged personal facets of identity *over* work-related facets of identity, which served to disrupt the ideal organizational self as only work-related.

Taken collectively, this relational orientation serves to enable compassion in specific ways. First, this orientation cultivates space for the *expression of suffering*. When leaders communicate in ways that emphasize care about one's personal well-being over

their work identity, this inherently cuts against the grain of dominant d/Discourses related to emotion at work, where personal sharing and intense negative emotions are seen as inappropriate and unprofessional (Tracy & Malvini Redden, 2019). As outlined above, scholars of compassion theory have paid little attention to how often employees fail to disclose and even actively hide pain or suffering at work. By developing a relational orientation that actively conveys the importance of one's whole, multifaceted, personal self over their work identity, participants described less uncertainty and greater comfort sharing about pain and suffering at work.

Secondly, an orientation which invites employee's multifaceted selves enhances leaders' ability to recognize, relate, and (re)act to employees in the face of suffering. Greater context for one's personal life, which organically develops when inviting multifaceted selves at work, allows leaders to recognize pain or suffering that employees may not have disclosed otherwise. Additionally, this more personal relationship may enable leaders and employees to have less uncertainty in how they relate and (re)act once suffering is expressed. As previously outlined, both employees and leaders face uncertainty in how they relate and (re)act to suffering. Leaders may be uncertain of how to best empathically relate, what is effective or appropriate to disclose, and if or how they can (re)act to help their employee. Employees may also be uncertain if their leader is relating authentically or if they want to accept emotional or other support in the face of suffering. An orientation founded on inviting multifaceted identities serves to create mutual trust between leaders and employees, where employees trust that leaders have their best interests in mind and leaders have greater context and confidence in trust they are relating to and (re)acting in effective ways.

This relational orientation highlights the importance of continuing to expand our view of compassion as episodic and emphasizes how it unfolds *within* ongoing, mutual, caring relationships that invite and include individuals multifaceted selves. When focused on compassion as primarily episodic, it can be harder to understand the relational contexts that are necessary to accomplish such a vulnerable, dynamic, effortful, and deeply personal endeavor in meeting another in their pain and suffering and (re)acting compassionately on their behalf.

Anticipatory Compassion Conveys Care and Creates Space to Express Suffering

Within my findings on the distinct communicative patterns that leaders used to craft emotion rules, a unique discursive pattern emerged within participants' stories that I am titling *anticipatory compassion*. Anticipatory compassion is defined as a discursive move where an individual proactively and explicitly acknowledges potential pain or suffering that someone may be experiencing, either currently or in the future. Across my data, this move was used by leaders to connect with employees around pain or suffering that they thought they might be experiencing, whether it was related to an upcoming work transition, a specific season, or a general sense that they might be struggling. My findings suggest that this discursive move function in three interrelated ways: (1) convey a sense of care and empathy proactively, rather than just responding to pain or suffering when it comes up, (2) help attune employees to their own potential pain or suffering, and (3) create an opening for employees that reduces uncertainty about expressing pain or suffering.

First, I argue that this discursive move proactively conveys a sense of care and empathy for employees. Many participants expressed a sense of deep care when leaders

went out of their way to proactively check-in with them about specific pain or suffering, especially when undisclosed (as in the case of *anticipatory compassion*) but also when leaders followed-up on prior expressions of suffering. Leaders, who often hold supervisory or higher executive roles, have more limited interaction with certain individuals and often have significant time pressure and intellectual load. Consequently, many participants highlighted how distinctive it was when leaders *did* proactively check-in, implicitly suggesting that this was not common across their leadership experiences. Additionally, a sense of care cannot be conveyed without *communicating* that sense of care. Echoing work by Miller (2007) and Way and Tracy (2012), many leaders may be able to cognitively take another's perspective and empathically feel for them but *communicating* empathic concern is what allows for connection. *Anticipatory compassion* works to *communicate* the cognitive and emotional elements of empathy, which cultivates connection and a sense of care for employees.

Secondly, anticipatory compassion may serve to *attune* employees to their own pain or suffering. It is well documented that many experiences of pain and suffering are ambiguous, complex, and hard to fully understand (Kanov, 2021). Even further, these ambiguities are often further exacerbated by the unique pressures of organizational life, which may downplay or exclude their emotional experience. Taken collectively, many people may encounter situations of pain or suffering that they are not able to articulate, comprehend, or understand fully, potentially compounding their suffering and inhibiting their ability to engage productively. Research on framing (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Fairhurst, 2010) and discursive leadership (Fairhurst, 2007) suggests that language shapes the context of how individuals experience ambiguous situations. In this way, *anticipatory*

compassion serves as a framing mechanism that helps individuals understand their pain and suffering in a way that they may not have otherwise been able to. For example, one participant recalled transitioning into a highly administrative role where he had much less patient interaction. His leader expressed to him that his transition into administration may be accompanied by a sense of loss and sadness from the lack of patient care. Later, when this participant *did* struggle with the transition away from patient care he recalled how his leader's messages of *anticipatory compassion* helped him understand his own emotions and normalize the grieving process.

Third, anticipatory compassion creates an opening for the employee to share about this pain or suffering in the future. When an individual proactively acknowledges potential pain or suffering, they are implicitly communicating that this emotion is permitted to discuss at work. Doing so helps reduce, minimize, or completely remove uncertainties or hesitancies that employees *could* have in sharing pain or suffering. Returning to the example of the healthcare worker transitioning from almost all client-centered work to a more administrative role, suppose that his leader had not expressed *anticipatory compassion*. Struggling with the transition may not only surprise this employee, but they may be worried about disclosing this to their leader for fear that it be perceived as them not being fit for administrative work. These image management concerns could lead this person to withhold this information or seek help elsewhere, limiting their ability to get compassion at work. However, because this leader has already named and normalized this pain, it minimized worries about image management and allowed this employee to express this pain more readily. Done over time, messages of *anticipatory compassion* may also serve to craft feeling rules that enable compassion,

functioning to minimize power dynamics and create space for the expression of other pain and suffering.

Taken collectively, anticipatory compassion may be a powerful way for individuals to care for those around them through proactive messaging. Within the context of leadership, where power imbalances and role-based differences may compound uncertainty about expressed suffering, this discursive move may have even greater impact, especially when communicated to people in lower-level positions within the organization.

More work should be done to explore *anticipatory compassion* empirically. However, I argue that this provides a powerful heuristic that may be used in training and pedagogy to help people understand the intersections of empathy, communication, and compassion theory. Beyond empirical work exploring anticipatory compassion on its own, scholars might usefully also explore its use within training and pedagogical context to help people better care for and connect with others.

Discovering and enacting compassion is punctuated by dialectical tensions

Finally, my findings outline specific dialectical tensions that leaders and employees navigate once suffering is expressed. Previous compassion scholarship has noted the inherent cooperation and mutuality embedded within the compassion process (Miller, 2007; Way & Tracy, 2012). Additionally, Way and Tracy (2012) found in their study among hospice workers that recognizing suffering often included active searching through interaction and paying close attention to various verbal and nonverbal communicative cues. Miller (2007) also found that among compassion workers,

thoughtful questions allowed for a greater understanding of context which enabled greater recognizing.

However, the literature still largely assumes that compassion providers will readily know what will be perceived as compassionate when suffering is expressed. Additionally, as Dutton and colleagues (2014) note, the "literature tends to take for granted that sufferers will be open to, ready for, or accepting of compassionate responses, but this may not be the case." (p. 296). In part, this may be due to the fact that much of the theoretical work on compassion has been explored and developed within organizational contexts where compassionate care is central to the organization's work (i.e., healthcare, counseling, pastoral care, working with homeless youth). Within these contexts, it may well be that compassionate action is both readily understood by the compassion provider and accepted by the sufferer.

My findings suggest that in many organizational contexts, discovering and enacting what would be perceived as compassionate is a dynamic process where both compassion provider and sufferers navigate three distinct dialectical tensions. Dialectical tensions can be defined as "the ongoing dynamic interplay of opposite poles as they implicate each other, as well as the unity of opposites. In dialectics, interdependent and mutually exclusive poles are continually connected in a push-pull on each other, like a rubber band." (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 74-75). As such, these dialectical tensions are always connected in a push-pull dynamic, the balance of which must be discovered within interaction.

These dialectical tensions further evidence the complex communicative dynamics involved in both empathically relating and (re)acting on behalf of another. In particular,

this finding suggests that relating includes navigating dialectical tensions that may create specific challenges for compassion providers when working to meet both the immediate needs of the sufferer (i.e., affirmation, immediacy, and deference to their experience) and their long-term needs (i.e., probing for additional information to inform level of compassionate response).

The first dialectical tension suggests that compassion providers can valuably let the employee lead the level of disclosure *and* ask probing questions in order to better understand the context of their suffering in order to scale an appropriate response. Within the context of expressed suffering, where an individual may already be feeling vulnerable and uncertain, probing for additional information could be seen as intrusive, inappropriate, or rude. Even worse, an individual may attribute probing questions to a sense of distrust, where they are probing for information in order to understand if this suffering is valid. In all cases, this kind of perception would likely lead to feelings of invalidation or rejection in a time where they need to feel affirmed and in control. Thus, compassion providers must defer to their employees lead regarding their level of disclosure while at the same time finding ways to ask additional questions in a way that conveys care and is not face-threatening.

The second dialectical tension suggests that it is valuable for compassion providers to both ask what the sufferer believes would be most effective in alleviating their suffering while *also* offering potential solutions. Suffering is an inherently subjective experience, and consequently, sufferers may have differing views on what would best alleviate their suffering. Openly asking what is needed invites the perspective of the sufferer, which creates space for them to share specific actions they believe will

alleviate their suffering while simultaneously honors their autonomy within the process. At the same time, my findings suggest that leaders may also usefully offer solutions they believe could alleviate suffering. Research suggests that certain types of suffering, such as sudden loss or acute grief, often shock individuals and leave them unable to process or know what is best for them (Bento, 1994). Sufferers may also be unsure of what they *can* ask for to alleviate their suffering, such as if it is appropriate to cancel meetings and take the rest of the week off. When leaders offer solutions, this signals implicit permission that cuts against any uncertainties that individuals may have and also allows individuals who do not know what they need to choose from various options. Pragmatically, leaders can utilize a combination of these throughout their interactions in order to discover and enact what will work best to alleviate suffering.

A third dialectical tension suggests that compassion providers work to honor the sufferer's agency with regard to what action they want to take to alleviate their suffering while *also* at times insisting on specific actions to alleviate their suffering. Honoring the sufferer's agency is critical, especially given the subjectivity of pain and suffering; knowing that many people could experience the same pain trigger in myriad ways, it makes sense to defer to the sufferer on what would best help them in that moment. At the same time, the sufferer may refuse or resist specific compassionate actions even when they believe they would work positively to alleviate their suffering. My findings demonstrate that some employees minimize their own needs when they worry about the impact of compassion actions on the organization or of other coworkers. For example, several participants described resisting offers of compassionate action because they worried it would be too disruptive at work or an imposition on coworkers. Only when

leaders recognized this underlying motivation and emphasized the need to take care of their own well-being *before* work-related inconveniences did employees accept their continued insistence on certain actions to alleviate their suffering. Expanding this dialectical tension to other situations suggests that compassion providers must defer to the sufferer's agency but also read between the lines to understand why individuals may be turning down specific offers of compassion. When leaders suspect that employees may be minimizing their own needs in service of perceived organizational inconveniences, leaders can directly engage those concerns in order to help sufferers have greater agency to choose what is best free from perceived constraints or anticipated consequences.

Collectively, these dialectical tensions suggest that discovering and enacting compassion in a way that meets the sufferer's needs is much more complex than previously understood, where both compassion providers and sufferers navigate potential uncertainties to discover and enact an appropriate compassionate response. These dialectical tensions also highlight the complexity and potential uncertainty that many leaders face when working to effectively support their employees through their suffering. Leaders may even perceive these dialectical tensions as paradoxical, contributing to their own uncertainty or difficulty in navigating an effective response on behalf of their suffering employees.

Practical Implications

This study offers important practical implications for cultivating compassion at work. These include (1) crafting job flexibility and leave policies, (2) critically assessing structures and policies that limit the expression of suffering at work, especially as relates

to individuals holding minoritized and marginalized identities, and (3) crafting emotional feeling rules which welcome personal and emotional disclosure.

Craft Job Flexibility and Leave Policies

My findings suggest that employees face significant uncertainty about expressed suffering at work, what they can ask for to alleviate their suffering, and how others may perceive challenges related to prolonged suffering. Although leaders and employees may learn to manage and navigate these uncertainties better over time, organizations would greatly benefit from developing policies around leave and job flexibility that minimize uncertainty for employees and give leaders the resources they need to react compassionately.

First, creating leave policies that are broad in application and minimize the need for employee justification may allow employees to take advantage of much needed time off while not feeling as though they have to disclose their own personal suffering. Rigid leave policies that have explicit or implied qualifying criteria (i.e., loss of loved one, significant health event) may put employees in a position of having to justify or validate their own experience of suffering when it doesn't fit the organization's ideas of what counts as suffering. Additionally, in organizations and roles where it makes good sense, job flexibility around work-from-home and hours that one must be in the office may allow employees to do things that alleviate suffering without having to ask explicitly for time off. This serves to minimize image management concerns and uncertainty and have employees have greater agency to attend to their own well-being.

These policies also give leaders resources to react compassionately to employees. As my research suggests, being able to propose specific solutions that may alleviate an

employee's suffering is important in addition to inviting employees' perspective on what would help. Organizations that have in-built job flexibility and more open leave policies empower leaders to quickly offer broad accommodations that may help many employees who need time.

Critically Assess Cultural Assumptions and Policies that Limit the Expression of Suffering at Work

Secondly, organizations may benefit from critically assessing various aspects of their organizational culture and policies that may limit or constrain the expression of suffering. With regard to culture, many organizations may espouse values around psychological safety, compassion, and personal well-being while remaining detached from employees' lived experiences of these values. One way organizations may work to assess this cultural disconnect is through anonymous surveys which explicitly assess employees' perception of their ability to express pain or suffering, leadership and organizational compassionate response, and cultural pressures related to professionalism. This could then spur courageous conversations among teams or across the organization about how to live out values connected to compassion and openness at work.

In addition to assessing culture, my findings also suggest that certain workplace policies may negatively impact individuals' ability to express suffering at work. In particular, my findings suggest that implicit and explicit policies which limit certain types of topics at work (i.e., politics, religion, LGBTQ+ issues) disproportionately impact employees holding marginalized or minoritized identities, whose suffering may often be tied to topics that others see as inherently political. Admittedly, welcoming broader conversations around politics, race, and LGBTQ+ experiences may present challenges,

but organizations do need to look at the ways that certain policies may be disproportionately impacting members of their community from expressing suffering and receiving compassion at work.

Craft Organizational Feeling Rules to Welcome Personal and Emotional Disclosure

Lastly, organizations may actively work to cultivate organizational feeling rules which welcome personal and emotional disclosure among coworkers and with appropriate direct reports. All organizations craft expectations around appropriate emotional expression whether, regardless of their awareness of these rules. Unfortunately, my findings suggest that left unassessed, a majority of organizations have traditionally crafted implicit feeling rules which *exclude* personal emotions at work. Consequently, many employees find expressing suffering at work too risky, and often suffer in silence.

In order to work against the implicit rules that often accompany d/Discourses of professionalism, my findings offer several specific ways that leaders may craft emotional feeling rules that more openly invite personal and emotional disclosure at work. First, leaders can utilize messages that emphasize the importance of personal well-being. Given the privileging of work-related identities, leaders may use messages that frame personal well-being as equally to or more important than work-related productivity. This may come in the form of elevating self-care as a critical part of work or using language that emphasizes employees as human beings rather than headcount, an employee number, or an organizational role. These messages cultivate an environment that works against strict work-life bifurcation and emphasizes one’s individual well-being over their workplace productivity.

Secondly, leaders can create routine spaces that invite personal disclosure, within both individual and group meetings. My findings suggest that even simple check-ins can be a powerful space that encourage and allow organizational members to get to know each other, create greater context for each other's life beyond work, and normalize personal sharing at work. Within these check-ins, leaders can specifically frame the time as a space to share about aspects of their life that are *not* work-related, which explicitly invites and normalizes personal sharing. Of course, leaders should emphasize that this is an *invitation* to share, as employees may have varying levels of comfort related to personal disclosure at work. Additionally, leaders may wonder how much is too much, or that inviting disclosure may open the floodgates. While these may become genuine concerns, my findings suggest that most organizations currently have an imbalance where *too little* personal disclosure happens at work.

Third, leaders *may* consider the value of strategically sharing about their own personal life and disclosing their own challenges and struggles. My findings demonstrate that leaders' disclosure of personal challenges and struggles has a powerful effect on shaping feeling rules within the organization and normalizing the disclosure of personal pain and suffering. At the same time, I say leaders can consider doing this *strategically* because my findings also suggest that employees have varied expectations and preferences of leader disclosure and vulnerability, where many employees shared that they feel it would be inappropriate for their leaders to share openly about personal challenges at work. Additionally, leaders' vulnerable expression may be received differently based on their demographics and position. For example, research suggests that women and BIPOC individuals are often subject to various stereotypes and biases that

influence how their behaviors are perceived and assessed (Eagly & Chin, 2010). In the current context, this suggests that disclosing personal life details or pain and suffering at work may carry greater risks for women and BIPOC individuals. Taken collectively, this suggests that leaders may use strategic personal and emotional disclosure to shape feeling rules but must also be aware of their own positionality and the varied implications of how it could be perceived by others in the organization. Additionally, my findings do suggest that many leaders are able to craft feeling rules that allow for the expression of pain and suffering without disclosing personal details themselves.

Limitations

This study, like all studies, has limitations. These include (1) limited sampling of minoritized groups, (2) a sample focused on white-collar workers, with a disproportionate representation of the education industry, (3) a broad definition of pain and suffering among participants, and (4) sole focus on self-report through interviews, with no observational data.

First, although I made efforts to get broad demographic representation within my sample, certain minoritized identity categories remain underrepresented. Of the 31 participants, 20 identified as white (64.5%). Although this percentage is close to mirroring the ethnic makeup of the current U.S. Population (~60% White non-Hispanic; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), only having 11 participants across minoritized ethnicities limits my ability to distinguish between unique challenges experienced by each group and risks generalizing the experience of ethnic minorities. Additionally, the majority of my participants identified as straight (n = 27), providing only limited insights into unique challenges experienced by gay and lesbian participants. Lastly, with regard to gender, I

did not include data on whether or not individuals identified as cisgender or transgender. Sixteen identified as female, 14 identified as male, and 1 identified as queer. Within interviews, one participant shared that they faced challenges transitioning from male to female within their organizational context.

Secondly, this sample represents highly educated, white-collar workers. All participants had at least a bachelor's degree, with 14 having attained a master's degree and 5 completing some form of doctoral degree (PhD, DPT, or MD). All participants also worked in traditionally white-collar industries, such as education, business services, healthcare, technology, and public administration. Within these white-collar industries, education was disproportionately represented in my sample, with 13 participants (41.9%) working in primary, secondary, or higher education contexts. These sampling limitations have clear concerns for the generalizability of this study outside of white-collar contexts. Additionally, this represents an opportunity for future work to understand the nuances between different types of white-collar work, such as differences among healthcare, education, and business services industries, as well as distinctives of how compassion unfolds within blue-collar industries.

Third, I did not qualify or specify what "counted" as pain or suffering within my recruitment call. I did this intentionally, recognizing the inherent subjectivity of pain and suffering for individuals. One challenge that emerged which warrants further study was that participants described situations of pain and suffering that varied widely, with some participants describing pain that was relatively minor in intensity and short-term whereas others experienced significant loss that was much greater in intensity and carried more long-term implications of care. Consequently, it may be that there are greater nuances in

how leaders should navigate various forms of pain and suffering, ranging from more everyday stressors that have compounded into pain or suffering to significant grief and loss.

Lastly, this study relies on self-report data through qualitative, semi-structured interviews rather than first-hand observational data. This research design, in part, was a result of social distancing regulations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the sampling method provides significant strengths in that it allowed me to understand the ways that participants were making sense of their own subjective experiences of compassion from their leaders, participants are only offering their view of the situation. Additionally, participants were recalling a situation that many times occurred several months in the past, which may limit the detail they can recall or the accuracy of their reflections. Observation data would have the advantage of capturing the nuances of dialogue, messages, nonverbals, and timing, all of which may illuminate the specific ways that leaders respond to, support, and enact compassionate actions in the face of suffering.

Future Directions

This study suggests several areas where future research could continue to expand our understanding of how leadership plays a role in cultivating compassion at work. These include (1) investigating industry-specific nuances of how compassion is cultivated and expressed, (2) exploring unique challenges around emotional expression for minoritized and marginalized identity groups and its relationship to compassion at work, (3) understanding managers' and supervisors' perspectives on compassion and emotion at

work, and (4) investigating the impact of messages that emphasize the importance of personal well-being on perceptions of safety to express personal emotions at work.

First, future work could usefully explore the influence of industry context on uncertainty related to the expression of suffering at work. Prior research on compassion within organizations has largely focused on healthcare and other caring industries, such as counselors, pastors, and nonprofit workers. Future research should continue to expand the focus of research across various organizational contexts to understand the specific uncertainties that individuals experience that keep them from expressing pain and suffering at work. For example, it would be interesting to examine the unique challenges of expressing suffering within blue-collar working contexts, service work and other types of "dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), or unique contexts such as high-reliability organizations (i.e., nuclear power plants).

Secondly, future work should continue to explore the ways that feeling rules are shaped differently for minoritized and marginalized identity groups. How does race and ethnicity impact the types of emotional expression that is welcome at work? How are different types of suffering appraised across varying minoritized experiences? Prior work by race scholars and sociologists has established that emotions are indeed shaped by intersecting factors of race, class, and gender (cf. Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Green, 2012; Wingfield, 2010), which have been undertheorized with regard to emotions at work (Mirchandani, 2003). Integrating and building on this scholarship would allow compassion scholars to better understand the influence of race, class, and gender across compassion processes, both for sufferers and for compassion providers. In the context of leadership, leaders who identify with traditionally marginalized and minoritized identities

may also face unique constraints in the ways they recognize, relate, and (re)act to suffering at work. Integrating interdisciplinary scholarship and further investigating these questions stands not only to nuance our understanding of compassion theory but also to provide practical guidance in how to cultivate compassion equitably across our organizations.

Third, this research suggests that it would be valuable to better understand managers' and supervisors' perspectives on emotion at work, compassion, and social support. Managers' own perceptions of the appropriateness of personal emotions at work will inform and shape how they create space for and enact (or do not enact) compassion at work. Knowing that personal emotions have long been excluded from organizational contexts (Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Tracy, 2004; Tracy, 2008) and that work-identities have often been privileged over personal identities (Tracy & Tretheway, 2005), it makes good sense that managers and supervisors may implicitly endorse and perpetuate the exclusion of personal suffering at work. Even further, managers and supervisors may experience organizational pressures about the appropriateness of personal emotions at work, even when they want to encourage that type of disclosure among their employees. Consequently, managers and supervisors may experience a variety of pressures related to emotions at work, compassion, and social support that appear paradoxical or in tension. My own findings add further complexity to this, suggesting that effectively discovering and enacting compassion may be a difficult task for managers' and leaders as it too often asks them to navigate competing tensions that may appear paradoxical. Utilizing new research on communicative perspectives of navigating paradox at work (Putnam et al., 2016), scholars could explore how managers make sense of and navigate competing

tensions and paradoxes related to task and relational aspects of management, specifically in relation to personal suffering and compassion.

Lastly, it would be interesting to explore the efficacy of messages that convey the importance of personal well-being at work and its influence on how willing participants are to express personal emotions at work. Previous research has utilized message design experiments to test the efficacy of various message strategies on employees' willingness to express ethical dissent within organizations (Bisel & Adame, 2019; Zanin et al., 2016). Similarly, and building on my own findings, research could test whether messages that privilege personal well-being over work-related tasks have an impact on an individual's willingness to speak up about personal pain or suffering at work.

Conclusion

This chapter summarized key theoretical contributions, practical implications, and limitations/future directions. Theoretical contributions include (1) demonstrating that uncertainty related to emotional expression and disclosure limits employees' sharing of personal suffering, which then shapes and limits compassion processes, (2) illustrating that individuals holding traditionally marginalized or minoritized identities face additional uncertainty related to expressing pain and suffering, (3) highlighting a relational orientation that emphasizes personal well-being as enabling the compassion process, (4) outlining *anticipatory compassion* as a specific discursive move that conveys care and opens space to express specific pains and suffering, and (5) empirically illustrating three dialectical tensions that punctuate the dynamic interactions between leaders and employees when relating and (re)acting, suggesting that it is not always easy to understand and enact what would be perceived as compassionate for employees in

their specific organizational context. Taken collectively, these findings illuminate the complexity of expressed suffering and compassion at work and provide inroads for leaders to communicate in ways that cultivate compassion at work.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

First, clarify where this leader relationship is (work, nonprofit, etc…)

1. Tell me a little about yourself and your work.
    a. What is the nature of your work?

Leadership Relationship

2. What does compassion mean to you?
    a. Does compassion mean the same thing when you're talking about it at work versus outside of work? If no, what are the differences?
3. You self-identified for this interview as having a leader that you find to be especially compassionate. Can you tell me more about this person?
    a. What is your relationship to them?
    b. How long have you worked with them?
    c. What makes this person compassionate in your view?

Experience of Compassion

4. Can you tell me about a story about a time recently in which you experienced compassion from this person?
    a. What was the nature of the issue?
    b. Did you volunteer your suffering, or did they recognize it and reach out to you?
    c. How did this person respond and relate to you during this episode?
        - What did they say? What kind of nonverbals did they display?
        - What did you feel or sense from them in their interaction with you?

5. A common definition of compassion is when individuals "recognize suffering in another, relate vulnerably and empathically with that person, and act or react to support them in their suffering." Consider the episode you just shared (or other experiences you've had with this leader)
    a. In what ways did this leader recognize when you were suffering?
        - Does this occur in other situations?
    b. Can you recall a moment in which you were suffering, and this leader recognized this and proactively reached out to you? Perhaps in moments where you could have otherwise not brought it up.
        - ***What do you think contributed to this leader's ability to recognize this?
    c. In what ways did this leader relate to you verbally and nonverbally in these vulnerable conversations?
        - For example, could include certain types of eye contact, facial expressions, head tips, ways they positioned their body, any type of touch, a specific type of message (text, email), certain words, a kind of tone of voice, sharing their own uncertainties…
    d. In what ways did this leader act or react on your behalf in order to alleviate your suffering?
        - For example, could include instrumental support, purposefully leaving you alone, or (in contrast) being nearby or present, getting you certain types of information…

e. You’ve described many ways in which your leader has communicated compassionately to you.
   - Do these behaviors show up in other situations at work? Can you give an example or story of that?
   - Are there situations in which these behaviors do not show up? How do you make sense of that?

6. I want to go back a little bit now. Many people often feel uncomfortable expressing personal emotions and struggles at work. Have there been other experiences of pain or suffering at work that you have not expressed to this person?
   a. How did you come to the decision to keep this particular suffering from this leader?
   b. Do you ever share your suffering but not divulge the full extent of it? (i.e., hold back certain details?). If yes, how do you decide what to share and not share?
7. How was it that you felt comfortable expressing your suffering in the experience you first shared?
   a. Can you think back to things this leader regularly says or does that contribute to your feeling of comfortability?
   b. Some say that this is essentially trust. Does this encapsulate what this is? Are there people you trust that you wouldn’t express suffering to?
8. What sets this person apart as highly compassionate compared to others in your organization that you also like and have positive relationships with?

    a. Another way of thinking about this: How is this leader similar to others that you like, but that maybe aren't compassionate in the same way?

9. Does this leader ever express their own suffering to you?
    a. Can you think of a particular example or story where they shared with you?
    b. What kinds of things have they expressed to you that seem especially memorable or meaningful?
10. Are there any downsides or challenges you find with this leader being especially compassionate?
11. What other factors at your work may have contributed to facilitating this leader's compassion. In other words, are there other things at work that make it possible or probable that leaders will be compassionate (e.g., certain policies or structures, a type of organizational culture, the physical space or layout of your work)
    a. How has this taken shape throughout your tenure at the organization?
    b. Any specific policies, organizational values, or other things that shape compassion within your organization?
    c. Are there things at work that would make you feel compassion is not welcome? How does this person accomplish compassion despite these factors?

Alright, now that we've spoken about compassion with a specific leader, now we are going into thinking about compassion with imagined others.

Imagining Compassion

12. Envision an Organizational Leader whom you think would be the epitome of compassion and one that you would want to work for.
    a. How does this person behave? How do they communicate? What types of personality traits come to mind? What are their habits? What do they look like (demographics)? Are they with others? Physically? Online?
    b. You used the word (insert any key words like authentic here). What does _________ mean to you?
    c. What do they say? How do they interact with you?
    d. Other contextual probes depending on emergent findings
    e. How would this person seek to create space (literally or figuratively) for the expression of suffering and for compassion to unfold readily at the organization?
13. Now envision you want an organization that supports this leader (and others) in being as compassionate as possible. What would that organization look like?
    a. What kinds of policies and practices would be in place?
    b. How would individuals communicate with each other?
14. Anything else that we haven't talked about that you want to share?
15. Do you think this leader would ever be open to being interviewed as well? If so, could I reach out in the future to gather their information?

THANK YOU so much for your time. I truly feel privileged to hear about your life and experiences and am thankful for the ways your story will help us further our understanding of cultivating compassion at work.

APPENDIX B

CODEBOOK

Abbrev.	Code	Description	Examples
RouConn	Routines or Structures of Connection	Regular habits, routines, or structural practices that allow leaders and employees to connect at work, most often as formal and informal check-ins. This created space to follow-up on previous sharing as well.	*Formal and informal* I mean, for one just scheduled meetings. Once every other week 30 minutes to just check in….and certain conversations we've had, like, on the phone when we were like commuting. Just more like open ended, like we just kind of call each other outside of work hours. *Informal* But he would pop in pretty regularly at 430 or something before he was going to go home and I was still going to be there for two hours. Yeah, I feel like because she would always when we were able to visit our offices, physically, she would always pass by and she'd wave or if I'm not seeing a student, she would just pop in and say, How's it going? Everything good? You know her and I developed a very honest relationship. I mean, honestly it could be a chat about anything from a minor nuisance with a student, you know, an interaction in the class to something substantial like my role and duties and the department being on my mind. But those interactions felt very organic. I feel compassion can be gauged in very small scales, like the thumbs up or thumbs down sort of thing, especially when we were always in a hurry, or in passing, and we had to go and do some things. And then they can be very substantial like checking in on our mental health
Genuine	Check-in is Genuine	Employees describe mundane check-ins as “genuine,” where they knew their leader authentically wanted to know how they were doing rather than asking “how are you” in a perfunctory manner. This is often communicated through tone, follow-up questions,	“I do feel like she's genuinely interested in hearing kind of how life is going like in one on one check ins. Like I feel like we can often go through a full half hour meeting where we, you know, could be talking about business to where she's just kind of exploring how life's going and what I'm processing as a human being.” “Because I think the, I think she's she has built trust because she has asked questions

		and the "feel" that is conveyed by the leader	and then been interested, and kind of had this track record of like if you bring something up. Like I don't just want to hear about it] I want us to partner together and do something about it. And I think her history of how she's done that has helped build a lot of trust and so because we have that trust when she was like, how was your weekend and I'm like, "It sucked because is the worst and I'm just crying all the time," which was maybe my supervision yesterday – I can't confirm or deny. But she's able to ask those questions and see the look on my face. And I'm just like deer in the headlights. I don't know how I'm going to do this because I'm working so much and also our democracy is crumbling and I can't. And she's able to like level with moment stuff, which is really helpful."
CommOpen	Communicating openness "made clear they were a resource"	Employees describe their leaders regularly communicating a sense of openness to them, including being available, having an open door, and creating space for them. This included both generally (I'm always available to you) and specifically (I recognize this hard thing is happening, and I'm here for you if you need)	No matter how like busy she was or think things that she has going on like when somebody came to her unless she was like directly in a call and she was talking with someone, or a group of people. No matter what she was doing. She never was like come back later. Yeah, I think she would always like drop what she was doing, come in, let's talk. Her doors are very, very open. I mean, literally and metaphorically Additionally, I'd say in the moments where he knows he can't, so like busy seasons this year when he has no space, even for one on ones, he'd say, like, "I don't have time to ask you this, but I want you to always come tell me if any of you know there's something in this category that's happening in your world. So even if I don't ask you please tell me"
PersInquiry	Inquiry into personal life	Leaders ask employees about their personal life at work.	You know, asked about well how's how's the PhD program coming and the house. How are [your kids], you know. Like she connects on a personal level too, and sometimes just so invitation of, like, "Yes, I see you as my colleague, as my coworker, as my subordinate but how's life? Right, just that simple invitation of "Tell me about you, the person, not just you, the worker."

			I mean, she is really good at asking questions about not just how am I doing job wise, but like, how am I doing overall.
Recognize	Recognized employee behavior differences or changes	Leaders recognize subtle shifts in behavior or communication, enabled by an awareness of employee's lives, personality, and quirks.	That recognition. So as I mentioned, if she heard something or hears something…like we do have a Slack channel too so we slack quite a bit. But if something seems off or there's a tone in someone's voice or something like that, you can be sure you'll be followed up with. Like she recognizes…she's hearing, she's listening, she's aware. I think part of it is that level of awareness and then she actually does something about it too. Right. You know that you will be followed up with, you know it.
CareInquiry	Inquiry of Care	When leaders notice behavior changes, disruptions of routine, or out-of-ordinary behavior, they inquire about how the person is doing *as a person* and check their perceptions before saying anything about work-related challenges This code is related to *proactiveinquiry*	Yeah, I think there's been meetings where maybe I was having an off day and I might have been sure, or I might have been you know, less talkative than normal or less vocal. And she reaches out and says, she acknowledges what she observed. And then rather than jumping to conclusions, she leads with like a question, of like, "Hey, you know, how are you feeling?" rather than like, "Why were you so silent today" or something like that. But she did, but she also doesn't ever do anything where it's like, "oh, well, I know you so well that I know you're off," right. You don't say, "Hey, I know you're off," she'll say, "Hey, you seem off. Am I perceiving that correctly? you know. And so it that gives you the opportunity because then what you're giving the person the opportunity to do is if I'm the person receiving that is, yes, I do want to talk about this. And so I will say, yeah, I do feel off and here's why. Or I might feel off, but I want to talk about it. So I can say no I'm totally cool. It's fine. She'll circle back if it continues, though.
HolisticCare	Holistic Care	Employees regularly stated that it was clear their leaders cared about them as *whole people*, above and beyond their productivity as a person.	She's just an exceptional person from the minute that I started on her team, it was clear that she cared a great deal about obviously the work that I was producing and the outcomes that I was creating, but also just how I was doing personally and what was

		This is a broader meta-theme, further evidenced by communicative actions seen in other categories (authentic check-in, inquiry across work-life boundary, proactive inquiry of suffering/pain)	going on in my context outside of work. How was I struggling...her doors, very, very open And sometimes you just say, "You know what you should go home. Do you have your lesson plans for tomorrow? Yeah. Okay. Go home and come back tomorrow." And regardless of if I took the advice, the sentiment was helpful and conveyed that he cared about my well-being, again, over and above the product that I would bring the next day in class.
ProactiveInquiry	Proactive inquiry about potential pain or suffering	Leaders recognize that certain events, seasons, or situations may bring on pain or suffering for employees, and proactively reach out to acknowledge this and see how the employee is doing	You know she was really good in the early phases of me transitioning to being a manager about recognizing "I know that, like, this is an exciting opportunity for you. But also, like, for me, it's also like mourning the loss of being completely clinical and having that time with patients and you know, just creates like a different feeling when you're at work and now you're like a part of the leadership team. So some people may treat you a little bit differently." So I think like just she took a lot of time in those early weeks of checking in being like, how are you doing? Understanding that process of, you know, letting some of the clinical side go and embracing some of the leadership side of things. He has kind of an ongoing list for things that are these experience and tries to make sure that he's paying extra attention to certain parts of our lives at different parts of the year. And that's seems generic, but it really works. And with the diverse personalities je works with, folks who will share readily when they're frustrated and those who won't, he kind of has to find some systems that work for him. But that's where he tries to make sure he notices.

Abbreviation	Code	Description	Examples
CareFirst	First response emphasizes holistic care	Leaders affirm their care for the employee and their pain/suffering *before* discussing work-related inconveniences that may emerge from expressed suffering (Distinct from care beyond employee, as this captures the *initial response* to expressed suffering as opposed to a feeling/ideology of care)	And the initial conversation was not "How long do you think you'll be out" the conversation was "how can we support you so that you can go as soon as you need to." He was quick to convey that we would figure it out. And that family safety would be prioritized over whether or not I was at school in person. And so he quickly communicated that there was a hierarchy of needs and that family was above the needs of being in building at school.
ProbingQuestions	Questions to recognize pain and explore depth of suffering	Leaders use questions in order to let employees share their feelings, and often probe to understand if there are deeper layers to a "minor issue" the employee presents	And we started talking about it from there and she asked me specifically like what had upset because she was kind of like, well, what, what, like you did everything right for this patient what…she was like I know it was hard, but what are you…what are you taking responsibility for here because she could tell that like I felt responsible. I want to phrase this as best as I can, um, it was kind of the opposite. I think of what you just asked of, like, rather than like pushing back on, like what I had to say. I feel like she was pulling out what I really was feeling and sometimes would fill in those blanks for me without me having to verbalize you know like the extent of what I was feeling. So I was very, very, very lucky to have her
ActListen	Active Listening Behaviors	Leaders actively listen and follow-up on key details, including attentive nonverbal communication. Many employees shared that leaders kept the focus on them through active listening instead of co-opting their experience.	Really makes you feel like you're you're heard and she's listening to you. And we'll go from there. Um, verbally, you know, she uses phrases like, I totally feel you. That sucks. I'm so sorry you have to go through that. I'm so sorry feeling that way. I can't imagine what that's like for you. Whereas you know the commonality, I can only imagine. It's like, no, you can't imagine being the only person of color in a unit that's predominantly white

NonImmediacy	Nonverbal immediacy “being present with them in pain”	Leaders relate in ways that convey immediacy and attention when employees share pain or suffering	On his face that there will be a sense of concern when he can when you're sharing something within or when when he thinks that may be something is wrong. You see it on his face right he's he's concerned he wants to engage with you. He wants to see where you're at. Those are instances where there isn’t anything she can do about it, but the non-verbals communicate compassion to you so… I mean, again, nonverbal she would never answer her phone if we were in our office, you know, like her phone would ring and, you know, she would let it go to voicemail didn't matter what it was.
LeadDisc	Employee leads disclosure level	Leaders did not pry for details but let the employee lead with the level of disclosure they felt comfortable with	Yeah, she she. Let's see. She lets us talk and she lets you kind of, you know, she listened in silence when I'm sharing and she makes that you feel comfortable in the space. And yeah, some she won't ask like all these questions and I feel like that that would have overpowered and overpowering. But she's not. She wasn't asking questions to, you know, get information that she could. I don't know. Get all the specifics. You don't really care about the specifics you cared about wanting to meet me where I was at and know how I was doing and her line of questions would reflect that. And she wasn't trying to put in her words or talk about like her own experiences. She was just curious about how I was going through it and I'm just asking minimal questions and let, let me talk did a lot of a
ConnectBefore	Connect before going to solutions	Leaders made an effort to ask questions, sit in silence, and connect with the employee in their hurt before jumping to solutions	But i mean i can i can remember a conversation in which I like pretty vulnerable, I would say, and just how hard things are like I'm really struggling. And she was really supportive and was really validating and that she didn't like just try to give me answers and be like, oh, try this, like, time management thing or like try this thing. Instead, she was like, she really leveled with me and was like, Yeah, I get it. I've been there. It's hard, I'm the same way, work life balance is really hard

Acknowledge	Acknowledge suffering and validate feelings	Leader acknowledges and validates expressed suffering, including employee emotions and sensemaking	And to acknowledge the hurt or pain that someone else is going through and making them feel known out of that meeting, rather than, like, Oh God, I just shared this and now I feel so open and naked and vulnerable, and I don't know how they're going to take that and potentially manipulate it… And absolutely worked to like validate my feelings and emotions and like…you know, creating room for me to talk about it. And also just responding in a way that was very validating.
NoWarmth	Relating doesn't have to be warm	Many employees describe that their leaders communicate and relate in ways that are not "warm" but still convey care	She's not overly gregarious or even in some ways very demonstrative, like even with her facial expressions and things. And she's had feedback on that before that she has a very a very good poker face I'll start by saying, he is not the default of the flowery warm spirit, you might think of with a compassionate person. Yeah, it's kind of, it's ironic that I'm talking about my boss, because I would say for a lot of my experience with her leading up to like becoming an assistant manager. And I would say what most people's viewpoint of her was that she's not like a very compassionate touchy feely relational person
Cautious	Cautious when relating personally	Employees describe that leaders were cautious to relate with their own personal experiences, to co-opt the sharing, or explicitly said they can't understand the situation Many employees shared that leaders kept the focus on them through active listening instead of co-opting their experience.	And she does a good job of not pretending like she can understand the situation if she can't, right. Like she isn't someone who's going to be like, "Oh, like, I get that." Or, "oh, I understand" or, "oh, I can relate," because if she can't, then she wont

Abbreviation	Code	Description	Examples
Advocate	Advocate for employee	Leader actively advocates with others within the organization on behalf of the employee, either reactively or proactively. This took the form of advocating for tangible changes, such as a policy, as well as sticking up for people and "going to bat" for them	I think it's really rare for a leader to intercede on your behalf and to literally step into that space and say, "No, this is my person like you can't treat this person that way," even before maybe you formerly worked for her. And that definitely I saw that, especially when and my second year she did actually become tenured she became an associate and she really was invested in using that new position that elevated position to advocate for people
HonorAgency	Honor employee's agency	Leaders defer to employees on what they want or feel that they need in the face of their own suffering, even when offering advice or potential solutions	Yeah, I would say she does a very good job of like giving agency within the scope of like where agency is actually warranted, and not like related to a client safety or something like that. Yeah, totally. And it's, it's never like "You need to skip this meeting." Do you need me there's totally a difference right and delivery and his delivery just always about "Do you need the time back?" or "Will this help you have an easier day, will this help you feel better." You know, it's never accusatory or forceful
NeedInquiry	Inquire about employee needs Connected closely to *ProHelp* below, where *both* are often present and interplay with each other	Leader asks what the employee feels that they need in the face of suffering, including open-ended questions as well as leading questions to let employees "correct" or guide them	You and then on the compassionate immaterial side of things, you know, she just checked in. She was like, hey, like how's your process going. And what can I do to help you. You want me to read over anything? Do you just want to chat. I think what [my leader] is good at is being willing to ask what is needed in that circumstance. You know, giving people the opportunity and saying, you know, what would you want to see moving forward, or what do you want from me to help in this, or what are some solutions that you could see moving forward? I think putting it in their court a little bit too, depending on what the issue was, and not assuming what they need, but in certain situations, saying, hey, what do you need, how can I advocate for you.
ProHelp	Proactively offer	Leaders proactively offer ways to help or do things,	He's trying to do both. Now, which is at first. When I first came to Whitworth. It was just

	suggestions of how to help Connected closely to *NeedInquiry* above, where *both* are often present and interplay with each other	and assess their usefulness. This reduces any uncertainty employees might have to *ask* for this type of support, and meet employees when they may not know what they need	kind of resting on asking what you need. And then not offering anything. And so sometimes, especially if you're newer to the place or you don't feel comfortable yet in a professional relationship really say like actually just need a day off for a day away that feels on professional to ask for. So, he's trying to do both, where he hears specific needs and is willing to try and meet those when he can, but also offer up, could I do this, this, or this for you. Like which one of these things have been helpful
Permission	Communicated permission	Leaders communicate explicit and implicit permission that it is appropriate to off-load work-related tasks (skip meetings, push back deadline, drop work, etc) in efforts to help alleviate pain or suffering	I think that, you know the willingness to - and it sounds weird, because we have unlimited PTO so its not like he's giving me extra time off or something like that - but like to say like, hey, you know, if you're not feeling well, take a couple days. Like, if there's something going on, whether it's physically or mentally. You know, like… Cris: Kind of the explicit permission? Participant: Yeah. But it's always the kind of service aspect. Can I take something off your plate. Can I give you permission to cancel meeting's today, that sort of thing.
InstrumSupport	Leader offers instrumental support within role affordances	Leader executes anything they believe could help, within the power of their role	I've seen him offer like here's a night and hotel room for an RD. Just take it off campus and get that space. And so, um, on a practical side of things, she did support me in applications for new positions that I was applying for. An employee whose mom wasn't feeling well in the hospital got diagnosed with cancer. It was was huge, and she had to start chemo right away. Well, under this person's leadership, we foot the bill for the family's meals for like the next month, you know, so it's just like, You're not alone. There's just like, there is creativity, I think, in a moment of crisis to leverage multiple kinds of resources.
EmoSupport	Leader emotional support	Leader offers emotional support to employees in response to their suffering	you know, it was a really crappy situation. And I don't think any of us could have foreseen that, um, so again, kind of like…but then she said that if she had been like the one to be dying. She would probably have

			wanted someone to tell her the truth. Like, you're not going to make this rather than just be like, You're going to be fine. And we'll see you on the other side of this kind of thing. And yeah, you know, because I think like…And then I thought about to, I think, you know, if it were me if I was the one dying. If someone told me there's a chance he might not make this I think I might have needed to like come to terms with that, you know, even though she didn't have a lot of time to come to terms with that.
ImmAct	Immediate action to help employee	Employees describe that their leaders took *immediate* action to help in any way they could. Employees *emphasized* the immediacy of the action as important	She's ready to go to bat for you. Maybe I think he used that phrase earlier but like what sets her apart is that she's ready to go to bat for you. Because, like, depending on what her her state of mind is that day, you know, but more often than not, she'll drop what she's doing for an opportunity to, you know, carve out space and time and help you and see what's going on.
LeadFollow	Leader follow up Closely related to *emotional support*, but extends beyond the acute moment	Leader follows up when suffering is expressed to check-in on employee	checking in on me like periodically over email just to see how is doing to ask about like my emotions to also just see how I was making progress, you know, and to let me know that like I had some leeway. Checking in with me and even subsequently after the fact, not only just making a passing comment when I first came back to work, but continually throughout the rest of the days that followed, you know, her asking about my dad and asking how I was doing. That shows that she was really…she wasn't just saying it to say it. But then the rest of the time she she would check in with me to be like, "Hey, how you doing, Hey, are you okay" and that kind of thing, too. And, you know, it wasn't like any one big like compassionate moment. It was just kind of an ongoing thing.

Abbreviation	Code	Description	Example
CommOpen	Communicating openness (same as code above)	Employees describe their leaders regularly communicating a sense of openness to them, including being available,	No matter how like busy she was or think things that she has going on like when somebody came to her unless she was like directly in a call and she was talking with someone, or a group of people. No matter

		having an open door, and creating space for them. This included both generally (I'm always available to you) and specifically (I recognize this hard thing is happening, and I'm here for you if you need)	what she was doing. She never was like come back later. Yeah, I think she was always like drop what she was doing, come in, let's talk
EmoResponse	Response to emotions shapes emotional boundaries "Trust formed by honoring disclosure of suffering" is related	Employees describe that their leader's response to emotional disclosures shapes their perceptions of emotional boundaries at work	I had tried to communicate [my challenges] at different points. I don't feel like I was heard. And then some of some of the results of that came up and then I got in trouble for it. And so it was just like, "Well, I tried to communicate about this." You get out and you're not hearing me and now these things are coming to pass. And I'm kind of like eating shit for it a little bit. And so it's like, well, that's how it's going to like if you're not paying attention. Or you just can't then like, that's fine. Then I'm just not going to talk to you about that kind of stuff…that's a very honest response. I think that that just like had her responded in a way that was like very emotional, like, emotion forward, and she made it very clear even though this is like a professional relationship. And I know that a lot of other folks have been like, I can't tell my [leader] anything personal. That she was very like willing to enter this space with me to like understand my emotions and what I was going through and to support that.
	Leader encourages work-life boundary permeability	The leader implicitly and explicitly encourages personal sharing across the traditional work-life boundary	And there have been a couple times, especially with these as new people have come on, she'll say, I know you're doing a great job. I know you are we, you know, we just talked through all our projects. Everybody is really excelling at their, their task list. I want to know how you're doing. Like how's…I know you just got a new puppy or, you know, I know your wife was struggling and couldn't find a new job, how she doing, you know. And it just takes a couple of those questions and pretty soon we're round robin of yeah you know my best friend got coven and so we're all worried about her and and like it
WorkDiff	Leader emphasize	Leaders specifically manage difficult work	And so she didn't like hold it over my head where I think like in the way that I

	openness and relationship when navigating work difficulties	moments (work issue, inappropriate interaction, etc) in a way that retains an emphasis on the need for care and openness in the relationship	responded, she could have made me feel like crap. I was really out of line. Like this authoritative figure [CEO] could have made me feel bad about that, but instead she was like, "no don't apologize. You were just speaking your truth in it." It allowed me to know that that was okay like to express my emotions, like, no matter what I'm feeling, whether it's anger, sadness, happiness, you know, you name it, it was just a signal to me that this the spectrum of my emotions are okay to to put on display.
HonDiscl ose	Leader honors disclosure and sharing Related to *Acknowledge*, but this extends beyond moments of suffering and captures the idea that employees are never shut down in their disclosures	Leaders honor and acknowledge employee sharing, including suffering but extending to personal/professional sharing	So I would say that I initiated that just because that's kind of my personality, but then when she responded positively to that or with a similar level of sharing. I knew. Okay, this is totally cool like, you can basically put anything on the table with her.
SuffPermi ssion	Permission to express suffering	Leaders explicitly/implicitly invite and/or communicate appropriateness for employees to share when they are in pain or hardship	Additionally, I'd say in the moments where he knows he can't, so like busy seasons this year when he has no space, even for one on ones, he'd say, like, "I don't have time to ask you this, but I want you to always come tell me if any of you know there's something in this category that's happening in your world. So even if I don't ask you please tell me" So a lot of the conversations like at the very beginning, it was always, you know, tell me everything you feel comfortable telling me. Tell me the things that will help me help you…and so, a lot of that was just him asking me again to be honest and asking me to be as comfortable as I was willing to be
Affirm	Leader affirmation and gratitude	Leader expresses encouragement, praise, and gratitude to their employee	And then also being able to say, "hey, thanks for everything you did today, I understand things like…" This was an actual text message I received from him, was, "Hey, thanks for everything you did it and know that it's been a little stressful having to do the

			[at home teaching] and the job. But like we do appreciate everything you are doing. just to send me like encouraging feedback on like the projects that I was completing and telling me that she was like very proud of what I had accomplished
Uncertain	Layers of Uncertainty in expressing suffering	Employees express various levels of uncertainty related to whether or not they should share pain and suffering at work, both personal and professional. Many employees talked about image management.	So what I do think it can do is it, it leaves me wondering, sometimes if she worries about my competency I did wonder like, does she think I'm weak. Does she think, you know, did I show too much. Do I have to make up for this And I've even tried to think, there's still times when maybe I hesitate to show everything because I'm still worried about a perception of competency, and not being strong enough, not being competent. There was still that like worry, even though they said hey, like take all the timing or whatever. And there's still that like re of taking too much time. Or feeling like, You know, I've been gone for so long. Sometimes there can also be, and back to your point about. We know that she's really busy, and some of it might be. Well, I don't want to be a burden. Mm hmm. And so, weighing like the triviality of what I am dealing with or, you know, what point does this become nontrivial and it is actually impacting my work or my ability to be part of this team or whatever the case may be.
Uncertain Response	Uncertainty in asking for help	Employees express uncertainty (or discomfort) surrounding what is appropriate to ask for (or receive) in response to their own suffering	I wouldn't ever have asked [for reduced case load]. That would be like, I feel like if her asking me, and me saying, yes, I want you to give me like a little bit easier case load, like that's bad in my eyes but me initiating that and asking that is like so much worse. Yeah, really. That's just kind of the culture of residency, like you just, I don't know. You don't want to be seen as a person who's like turning away learning opportunities and like shirking responsibility. When I first came to [my organization] it was just kind of resting on asking what you need. And then [he would] not offer anything. And so sometimes, especially if you're newer to the place or you don't feel

			comfortable yet in a professional relationships really saying like “I actually just need a day off” feels unprofessional to ask for
MargUncertain	Marginalized Identity Uncertainty	Employees holding marginalized identities express additional uncertainty specifically related to their marginalized identity	For me. Sometimes I feel like if I show emotion, it's a bad thing. And then if I do show emotion. It's also a bad thing. So living with that mentality like that kind of idea in my head. It's like okay like sometimes I do have to put a face on and I don't have to care what people say...So for instance, during the summertime when everything was going on with like Black Lives Matter and everything. My boss was, although she agreed with, you know, justice and everything. It's like, it wasn't the same. It's like, it was not the same. And so it just kind of like, I understand you were cool like your heart. Isn't that right place, but it just, like, and even for me, it's like, um, it's not like my family. I don't necessarily know George Floyd but its still painful. It's so hurtful. So it's kind of like, yeah, you like …are going through pain and like choosing whether to disclose certain things. Cuz it's like a catch 22, if I share emotion like I'm weak, and if I don't show emotion I'm a stereotype of a black man who doesn't show emotion. It is the politicizing of, you know, compassion. What does empathy for personhood mean and it was a lot of white men old white men saying that you can't be who you are and that I get to say who you are, and that was just super frustrating for me and I couldn't take it in. I kind of snapped a little bit. But, you know, because, you know, people were like, “Oh, we're not gonna mention in Core because that's not a thing.” But how can you just not mention something that is heartbreaking for like half your community.
LeadExpSuff	Leader expressed suffering	When leaders express their own pain and suffering, this shapes what employees perceive as appropriate for *them* to share in the workplace	And setting trust aside, I mean I do think it's when she has been vulnerable with us, and she has shared like I'm struggling. Here's what I'm struggling with here's what's going on in my life that then it doesn't feel one sided, right.
Boundaries	Employee has emotional boundaries	Employees describe that they do still have emotional boundaries with their leader (and	I think any like personal details are not helpful and I think would feel weird to kind of share with her because she's still like my supervisor. So like if there's, you know, I

		coworkers), and they don't necessarily want to or think it is appropriate to share everything at work	don't want to talk about family drama and politics with my supervisor. Or like, I'm not going to talk about my marriage or friendships, I can talk about those things in passing.
Similarity	Supervisor Similarity	Employees describe how similarities with their leader (demographics, past experiences, passions, politics/ideology) helped them connect and, at times, feel more comfortable disclosing pain and suffering	And you know her background is similar to mine. We [both] grew up sort of mostly religious and so we kind of chatted about how tough it is to navigate those conversations when you grew up in a particular mindset or a particular context and whatnot. And you deviate away from that and now you're stuck here in the middle. So being stuck in that middle is a precarious conversation. And so I tend to look for people who are in that position as well who have were raised in this particular way. But deviated from that.
Trust	Trust necessary but insufficient	When prompted to reflect on trust and expressed suffering, employees said that trust was essential but did not fully capture the dynamic with their compassionate leader	Yeah, if I don't know if that's the same thing as trust…I think having someone understanding was I think a big part of why I shared with her. I don't think it boils down to trust. I feel like compassion is a sort of like mosaic of elements. There's honesty. There is trust. There is kindness. There is a, you know, a sense of time and place. I feel that comes with compassion. Trust is a big part of it, I think, right, because to be compassionate with someone you are putting hope for compassion in that person… It's a pretty significant factor I feel but along the way you find other things that can be added into that like
Adjust	Adjust to employee style	Employees describe ways that they have adapted their communication and engagement to accommodate their personality style	For someone like myself, where Idon't ever want to ask them to cover my On-Call shift, or things like that are super hard for me to do. I'm not going to just ask my boss to make my job a little bit easier, like that. That just doesn't sit well in me. So he offers it and it makes it easier to accept the help so yeah. He's learned that. And that's not true of everyone on his team. Some people will ask for specifically for what they need, but I think for he and I's as relationship. he's had to learn to offer. And that's part of where the compassion is.

LowVulnerability	Little vulnerability shared by leader	Employees shared that their leaders did not disclose vulnerably or express suffering to them	She hasn't [shared vulnerably with me]. And again, I think that's probably more of like a professional thing I think that um she, you know, while we see each other as friends and I, I very much do see her as a friend. I think that she probably sees me as a friend, but also as like an attending physician and again there's like a hierarchy kind of thing there that I think people would maybe find it a little bit unprofessional
MinPower	Minimize Power Dynamics	Employees identify various communicative behaviors from their leaders that serve to minimize power dynamics, such as admitting they don't have all answers, conveying openness, asking for help, and sharing personal struggles. Many employees said they felt like their leader was a friend more than a supervisor	I think like her vulnerability helps. And it's not this weird like yes I'm aware. She is my supervisor and she does have like power over me, but it doesn't feel like this weird power dynamic where I can't say anything. Because there's a level of like self-disclosure that she has had in which sh's been vulnerable and said, "I have a hard time with self-care too" You and I both know in our fields that people make those sort of [power] moves. They say anything and flex their authority in that way. She was not that type of person. She would use her position and authority to work on behalf of others. And it was a huge driving force in her teaching and her service.

APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

EXEMPTION GRANTED

Elissa Adame
CLAS-SS: Human Communication, Hugh Downs School of
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Elissa.Adame@asu.edu

Dear Elissa Adame:
On 5/27/2020 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review: Initial Study	
Title: Compassion in Organizations	
Investigator: Elissa Adame	
IRB ID: STUDY00011987	
Funding: None	
Grant Title: None	
Grant ID: None	
Documents Reviewed:	• Compassion in Organizations Consent, Category: Consent Form; • Compassion in Organizations Interview Guide, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Compassion in Organizations Protocol, Category: IRB Protocol; • Compassion in Organizations Recruitment, Category: Recruitment Materials;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 on 5/27/2020.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified at research.integrity@asu.edu to determine if additional reviews/approvals are required.

Changes may include but not limited to revisions to data collection, survey and/or interview questions, and vulnerable populations, etc.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Cristopher Tietsort Sarah Tracy

Elissa Adame

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM

Compassion in Organizations

My name is Cris Tietsort, and I am a graduate student in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication under the direction of Dr. Sarah Tracy and Dr. Elissa Adame. I am conducting a research study to understanding how compassion is experienced in the workplace.

I am inviting your participation, which will primarily involve a 45 to 90-minute interview and a short demographic survey. Additionally, you may signal your availability for a future follow-up interview. The interview will focus on your experiences and stories related to compassion and emotion at work.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study and you must be comfortable speaking and reading in English to participate in the study. You have the right to not answer any question and to stop participation at any time.

Benefits to participating in this study may include a heightened sense of wellbeing associated with processing compassion and emotions at work. We do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in this project.

Your responses will be confidential and not associated with your identifiable information like your name. We will not retain identifying information, except for your name and contact information for potential follow-up. This information will be destroyed 6 months after you complete the interview. The audio-recordings will be erased upon completion of the study. The results of this study and transcribed excerpts from your responses may be used in reports, presentations, or publications, but your name or other identifying information will not be used.

We would like to audio record this interview, and when conducted on Zoom, to video record as well. These videos are for internal research use only so that the researcher team may accurately make notes about nonverbal communication. Videos will not be published or publicly presented. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please make the request if you do <u>not</u> want to be audio or video recorded; you also can change your mind midway through--just say so.

The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do <u>not</u> want the interview to be recorded; you also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: Dr. Sarah J Tracy at sarahj.tracy@asu.edu, Dr. Elissa Adame at elissa.adame@asu.edu

, or Cris Tietsort at ctietsor@asu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. Please let me know if you wish to be part of the study.

Please provide your name and preferred contact information (text or phone number) below if you are willing to be invited to a follow-up interview. This information and this consent document will be stored in a password protected computer file. This information will be destroyed when the study is completed or by December 31, 2024 (whichever is sooner).

Please indicate how you would like to participate. If you would like to change your mind about this at any time, you may complete a new form. Please place an X by all that apply.

- ❑ I consent to being **video recorded** for internal research team use.

Name: ___________________

Date: ______________________

Signature or e-signature: ___________________