The Impact of Life Experiences on the Expression of Compassionate Action in Volunteers

by

Stephanie Huska

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Royal Roads University

Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Supervisor: CAROL A. BROWN, PHD.

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STEPHANIE HUSKA, 2023

COMMITTEE APPROVAL

The members of Stephanie Huska's Thesis Committee certify that they have read the thesis titled The Impact of Life Experiences on the Expression of Compassionate Action in Volunteers, and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements for the Degree of MASTER OF ARTS IN CONFICT ANALYSIS AND MANAGEMENT:

Carol A. Brown [signature on file]

Stephanie Vieille [signature on file]

Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon submission of the final copy of the thesis to Royal Roads University. The thesis supervisor confirms to have read this thesis and recommends that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements:

CAROL A. BROWN [signature on file]

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Abstract

This exploratory qualitative study considers the connection between life experience and compassion by conducting two virtual circle processes with volunteers located in Williams Lake, British Columbia. A network selection strategy was used to gather 10 participants, resulting in two circles with five volunteers each. The two virtual circle processes were recorded, then the dialogue was transcribed and analyzed for themes by means of narrative analysis. The definition of compassion used for this study is the ability to understand another's suffering and the desire to relieve them of their suffering. The research conducted for this paper uses volunteers as participants to understand compassion in practical applications. Six themes were developed from the data and are as follows; connection, it feels good, volunteering modeled, religious anchor, common humanity and recognition of economic inequality. The six themes fit into three compassion cultivation domains, which I named self, soul and external.

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Chapter One – The Context

> Compassion is not just feeling with someone, but seeking to change the situation. Frequently people think compassion and love are merely sentimental. No! They are very demanding. If you are going to be compassionate, be prepared for action!
>
> – Desmond Tutu, Charter for Compassion

To experience compassion is to be touched by someone else's suffering. In recent years, I have been drawn to Buddhism, with one of the main reasons being its view on suffering, that is, that life is suffering. In fact, this is one of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism (Lopez, n.d). My experience is that when faced with suffering, either ours or someone else's, compassion is the most valuable tool we have. For this reason, I think an increase in compassion, for ourselves and others, could be instrumental in creating positive change in the world. This view fostered a desire to explore what are the life experiences that awaken the desire of volunteers to take compassionate action (Dass and Bush, 1992)? Finding themes in the life experiences of volunteers may identify experiences that foster the cultivation of compassion. Understanding how life experiences prime our systems for compassion provides the potential to maximize or build on those life experiences which may cultivate a more compassionate world. Volunteers were chosen for this study as volunteering is both a visible way that people are acting in the world to help others, and most people find it easier to feel compassion for those close to them, with more difficulty feeling compassion for ones who they do not identify with. I wondered if volunteers would engage with beings that they identified with as well as beings that they did not. For example, volunteering for an environmental organization or with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA).

My research question is important for several reasons. One is that the study of compassion is prevalent in my life right now, both through this thesis as well as a contemplative psychotherapy course I am taking. Secondly, compassion is something found in some mammals, but humans have a unique ability to experience. Finally, humans' capacity for compassion can be increased and expanded which is a skill that allows one to offset the individualistic culture that we currently live in. Ricard et al., (2018) articulates the benefit of compassion so beautifully by stating that;

> "Compassion, it turns out, is an excellent tool for ripening our capacity for happiness in that it leads us to what I call *lucid happiness* or *mature happiness,* that is, happiness that doesn't isolate us in some random bubble but keeps us in contact with the permanent flow of suffering that passes through human lives" (p.7).

Ricard et al. (2018) go on to explain that compassion is an unlimited resource within people, although it is often seen as a cake to be divided up (p.13).

This thesis analyzed the transcripts of two virtual circle processes of five volunteers each to determine if there were life experiences in common that may have awakened the desire of the volunteers to take compassionate action. This chapter describes my research question, why it was chosen and what it means to me, provide simple definitions of terms common throughout the paper, and then discuss the research structure and process used. Chapter 2 is the literature review, outlining the neurobiology of compassion, more in depth definitions of terms, and connecting volunteering with compassion. Chapter 3 includes the method and methodology sections, as well as the scope of this research. Chapter 4 is the analysis and will lay out the themes from the data as well as three compassion cultivation domains. Chapter 5 is the discussion, where the literature

is included with the themes from the data and includes a section on limitations and future research. Chapter 6 will bring details together in the conclusion.

Compassion is important today because it combines the recognition of suffering with the desire to relieve someone of their suffering. In North America, we live in a very individualistic culture, as indicated by the slogan every man for himself (Jinpa, 2015). A side effect of this is loneliness and social isolation (Murthy, 2020). This is challenging as both actual and perceived social isolation are associated with a higher risk of early mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Murthy, 2020). Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015) report that loneliness increases the likelihood of death by 26% (p. 233), while a study quoted in Vivek Murthy's book "Together", states that people with strong social relationships are 50% less likely to die prematurely (Murthy, 2020). Murthy (2020) explains two distinct challenges with loneliness. First, disregarding the feeling of loneliness can be seen as a notification from your body that you are lacking in connection. As an example, notifications are the way your body tells you to eat when experiencing hunger pains. However, due to culture and stigma, most people ignore the pains of loneliness. Second, loneliness can prevent people from reaching out, becoming both a symptom and a barrier (Murthy, 2020). Psychological issues associated with loneliness have been relieved by self-compassion (Lyon, 2015).

Compassion

Kristin Neff, one of the pioneers of the self-compassion movement, states that seeing the human underneath the suffering engages your compassionate instinct (Neff, 2012), but what does that mean? To truly feel compassion, we must observe our own suffering (Jinpa, 2015). To guide us on this journey, Kristin Neff developed a framework in developing a self-compassion work. Her framework has three parts: common humanity, self-kindness, and mindfulness.

Common humanity is the understanding that we are all human, and we all have difficult situations in our lives that cause suffering. The details of the situation may vary, but all humans suffer. Generally, feeling compassion for another is easier than feeling compassion for ourselves (Jinpa, 2015; Neff, 2021). Though compassion is often envisioned as nice, soft and gentle, it can be uncomfortable. Compassion requires people to contact the places in themselves where they have suffered, it requires self-reflection, and potentially moving outside of our comfort zones (Jinpa, 2015).

Compassion comes from Latin and Greek roots “pati” and “pathein” which mean “to suffer” and the Latin root “com” which means “with,” literally meaning to “suffer with” another person (Siegel & Germer, 2012, p. 12; Sinclair et al., 2017). Gilbert (2015) reviews various definitions of compassion and finds they all agree on “a sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try and alleviate and prevent it” (p. 3). There are scales developed to measure compassion levels which can be used before and after compassion training (Gu et al., 2020; Pommier et al., 2020).

Gilbert (2015) breaks compassion down into two psychologies “1) the intention and act of turning toward and engaging with suffering rather than avoiding or dissociating from it and 2) the intention to acquire the wisdom to learn how to alleviate and prevent suffering and act on that wisdom” (p. 3). Gilbert (2015) uses an example of jumping into a fast-flowing river to save someone, which is a courageous, compassionate intention (psychology 1); however, if one can't swim, it is not a wise, compassionate action (psychology 2) (p. 3). Gilbert (2015) goes on to explain that compassion has a longer-term focus as well, related to the wisdom psychology of it, stating “when we have compassion for a suffering community, it involves not just alleviating their immediate suffering, but also having empathic insights into what they will need to flourish

and prevent future suffering" (p. 4). Jinpa (2015) echoes this, agreeing that empower others to help themselves is the highest form of compassion (p. 7).

Ram Dass, a psychologist, and spiritual teacher, coined the term compassionate action in his 1992 book with Mirabai Bush "Compassion in Action: setting out on the path of service". In the book, Dass and Bush (1992) explain that the book is guide readers in how to take compassionate action from close friends and relatives (people that are easy to feel compassion for) further out, to heed the call from our hearts to address the significant amount of suffering in the world. In this study, I assume that compassionate action includes volunteer work as it can be considered an action to relieve another's suffering.

Dr. Dacher Keltner (2012), a researcher from the University of California Berkeley, believes that compassion was a necessary adaptation for humans since their babies are among the most vulnerable offspring on Earth. To keep their helpless babies safe, it was a necessity that humans be wired for compassion. In the brain, the periaqueductal gray is one location that compassion responses are held and is also associated with nurturing behaviour in mammals (Keltner, 2012). In addition to the periaqueductal gray, which lights up when we see someone suffering, the vagus nerve is also activated when people are shown images of suffering, or told about a sad experience (Keltner, 2012). Much of the parasympathetic neural pathway travels through the vagus nerve, a cranial nerve that goes from the brainstem to the organs (Porges, 2017). Individuals deemed to be more compassionate tend to have a stronger vagal response to sad news (Keltner, 2012). Compassion is sometimes used interchangeably with sympathy and empathy although they are all very different. Recent research into the neurobiology of emotions, as well as the physical manifestation of emotions allows us to understand that compassion,

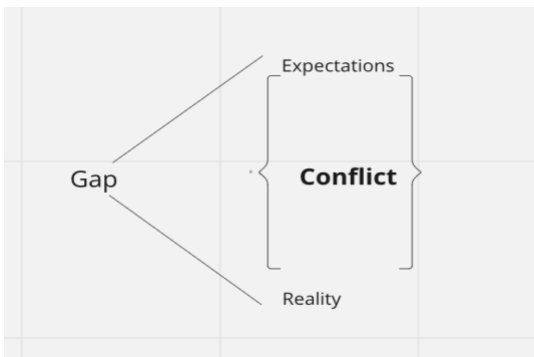
sympathy, and empathy are three distinct experiences (Sinclair et al., 2017). According to Gilbert (2015), caring motivational systems (compassion) and competencies (like empathy) have different evolutionary histories. These differences will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

For the purposes of this study, compassion is defined as the ability to understand another's suffering and the desire to relieve them of their suffering.

Conflict

Conflict has been defined as the gap between expectation and reality (Egan, 2007) which I have adopted for the purposes of this paper.

Figure 1 *How Conflict Begins*



Note. This is adapted from Egan (2007)

Egan's (2007) definition fits so beautifully into the work of compassion for two reasons. First, the definition applies to both the internal and external conflict. Internal conflict that occurs when expectations differ from reality, for example if one does not achieve a desired grade on a paper. In situations of internal conflict, research shows that self-compassion is an important step in working through the conflict (Yarnell & Neff, 2013). Self-compassion is compassion that is directed inward, towards ourselves, compared to directed outward, to others. According to Neff

(2022), for most of us, self-compassion is more difficult than compassion for others. Second, Egan's definition of compassion aligns with the Buddhist principle of suffering, which is resistance to reality (Jinpa, 2015).

Porges' (2017) work suggests that compassion training could have a positive impact on one's ability to engage in conflict. Conflict often comes with experiences of emotional pain; it can be difficult to accept that reality is different from expectations (Porges, 2017). Respecting one's ability to experience the grief associated with releasing expectations is a compassionate perspective (Porges, 2017). People can give this respect to both themselves, as well as the person they may be in conflict with, which is empowering and relieves the fear of judgement or shame (Porges, 2017). Self-reports from research analysed in Klimecki (2019) indicates that people with higher levels of compassion may use more adaptive conflict resolution strategies (p. 313).

Compassion Training

Capacity for compassion can be increased through compassion training. Compassion training is offered from institutions throughout the world such as Stanford University's Applied Compassion Training, an eleven-month course as well as an 8-week compassion course (Stanford medicine, 2022). Christopher Germer and Kristin Neff offer a mindful self-compassion course (Self compassion, 2023), Emory University offers cognitively based compassion training (Emory University, 2022). Thupten Jinpa, previous English translator for the Dalai Lama, is the founder of the Compassion Institute also developed a Compassion Cultivation Training (Compassion Institute, 2023). Some aspects of the trainings are based on Buddhist psychology; others are based on more cognitive processes, in self-compassion training, an example would be journal activities developed to consider the perspectives of others. (Shapiro & Mongrain, 2010). Neff and Germer (2017) reported on a randomized study on effects of a program they developed,

Mindful Self Compassion (MSC), and found participants from the treatment group had a significant increase in self compassion, compassion for others as well as life satisfaction. Klimecki et al. (2012) studied the impact of compassion training, stating “the observed increase in reported positive affect – even when exposed to the suffering of others – suggests that persons trained in compassion can encounter social situations in general and distressing situations in general, with positive, other oriented affect” (p. 1559). Sinclair et al. (2017) state that beyond the neurobiology, a proactive approach to relieve the suffering, sets compassion apart from sympathy and empathy.

If compassion training can increase the capacity to enter a social situation, even a distressing one, in a way that allows one to remain aware of the other person, or in a way that keeps the suffering of other people in mind, it could allow one to be more open to perspective taking. In this way, compassion training effects may translate into benefits for the conflict resolution field.

Buddhism and Compassion

Compassion is a main tenet of Buddhist philosophy, with the Dalai Lama famously quoted as saying “if you want others to be happy; practice compassion. If you want to be happy; practice compassion” (Lama and Cutler, 2020). Buddhism views compassion as both an emotion and an action, so it is always both. For many years, Buddhism has been leading the way in compassion teachings and compassion cultivation practices. Buddhism considers compassion is one of the four immeasurable attitudes, along with love, joy and equanimity, and understands compassion to be given to all sentient beings, meaning beings that can perceive or feel things (Brach, 2020; Siegal & Germer, 2012, p.19). Sentience can also be beautifully simplified as a being’s desire to stay alive, and not be hurt (Brach, 2022).

In Buddhism, wisdom and compassion are two wings of a bird, which is to say, that if you have one without the other, the bird cannot fly (Loizzo, 2017). Compassion defined through a Buddhist lens promotes prosocial behaviour and is a basic trait of humans stemming from the recognition of, and desire to, relieve suffering (Lama, 1995, 2001, quoted from Jazaieri et al., 2013, p. 1114). This is exemplified in the phrase “may all beings everywhere be free of suffering and the root of suffering,” which is the highest dedication one can use for their practice (Chodron, 2014). Buddhism sees no separation between compassion for the self and others, as well as no distinction between compassion for family members and for strangers. In North America, the individualistic culture and society (Jennings, 2017; Jinpa, 2015) seem to focus less on building the innate capacity for compassion and instead, take advantage of common barriers to compassion, which are discussed in chapter 3.

Volunteering

Volunteering was chosen as a measurable way to showcase compassionate action. I found very little research on the connection between volunteering and compassion (Mendez & Diaz, 2021; Monforte, 2020).

A benefit of compassion training is to expand our ability to feel compassion (Weng et al, 2013), which allows us to feel compassion for people or beings that we see as different from ourselves. Though this was not something that I confronted directly in this study, it would be interesting to understand why people choose the volunteer placements that they do, and whether that choice is made because of a sense of identification with the group. Additionally, it would be interesting to learn if volunteer opportunities in which they are in contact with people or beings they do not identify with, is an opportunity to expand compassion.

Introduction to the Research

This exploratory qualitative study will strive to understand the following: What are the life experiences that awaken the desire of volunteers to take compassionate action? To support this research, compassion is defined as the ability to understand another's suffering and the desire to relieve them from their suffering. (Makransky, 2012). Life experiences are those experiences that shape our lives, that we may or may not have chosen. For example, one of the participants grew up very poor, which shaped the participant's life, and their resulting choices. The phrase 'awaken the desire' comes from my internal question of how someone moves from feeling compassion to taking compassionate action. I do not think that every person that feels compassion will take compassionate action. I was curious about whether the volunteers had similar life experiences that prompted them to move from the feeling of compassion to taking compassionate action. I wondered if having compassionate action modeled might be a life experience that increased one's propensity to take compassionate action. In this study, volunteers are people that either formally or informally participate in programs designed to support members of their community or the broader community. Volunteer for this study includes people that formally volunteer for a non-profit organization such as BGC Canada, and people that step in to help people in their community by cleaning a friend's house or organizing a meal train. Compassionate action was defined above and describes taking action to relieve someone's suffering.

Finding themes in the life experiences of volunteers could help understand whether there are specific instances that foster the cultivation of compassion for all sentient beings and enable us to be more compassionate to people and things outside of our immediate circle. The importance of expanding our capacity to feel compassion for others, is to contribute to a world

grounded in the understanding that we are all fellow travellers (Brach, 2016). In Buddhism, and in some compassion trainings, a concept that allows one to expand the capacity for compassion is that all beings are interconnected (Jinpa, 2015). Neff (2003b) uses this as a component of her definition of common humanity. In Buddhism, the foundation of suffering is our sense of separation from this interconnectedness. The belief of interconnectedness is reflected in a sentiment by Einstein who was quoted in an article by Dr. Neff (n.d) as having written

> a human being is part of the whole, called by us 'universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings as something separate from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty (para. 5)

Research Context and Significance

The purpose of this exploratory research is:

- to gain an understanding of the role, if any, that life experiences play in motivating someone to take volunteer.
- provide an understanding of compassion, compassionate action, and wisdom by applying the concepts to practical situations.
- Share the information with communities to support the growth of compassionate action in communities.

As mentioned above, this research presumes that volunteerism undertaken by the participants is compassionate action.

Research Structure

This exploratory qualitative study explores the possible connection between volunteer work and a compassionate call to action. Conducting two circle processes of 5 volunteers each, I asked questions of the volunteers to understand where the desire to volunteer comes from. Each volunteer was invited to share their experience with the group. The hope that I had for the study, and the results of my research, was to understand whether the volunteers shared similar life experiences that may have motivated compassionate action. The definition of compassion used in this study is the ability to recognize any sentient being's suffering and the desire to relieve that suffering. For this study, compassionate action is taking steps to relieve someone of their suffering. The volunteers in this study demonstrated compassionate action in volunteering, including:

- Organizing and executing a fundraising event to raise money for the BGC Canada;
- Making and distributing meals to poor;
- Volunteering to be a "big" with the BGC Canada;
- Organizing 40 volunteers to run errands for people in need at the beginning of COVID-19.

According to Buddhism, compassion is both an emotional state and an action, so to be considered compassionate, the action needs to be effective, that is, reduce the suffering (Loizzo, 2016, p.70). The actions in the list above reduce suffering by filling different needs in the community such as the need for a safe place for kids to go, a need for food, a need for mentors or the need for help with errands. These are direct actions to reduce suffering.

Wisdom in compassion can be aligned with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is depicted by a five-level pyramid, with physiological needs at the bottom

(food and clothing), safety, love and belonging, esteem and finally, self-actualization (Block, 2011). According to Maslow, physiological needs such as food and clothing, had to be met before moving onto friendship and self-actualization, so once a need at a level is met, the next need becomes the focus (Block, 2011). How to apply wisdom to compassion is a concept I struggled with in designing the study for this paper, because not all volunteering can be considered compassionate action. A simple answer may have been found in Maslow's hierarchy as volunteering can be considered compassionate action, where it is meeting a basic survival need that must be met. However, as the situation moves up the triangle, such as for friendship and love, compassion, and therefore compassionate action, becomes more complex.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

> Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive.
>
> - The Dalai Lama XIV, The Art of Happiness

This study strives to understand what are the life experiences that awaken the desire of volunteers to take compassionate action? Compassion is a concept that is often misunderstood (Neff, 2022). This literature review looks at compassion as a state, and as an action, relying on Buddhist concepts to provide a foundation and a broad review of literature to bring a deep full understanding of compassion into a practical, understandable concept for our world today.

As a foundation from which to develop an understanding of compassion, this chapter digs into what compassion is, moves onto the history of compassion, then into the neurobiology of compassion followed by definitions of empathy and sympathy, as well as the connection between compassion mindfulness and wisdom. The review then moves into volunteering and meaning in life, a more detailed description of compassion and what tools are helpful to bring compassion into our lives, and to take wise compassionate action. Finally, this literature review will briefly touch on the connection between compassion for others and self-compassion.

A Broader Look at Compassion

Compassion has been a primary focus in Buddhist texts for the last three thousand years and is still a main tenet of Buddhist psychology (Khoury, 2019; Makransky, 2012). In Buddhism, compassion is the sense that others' suffering is like our own and we wish them to be free of it (Makransky, 2012); it is also described as including all sentient beings (Hofman et al., 2011). In fact, compassion activates the same neural network that was originally associated with

belonging, gratitude and love, specifically maternal love (Ricard, 2015). Tara Brach (2022), a Buddhist psychologist, names three qualities associated with compassion:

1. Compassion is an all-pervading wide-open state of heart that is inclusive; that is compassion senses the sentience in all beings.
2. There is a natural arising of tenderness or care when we see others hurting.
3. There is an impulse to help.

The ability to identify someone else's suffering can be considered cognitive empathy, one of three types of empathy (Goleman, 2008). Goleman (2008) lists the three types of empathy as 1. cognitive empathy or perspective taking, 2. emotional empathy which is the sense of feeling what another is feeling and 3. empathic concern or the ability to understand what another needs from you. This indicates that empathy and compassion are linked, though separate emotions and experiences.

Humans have a unique ability to comprehend experiences of all sentient beings, which can motivate us to desire them to be free from suffering (Gilbert, 2015, p. 237). However, this comprehension can feel heavy as there is so much suffering in the world, poverty, climate crisis, and wars just to name a few. This is where compassion comes in, as it is a soothing emotion, tying to the research that feeling loved and being loving are beneficial to our physical health; reducing stress hormones, while increasing immune system function and frontal cortex processing ability (Singer & Bolz, 2013; Murthy, 2020). Compassion is also associated with increased social connectedness and kindness both towards self and other (Jazaieri, 2013). Lastly, compassion is linked to emotional intelligence and nurses and physicians with higher emotional intelligence self-report that they are more compassionate (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2021).

In understanding compassion from a broader perspective, this section will explore: the history and evolution of compassion, the neurobiology of compassion, empathy and compassion, mindfulness, learning compassion, and tools for bringing compassion into daily life.

History and Evolution of Compassion

To understand the mechanics and function of compassion and compassionate action, the following research has been selected to explain the history and evolution of compassion (Gilbert, 2009), the role it plays in psychology, and whether it is cognitive or emotional (Gilbert 2009; Khoury, 2019; Jazaieri et al, 2013; Singer and Bolz, 2013). One theory is that compassion evolved so humans would be better able to survive (Keltner, 2012). Compassion is thought to increase survival by allowing humans to connect with their children and other members of their community enough to want to relieve their suffering (Gilbert, 2015, p.226). According to evolutionary theory, if compassion is vital to survival, there would be non-verbal signals associated with it (Keltner, 2012). Compassion has been found to be conveyed through both facial expressions and touch (Keltner, 2012). There are indications from human civilizations from approximately 1 million years ago, that wounded and diseased members of a community survived, which meant that they must have been cared for (Gilbert, 2015). For millions of years, evolution favoured humans that focused on their kin group or tribe and saw people from other tribes as less than (Gilbert, 2015, p. 235; Brach, 2022). However, shifts in neurobiology about 70,000 years ago allowed humans to have had a broader view of compassion and collaboration, which has led to where we are now (Brach, 2022). An example of this broader view is global collaboration on economics (Brach, 2022). This has resulted in a push and pull between our old conditioning to make other people bad, and the more recently evolved section of our brain that allows us to see “beingness” in all others (Brach, 2022).

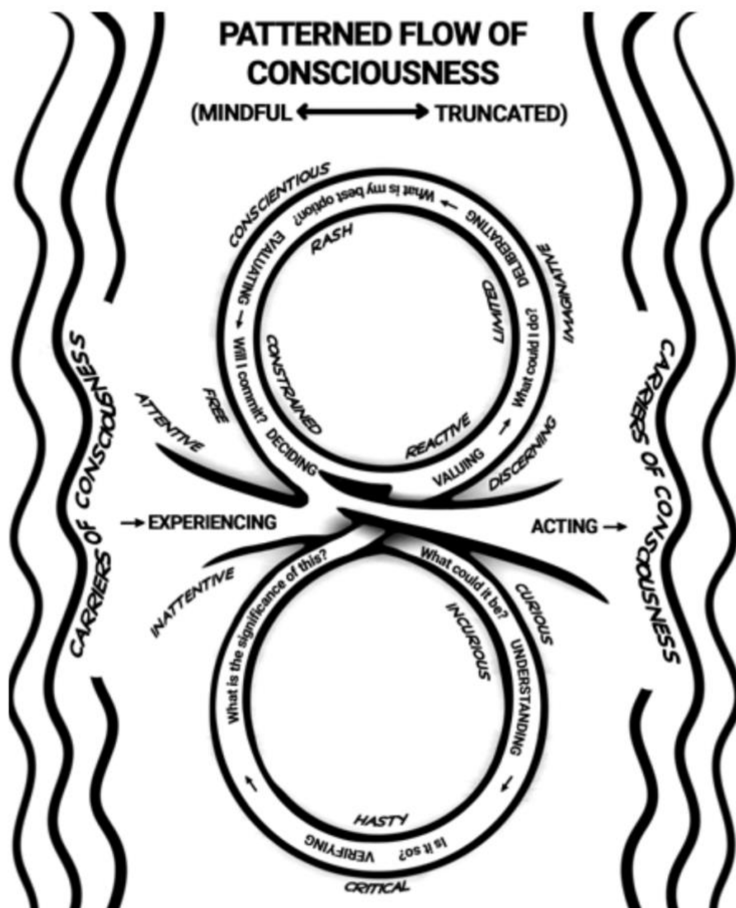
Neurobiology of Compassion

About 2 million years ago, humans began to develop a thicker skull, allowing for brain growth, an expanded cortex, and a larynx to communicate, among other characteristics (Gilbert, 2015, p. 230). With these changes, humans developed a mind capable of imagining, reasoning, anticipating, and planning (Gilbert, 2015, p. 230). However, humans are still largely driven by old, outdated systems that evolved before the "new" brain, which means that humans can imagine the potential for pain, terror, and suffering which other animals cannot (Gilbert, 2015, p. 231). As humans, we are formed by our environment, which, combined with the interplay between primitive systems and "new" brain, means we can get stuck in threat loops (Singer & Bolz, 2013). These threat loops can have us searching for danger constantly. Threat loops can be more damaging for humans compared to other mammals because, for example, if a rabbit got attacked by a cougar and got away, the rabbit would shake off the experience and recover within a short period of time. If a human got attacked by a cougar, and survived, they might for example, worry about going out the next day, or worry about their children going out. Human creativity is born out of the ability for rumination, planning, anticipating, and imagining; however, these attributes can lock us in severe threat loops (Singer & Bolz, 2013, p. 234). Indeed, the human brain is designed to have a negativity bias, meaning that it remembers negative experiences with greater ease than positive ones (Singer & Bolz, 2013, p. 235). The push and pull between the old brain and the new brain, as well as the ability of our limbic system to get hijacked by a sense of threat, all make practicing compassion cultivation important (Brach, 2022). Threat loops can be viewed in different ways, for example, Insight theory, a model of understanding consciousness, can be used as a reflective practice. It can be understood by a diagram of threat loops to illustrate engagement in conflict (figure 2) (Price, 2016). According to

Insight theory, which understands that our interior state drives behaviour, threats can happen on three levels: personal, practical, and social (Price, 2016). A foundation of Insight theory is the understanding that when we feel threatened our ability to think rationally becomes reduced (Price, 2016). The reduction in our ability to think rationally, impacts how we engage when we feel threatened, which happens when we are in conflict situations.

Figure 2 *Insight Loop*

Insight Loop. Taken from Price, 2017



This idea is supported by Polyvagal theory which suggests that vagal withdrawal would promote fight or flight behaviour, while vagal influence supports social engagement (Porges, 2007). Therefore, it is possible that increasing vagal influence in conflict may allow more engagement.

Although there is a tendency to get stuck in threat loops, this 'new' brain has allowed humans to evolve to be very social creatures with brains that can comprehend the suffering of other beings (Singer & Bolz, 2013). According to Gilbert (2009) compassion invites us:

> to stand back from some of our primitive passions and desires, such as tribalism, and remember that we are all human beings, in the flow of life, who feel pain and suffer the same way; we have all just somehow 'arrived here' and are actors of the narratives of life (p.34)

When we can allow others to experience their pain while also holding a safe space for them, we are engaged in the embodiment of compassion (Porges, 2017, p. 191). History shows that we have an innate ability to experience and express compassion, though humans have a greater tendency towards negative bias. Luckily, humans can change their state, and tools to do this are often taught in compassion cultivation trainings (Gilbert, 2009).

The interplay between the primitive brain and the new brain, combined with the innate drive towards compassion for those close to us paired with the ability to expand our compassionate circle and change our state, prompts the question around life experience and compassion cultivation. Are there life experiences that prime our systems for compassion? If so, how can we maximize or build on those life experiences to cultivate a more compassionate world? If, as mentioned above, empathy may form the basis for compassion, therefore it is necessary to gain an understanding of the differences between empathy and sympathy.

Empathy and Compassion

According to Sinclair et al. (2017), empathy is defined as "an ability to understand and accurately acknowledge the feelings of another, leading to an attuned response from the observer" (p. 438). Bloom (2016) argues that empathy can be debilitating, given that the ability

to feel into the experience of another's suffering can result in one's inability to act or to react irrationally. When experiencing empathy, neurobiology demonstrates that pain pathways are activated in people (Sinclair et al., 2017). However, neural networks associated with love and connection are activated when experiencing compassion (Klimecki et al., 2012). The activation of the pain networks and the sympathetic nervous system through empathy compared to the engagement of the vagal pathways and parasympathetic nervous system for compassion is what differentiates the two from a neurobiological point of view (Porges, 2017).

Ricard et al. (2018) describe the connection between empathy and compassion, "if, for example, I feel empathy without this empathy turning into altruism and compassion, I am in danger of falling into empathic distress, or burnout" (p. 10). Often, empathy is considered a part of compassion in way that individuals use it to feel into the suffering of another, which then drives the caring motivation to alleviate the suffering (Sinclair et al, 2017). This, however, may be where the benefit of empathy ends. Empathy is confined to people that we can identify with as it evolved with humans in tribal societies for most of our time on earth. For that reason, in a global society, empathy can be draining. What allows one to turn and face the suffering of another, is one's capacity to be in contact with their own suffering.

In a review of empathy definitions, Gilbert (2015) finds there is commonly a distinction between two types of empathy, cognitive empathy (also called perspective taking) and emotional empathy which links to emotional contagion and the ability to resonate and feel with the other (p. 7). The interesting and relevant piece of this is that emotional empathy, which evolved first, is equally credited with spreading fear as it is to emotional resonance (Gilbert, 2015). This means that empathy's relationship to compassion is tricky as well, as we may feel emotional resonance (empathy) watching someone we admire take revenge on someone we dislike (Gilbert, 2015).

Some authors argue that compassion fatigue is empathy fatigue (Bloom, 2016; Sinclair et al.,2017). Compassion fatigue is a term first used by Joinson (1992) and later defined by Figley (1995) as a stress reaction identified with feelings of helplessness, isolation, and confusion.

The antidote to getting caught up in emotional empathy is wisdom. And this is the key that puts compassion in a league of its own, separating it from empathy even though the willingness to understand another's emotional experience is necessary. To facilitate a deeper understanding of emotional empathy, it is important to understand that the time people put on different relationships will account for how much effort people are willing to make to attune to another's emotions (Gilbert, 2015). This means that we are likely to empathize with our friends over our enemies. This can also contribute to actions looking compassionate, even when they are self-serving, such as a desire to be liked or a strategy for acceptance (Gilbert, 2015). In fact, Catarino et al. (2014) found that submissive compassion (compassionate action as a strategy to be liked) was associated with depression, anxiety, and stress. However, compassion as a caring motivation is associated with improved wellbeing, and can be expanded to outgroups. When one has a self-identitfied goal of compassion as well as identifying as caring and kind, one will show less hostile behaviour towards outgroups (Gilbert, 2015, p. 7). Sinclair et al. (2017) explain that beyond the neurobiology, a proactive approach to relieve the suffering, sets compassion apart from sympathy and empathy.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is one of the three core concepts of self-compassion according to self-compassion pioneer Kristin Neff. Mindfulness has been increasingly relevant in scientific literature, particularly around mental health with over 3000 articles featuring mindfulness published since 2010. A large amount of this literature praises mindfulness as a useful

therapeutic intervention (Stanley, 2019). The study of mindfulness spans disciplines such as psychology, neuroscience, and Buddhist studies. Mindfulness is understood as many things, including a technique, a skill, a way of living or being or an experimental variable to be manipulated (Stanley, 2019). According to Stanley (2019), the literature contains over 30 definitions of mindfulness. Mindfulness for the purposes of this paper, is the state of being aware of one's thoughts (Harris, 2011). The benefit of mindfulness in the practice of compassion for others, is to allow one to notice their thoughts or beliefs about a person or a situation.

There are many recorded benefits to mindfulness, including improving cognitive function and mitigation of depression and anxiety (Harris, 2011). Mindfulness is also connected to self-reflection, as it allows one to understand and take an objective view on thoughts and emotions. It also allows one to turn towards difficult emotions with kindness, increasing one's ability to practice self-compassion. The practice of mindfulness allows us to see thoughts and emotions as things separate from who we are as a person (Harris, 2011). Kristin Neff (2021) has included mindfulness as a pillar of self-compassion because it minimizes over-identification with thoughts and feelings, which allows one to gain an important perspective that supports extending compassion to difficulties, whether they are ours or others.

Learning Compassion

Compassion can be learned (Jinpa, 2015; Lutz et al., 2008; Weng et al., 2013). There are many successful programs teaching self-compassion and many therapeutic interventions, as well as Buddhist practices that teach how to increase compassion. A study done by Weng et al. (2013) tested whether compassion could be trained. The authors found that participants that had taken the compassion training displayed increased altruism towards the victim of an unfair social interaction compared to the control groups (Weng et al, 2013). The authors also found changes in

the neural response to suffering, indicating neuroplasticity extends to compassion and altruism (Weng et al., 2013). The ability of humans to learn compassion is important to this research because if we can train ourselves to be more compassionate, we may also be able to increase our compassion through life experiences.

As interest in compassion rises, so does the opportunity to educate ourselves and others on the topic. In North America, compassion training is often split into two groups, one focused on self-compassion, while the other focuses on compassion cultivation for others. Compassion training is available online (Neff, 2003b, Kabat Zinn, 2015, Brach, 2020), universities have opened centres of compassion (example Stanford, Harvard, Helsinki, Brown), businesses have hired compassion directors (for example LinkedIn) and compassion has been advocated for by presidential hopefuls (Boorstein, 2020; Brach, 2020; Neff, 2003a; Kabbat-Zinn, 2015).

Buddhism has a long history of compassion cultivation practices and does not separate compassion into compassion for others and compassion for the self. Buddhist systems understand compassion is for all sentient beings, meaning that it is inherently applied to the self. One of the Buddhist practices that support compassion cultivation is loving kindness meditations, in which loving kindness is practiced for the self, someone loved, a neutral party and a difficult person (Chodron, 2014). In this way, compassion development for self and others allows one to start with the capacity for compassion they currently have (Chodron, 2014). As compassion has gotten more attention, it has been integrated into mainstream psychopathology interventions (Shonin, 2018). For example, current research (Lee, 2005) outlines two separate case studies where a healing mentor meditation from the Buddhist tradition was incorporated into cognitive behavioural therapy to address deep seated shame and self-worth issues. After

using the sessions to work through the meditation, significant improvement was made (Lee, 2005).

Tools for Bringing Compassion into Daily Life

Mindfulness practice is included in compassion trainings such as the applied compassion training through Stanford University and the Mindfulness Self Compassion training developed by Christopher Germer and Kristin Neff. Mindfulness plays the same role in compassion for others as it does in self compassion, which is minimizing overidentification with thoughts and feelings (Neff, 2021).

The second tool that is useful to bring compassion into our daily life is reflection. Self-reflection is a way to know and understand oneself better. This step is important for bringing wisdom into our compassion practice. Wisdom in compassion practice is understanding the right tool for the job, it is a response from an open heart, not a reaction based in fear (Loizzo, 2016).

Volunteering

Volunteering and Meaning in Life

Meaning in life is found to have three components: coherence, purpose, and significance (Martela & Steger, 2016). Coherence relates to one's life making sense, purpose refers to having a direction in life while significance is a sense of the value of one's life (Martela & Steger, 2016) Both coherence and significance have been inversely correlated to depression (Radicic & Rivardo, 2019). Volunteering has been shown to be associated with lower levels of depression (Joongbaeck & Pai, 2009). Meaning in life research focuses on what people experience as meaningful in their lives, which is distinct from meaning of life, which is a more philosophical, existential question relating to why life exists (Martela & Steger, 2016).

Volunteering as Compassionate Action

Compassionate action is a term coined by Ram Dass and Mirabai Bush in their 1995 book and then validated by Paul Gilbert in a 2017 research study. The book is described by the authors as exploring the Dalai Lama's phrase of selfish altruism (Dass and Bush, 1995). The first pages of the book clearly explain the paradox that I have tried to put into words for my research of volunteering, and the connection between wisdom and compassionate action. Dass and Bush (1995) state

> Compassion in action is paradoxical and mysterious. It is absolute yet continually changing. It accepts that everything is happening exactly as it should, and it works with a full hearted commitment to change. It sets goals but knows that the process is all there is. It is joyful in the midst of suffering and hopeful in the face of overwhelming odds. It is simple in a world of complexity and confusion. It is done for others, but it nurtures the self. It shields in order to be strong. It intends to eliminate suffering, knowing that suffering is limitless. (p. 3)

This paragraph speaks directly to the need for wisdom in compassion and that understanding that suffering is limitless, yet still choosing to participate with an open heart. This is compassion in action (Dass and Bush, 1995).

Compassionate Action in the World

Altruistic behaviour and generosity are two outcomes that compassion gives rise to (Jazaieri et al., 2013). Post (2008) states that adult behaviour motivated by concern for another (altruism) is associated with improved self-esteem and well-being among other positive outcomes. As an affirmative emotion that is focused on others, compassion can result in more social connectedness (Jazaieri et al., 2013).

As discussed in the neurobiology of compassion, the vagus nerve is one of the important factors in the felt experience of compassion (Kelter, 2012). Humans can increase their vagal tone through breathwork and other practices, supporting the vagal tone as a part in increasing our capacity for compassion (Porges, 2017). Current understanding of the vagus nerve is that it has an old section and a new section. The new section makes unconscious bodily actions, such as breathing, conscious (Loizzo, 2017). In the same way that we can choose to take a deep breath, we can choose to override our self-protective instinct for survival and choose instead to cultivate love and compassion (Loizzo, 2017). Modern neuroscience breakthroughs allow us to understand that the human brain is "much more geared to social cognition, social emotional development and social autonomic regulation than was believed in Freud's day" (Siegel, 2007, p. 120). Additionally, modern neuroscience understands neuroplasticity, that is the brain is always evolving (Siegel, 2007, p. 122). The new section of the vagus nerve, with the ability to make the unconscious conscious, allows humans to move from reaction to response (Loizzo, 2017). This, paired with the neuroplasticity of the brain, facilitates the retraining of the nervous system, allowing people to increase their capacity for compassion (Kelter, 2012). This can be helpful in conflict, volunteering, and social justice work.

Compassion in conflict work has very little research (Klimicki 2019). The definition of compassion, the understanding of someone's suffering and the desire to relieve it, may situate it as a foundational tool in working towards conflict resolution. In conflict, understanding someone's suffering may look like deep listening to their perspective, possibly while putting our own deeply held beliefs on the shelf so we can listen with an open mind. The decision to understand one's commitment to defending their own perspective, while choosing to understand another's position, could bring the sides of the conflict into dialogue. According to

McCambridge (2003), dialogue requires participants to be willing to try to understand why they are committed to their perspective (McCambridge, 2003). This differentiates it from discussions or negotiations, in which the goal is to win, or convince someone of a certain perspective (Bohm as cited in McCambridge, 2003). Instead, dialogue intends to create shared meaning and expose new possibilities (McCambridge, 2003).

Barriers to Compassion

Barriers to compassion can arise as both a barrier to giving and receiving compassion (Jinpa, 2015). When we understand common barriers, we can then address them through training or teaching.

A common barrier is understanding the feeling of someone suffering but being unsure of how to engage in compassionate action. This is a main point Bloom (2016) argues, that engaging in empathy prompts people to make irrational choices or become overwhelmed with despair. A second potential barrier was outlined in one study by Stellar et al. (2012) as the perception of economic class. A key aspect of compassion is being able to identify with the person suffering. Stellar et al. (2012) found that compassion "is not randomly distributed across social classes, and that at the trait, state and potentially physiological level, it appears to be a more consistent part of the emotional repertoire of lower-class individuals" (p. 457).

One of the memorable aspects from 2020 has been the worldwide pandemic of the Coronavirus (COVID-19). The pandemic shone a spotlight on the isolation, loneliness and depression that has overtaken many (El Desouky et al., 2021). When humans are operating from a place of fear, their vision becomes narrower and more focused on themselves (Price, 2018). This is in line with the neurobiology of the brain, where even though we have the new brain's ability to broaden our compassionate perspective, we also have the old brain, tending towards

negativity and scanning for threats. One of the cognitive aspects of compassion is that it requires us to pay attention to other people; to engage with other's suffering in times when it would be easier to ignore it (Jinpa, 2015). This is difficult if we are in a fear state. Indeed, it takes courage to open up whether asking for, or offering, help; courage to reach out to people, to meet them in their suffering and offer compassion (Jinpa, 2015). Though this is a common barrier, compassion can make us more courageous. Compassion for ourselves allows us to be more authentic in our offerings and compassion for others allows us to turn the spotlight off ourselves and stop fearing the other person (Jinpa, 2015).

Pride can also be a barrier to compassion, as it is a type of fear masquerading as strength (Jinpa, 2015). Pride can prevent us from receiving compassion if our identity is dependent on our success, as it can prevent us from reaching out to people who matter to us (Jinpa, 2015). Additionally, feelings of shame, and guilt that may be associated with pride may also prevent us from receiving compassion (Jinpa, 2015).

Alongside barriers to giving compassion are barriers to receiving compassion. This may have a cultural aspect as Jinpa (2015) states as this as a key learning from transitioning from a Tibetan monastery to a western culture, such as in North America. In the Tibetan monastery, compassion was more readily received (Jinpa, 2015). Gilbert (2015) states that receiving compassion (from others or ourselves) is linked to our capacity for affiliative emotions (p. 237). Affiliative emotions are subjectively described as warmth or tenderness (Moll et al., 2012). Our ability to receive compassion could also be connected to our maturity of defenses, as mature defenses result in well-being to self and other and included humour, sublimation, and altruism, while less mature defenses tended to cause grief and were behaviours of projection, and passive-aggressive behaviour (Siegel & Germer, 2012).

Chapter Three – Research Method and Methodology

On Giving (an excerpt)
Then said a rich man, Speak to us of Giving.
And he answered:
You give but little when you give of your possessions.
It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.

-Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet

A key component in the definition of compassion is the desire to relieve the suffering, or a call to action. This exploratory qualitative research study strives to understand what role life experiences may have had in the motivation for people who volunteer at different organizations in Williams Lake, British Columbia. The research question is what were the life experiences that awakened the desire to take compassionate action? This is an exploratory thesis, which utilizes a small study to explore connections between volunteering and compassion. Qualitative research was chosen because I was interested in understanding how life experiences may impact the participants desire to take compassionate action, and the meaning people assigned to their life experiences. Both the small size and the exploratory nature limit the applicability of generalizations.

To answer my research questions, I used a network selection strategy. The process of network selection was to reach out to members of the community who are involved with volunteers or work for organizations that utilize volunteers. I then reached out to people they suggested as well as people that I know from volunteering in the community. Of the 15 people I reached out to, I invited 10 people from the volunteer community in my hometown of Williams Lake, British Columbia, to a virtual circle process. The conversations exploring compassion included the meaning, the role that it played in the volunteer's life, and the life experiences that brought them to volunteering.

Research Methodology

This study approaches research through a qualitative socially constructed lens. A social constructivist worldview understands that each person is making sense of the world they live in (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Social constructivist research relies on the view of the individuals participating in the research (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Social constructivism requires the researcher to understand how their background informs their interpretation and attempts to understand how others make meaning of the world (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This methodology prompted me to leave the questions open-ended, and let the participants choose which stories they wanted to share. I allowed the questions and the circle to be as unstructured as possible, and then tried to understand, from the stories the volunteers chose to share, how they made sense of volunteering and their role. Listening to the participants stories provided opportunity for great insight into how the participants made meaning from their experiences. Social constructivism generates or develops a theory or pattern of meaning which complements an exploratory qualitative study (Creswell, 2018).

The circle was conversational style dialogue, focused on storytelling. The stories from the participants were used to determine the themes, all done through my lens of meaning making. Some basic tenets of my worldview are that I believe in the inherent goodness of people and the universe. I believe in the necessity of community and connection for all humans, and that everyone is deserving of those things. I feel that volunteering can play an important role in creating a community that has the capacity and resources to support its members to build fulfilling lives. No matter how careful we try to be neutral, we still impose our perspective on the situation, and I also tend to feel deeply empathetic.

Though I developed themes from the stories told, themes were also informed by the circle participant's body language and tone. I was informed by watching reactions, by seeing the impact of the experience on their faces, the tears in their eyes, and pride in their voice as they spoke of where they felt what they were contributing through their volunteer work was meaningful. The sadness that came with the story of a homeless person considered a friend, now gone. Or a child lost too soon and a family that is more resilient than they should have to be. The pride that comes with the true belief in changing lives

I used narrative inquiry and interaction between individuals as key components (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Narrative inquiry was chosen because it is "the study of the ways humans experience the world" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p.2). This fits in very well with a social constructionist worldview and I was very interested in what kind of story the participants would share for each question I had prepared. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe of narrative inquiry, my job was to be aware that I was constructing a relationship in which both mine and the participants voices needed to be heard. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) emphasize that both the participant and the researcher must feel cared for in narrative inquiry and have a voice with which to tell their stories (p.4). This relationship between participant and researcher was exemplified in the use and execution of a circle process for my research and is an example of the first turn to narrative inquiry (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). In narrative inquiry and in my research, the experiences the participants shared were not viewed as singular things that happened (Caine, Estefan and Clandinin, 2019). Instead, experience was considered an interplay between what the participant thought, what they chose to share with the group, combined with how the participant viewed and encountered each of the others in the circle (Caine, Estefan and

Clandinin, 2019). The creation of a social field, described below, allowed participants to be more open in their sharing of how the experiences had shaped their life and view.

Research Method

I chose the circle process as the method because it allows for the potential to explore a topic in a way that reduces power dynamics, creates connection, and encourages vulnerability. While sitting in a circle and taking turns, it provides the space for quieter participants to be involved and values the contribution of each participant equally (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010; Pranis, 2005). Though my circle was virtual, the intention of taking time and space for each participant to share, in a set order that mimicked sitting in circle. The emphasis on all participants is equal, which is intended to create a feeling of safety, which should allow for participants to be willing to share life experiences that had an impact.

Circle Process

The circle process has roots in Native American culture and is used today in many situations including conflict, restorative justice, and education (Pranis, 2005). Key components of a circle process are the use of ceremony or ritual, an opening, a check in, the discussion, a check out and a closing (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, Pranis, 2005). The opening and the check in are opportunities to create a container, which is one of the practices of dialogic organizational development (Corrigan, 2015). A container describes “an intangible yet real space in which the potential and possibility of a group can unfold” (Corrigan, 2015, p.291). Building a container using the dialogic organizational development method aligns well with a circle process as it sees each participant as having equal wisdom to contribute to an emerging collective meaning (Corrigan, 2015, p.292). When the container is functioning well, it will hold the space for the participants and create a feeling of safety which informs the circle process’s ability emphasize

interconnectedness and relationships while achieving goals, with the aim being that each participant feels heard (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, Pranis, 2005). The feeling of safety supports participants to be more open and vulnerable, leading to the creation of a social field between participants (Corrigan, 2015). A social field may be what proponents of the circle process speak of when a synergy occurs between group members, allowing innovative and creative solutions to come forward (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). Social fields are an important foundation for social learning and are described as comprising of high levels of trust and respect (Corrigan, 2015).

The opening of a circle process provides an opportunity to create a shared purpose. In each circle process, as part of the opening, I shared the research question with the participants, as well as the definition I use for compassion. The participants were given an opportunity to share their needs and hopes for the circle. I wanted to leave the space open for people to share experiences that felt relevant and valuable to them, so the only purpose I offered was an interest in hearing their stories from volunteering experiences. The questions asked through the circle process are provided in Appendix C. According to Parker (2018) a shared purpose is key to a successful gathering. By co-creating discussion rules, hopes and needs, we were creating a shared purpose for each virtual circle. A circle process encourages dialogue, as each participant is given their own time and space to share. I found that the willingness of some to share vulnerable moments and statements, seemed to open the door for others to be vulnerable as well. As stories were shared, participants remembered other stories or moments of their own, and seemed to make meaning of some of their experiences by listening to others.

Circle was preferred as a method for this study because the ritual involved in the opening and closing, the focus on a central topic (compassion) and the desire to hear stories of each participants' life experiences. Additionally, the circle process is set up in a way to hear

everyone's voices and hold space for vulnerabilities. The circle process also provided the participants opportunities to hear other's stories, and to make meaning of their experiences together. An unexpected benefit was the sense of hope and possibility that arrived. The participants mentioned how invigorated they were, and how grateful to hear of the work that each person has been doing within the community. Circle processes, also known as Sharing Circles, are often used in Indigenous research, or research with Indigenous communities, keeping connected to their ancestry of Indigenous culture (Pranis, 2005). Circle processes have a long history of use, benefits of which include making decisions by consensus and the ability of the circle to hold a participant's emotional and spiritual contribution in addition to physical and mental (Pranis, 2005). The benefits of circle processes encourage their widespread use in situations such as restorative justice, where difficult topics and opposing opinions must be handled with care.

The stories from the virtual circle processes were recorded, transcribed, coded then themed. In vivo coding is a method by which the researcher takes exact phrases from the data. I went through initially with a highlighter, then wrote the codes on sticky notes which I then stuck to my wall so that I could group them into themes. In Vivo coding is also known as "literal coding" or "verbatim coding" and through this process a code references a "word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record" (Saldana, 2013, p.90). Initially I went through the data with a highlighter, choosing phrases that were relevant to the research question. I then went through the transcription again writing out codes. I then wrote out all the codes onto sticky notes to group them into larger clusters, or themes. Each circle process started the same, with my role as facilitator opening and setting the foundation for the conversation. We also created a shared purpose, in my explanation of the thesis and desire to hear their

experiences. In the first circle, there were two men and three women, in the second circle there were five women participants. In the first circle, some of the people had volunteered together, which was similar in the second circle, in fact the second circle had two women in it that were quite close and a third that seemed to know them both well. Both circles felt very different, and the type of story felt different as well. The first circle felt more vulnerable, while the second felt more intellectual.

There are similarities between the virtual circle processes and focus groups. One similarity was that I acted as a leader of the discussion, guiding the discussion with questions but saying as little as possible during the group (Greenbaum, 1998). According to Greenbaum (1998), the moderator uses an outline and attempts to have the participants do the majority of the talking. Additional similarities were that the circle process was in line with the purpose of focus group research to find a range of perspectives, highlight issues of importance, and provide a comfortable safe environment to share (Hennink, 2014). The virtual circles are related to telephone focus groups as the participants were in separate locations and interactions between the participants is limited (Greenbaum, 1998).

Participant Selection

Invitation to Participate

To find participants, I used a network selection strategy. The network selection strategy used can be imagined as concentric circles. I initially asked a close circle of friends to suggest volunteers, then I reached out to acquaintances that worked with volunteers directly or indirectly. Finally, I reached out beyond that group, cold calling a man that I had volunteered with about four years ago. I reached out to the list of potential volunteers to ask if they were interested

before sending out the email invitation which is attached in Appendix A. It includes the research question for my study as well as the definition of compassion used.

Participants

All the participants had volunteer experiences; some had both formal and informal volunteering. Formal volunteering is with an organization, while informal volunteering is not under an organization and is usually something initiated by the individual (Gerszon et al., 2021). All participants are currently volunteering or have volunteered at one or more organizations in the Williams Lake area. The volunteers all live in the Williams Lake area and I was able to connect with them via email or through Facebook. I reached out to several other volunteers recommended to me, however, no others were able to participate.

All 10 participants were over 18 years of age and had the study explained to them in the invitation. I chose Williams Lake because it is both my hometown and my current town of residence.

Consent

Prior to the circle process, each participant was emailed a consent form, found in Appendix B, and provided an opportunity to discuss the consent with myself, ask any questions or opt out of the study.

Each of the participants signed a consent form, found in Appendix B. The consent form was provided by email. In the body of the email, I made clear that I was available if the participants wanted to ask questions, get clarification, or opt out of the study. Additionally, in the opening to

the circle process, each group set ground rules that included a dialogue around confidentiality. On the consent form, 6 participants preferred use of a pseudonym, two preferred the use of their name and two chose yes for both pseudonym and name.

Assumptions

There were two major assumptions in the development of this paper. Firstly, that some volunteerism is compassionate action. Compassion and volunteering are both prosocial and have similar benefits to the volunteer/giver of compassionate action (Lim and DeSteno, 2016; Weng et al., 2015). Secondly, life experiences impact the level of compassion. The research on this was limited, although Lim & DeSteno (2016) found "increasing severity of past adversity leads individuals to become more compassionate" (p.3). Lim & DeSteno (2016) also show that people were willing to display "costly" behaviour to alleviate other's suffering (p.6). This is echoed in Carl Jung's work on the wounded healer archetype, stating that the amount of pain that has been overcome is equal to the power of healing (Henderson, 2019).

Interview Guide

Circle Process

There were two circle processes, both virtual, held through Zoom. I, as the facilitator, welcomed everyone to the circle and initiated introductions, the first step in creating a container for the group. A container is "an intangible but real space in which the potential and possibility of a group can unfold" (Corrigan, 2015, p.291). According to Corrigan, (2015), the opening is important in the development of the rim (scope of work) and the center of a container (purpose). Steps for creating a container are to "(1) cocreate the purpose, (2) guide the invitation process and (3) welcome participants across the threshold" (Corrigan, 2015, p295) all of which I did. Welcoming people into circle invites them over the rim, or threshold, which is an important part

of the ritual of creating the container (Corrigan, 2015). Parker (2018) states to make meaningful connections, the purpose of gathering must be clear and concise. Additionally, the purpose should be stated before gathering, so people know what to expect. (Parker, 2018). In this case, in my conversation before the email invitation, as well as in the invitation, the purpose of the gathering was made clear. I specifically kept the purpose broad, wanting to offer space for any experience the volunteer wanted to share. This was valuable, because I was surprised in some instances, either by the story shared, or the desire not to speak to a specific question.

After the welcoming and introductions, the group discussed ground rules for the circle process. Ground rules aim to create the container and provide safety for the participants. The circle process fits well into development of a container because the container is preferred when set up with a focus in the center, so participants are in a circular shape, and the container functions under the belief that ideas can come from anywhere within a system, which is aligned with circle processes (Corrigan, 2015). Though the participants were virtual, I kept the idea of a circle by having a set order in which each person had a turn to speak. Additionally, I ensured that I opened the floor to suggestions from the very beginning, to make all participants feel like they had both a role and an opportunity to create the process. Development of a container also contributes to the safety of the circle process, as a well-functioning container is characterized by trust, respect, engagement, and full participation between participants (Corrigan, 2015). When trust, respect and engagement are high, it is called a social field. A container allows people to shift their perspective from self to the collective (Corrigan, 2015). When perspectives shift, and a social field arises, it allows the participants to show concern for each other, enabling them to articulate their truth and integrate multiple views (Corrigan, 2015). Safety for the participants is necessary for the circle process to allow the synergy between participants to happen (Baldwin

and Linnea, 2010). Dialogic organizational development recommends prioritizing time on building relationships, and creating trust, which protects the container (Corrigan, 2015). Regarding building relationships, because we were in a small town, most of the people had heard of others. In the first circle there were two people that knew each other well, and one person that did not know any of them. The second circle had three people that knew each other quite well, but the other two did not know anyone else. As the host, my role was to be present with the participants, hold space for them and remain curious about both the participants and the work (Corrigan, 2015). To make the data relevant, it was important that all circle participants were using a shared definition of compassion. To achieve that, I provided the definition before we began circle, while discussing the ground rules. With my interest for this study being in learning about common life experiences among the volunteers, I left the questions open to cover any volunteer experience that they had. I wanted to ensure that I was not limiting the volunteer experience to formal, as compassionate action is not confined to a formal setting. For example, going to clean a friend's house once a week because the owner of the house needs support. This choice is what I find particularly interesting and wanted the questions and the circle to be a space where people felt comfortable telling stories that they might have otherwise thought weren't "newsworthy". Brian Fretwell (2022) posted an Instagram video on finding out people's gifts, explaining that one way to recognize those gifts is to find out what they do that they think everyone can do. This, in part, informed my approach, of wanting to get a bit deeper than what the participants might have thought were the best stories.

After completing the research, I felt like the circles were successful. Most of the participants seemed willing to be open and express how they had been touched by their experiences. The use of the word meaningful, in my question to the participants was intended to

guide them to potentially choose a different experience than one they might normally tell. It is heartwarming and hopeful to listen to people talk about meaningful events, specifically connections with other humans. There seems to be a specific type of opportunity to really connect in a difficult circumstance. What stood out to me the most, through both circles, was the softness, the gentleness that accompanied mentions of connections made. The participants eyes soften, their voice gets lower and their body language seems to soften when they mention this person, or situation, that impacted them. Often tears would come to their eyes, (at one point we all had tears!) or we would share laughter over a story told. I recently did a grief workshop based on Martin Pretchel's work that grief and praise are intimately linked. In some tender moments, it seems, there is only the ability to praise, someone that was here, and is now gone, or someone that has nothing and still made their mark on us. I think that deep down humans hold a reverence for life experiences, both difficult and wonderful, and that is what I heard over and over throughout the research.

Researcher Bias

I am currently taking a contemplative psychotherapy course that focuses on compassion from a Buddhist perspective. The course is offered through the Nalanda Institute, a non-profit organization started by medical doctor and neuroscientist Joe Loizzo to bring the Buddhist teachings from the first university in India (Nalanda University) to North America. This has informed some of the resources used, and views presented, in this paper. As I reflect on this work, and my bias, I note that I view compassion cultivation as a support to positively shift many social issues that we see in the world. Two ways that I could see shifts are first through creating the ability to see others suffering, and second, by motivating one to take action to relieve the suffering. This ability to see another's suffering is not just the more obvious suffering of the

poor, it is the suffering of a co-worker, a taxi driver, an airport employee. Ultimately, it applies to all beings in the world, even those that have fundamentally different beliefs than you. Having compassion for someone does not mean that you agree with them. So perhaps the action is simply pausing and recognizing that they might be suffering in ways that you cannot see, and acting accordingly. This bias is something that I am aware of, and because of this bias, I did not share my opinions with the volunteers through the circle process.

A second bias of mine is that constructive conflict can be transformative (Lederach, 2003). When one engages in conflict that is transformative, with an open mind, one may experience a change or shift in perspective. It can be as simple as a new understanding of other, or as complex as moving us to a change in behaviour or other transformational actions. I think that often we are caught up in protecting our own identity, that we cannot engage from a grounded open place, that respects the other person's humanity. This too is where the focus on compassion comes in, because if compassion is a vagal mediated state, where we can support our nervous system with feelings of safety, then it may allow more transformative conversations in situations that would otherwise be negative.

Data Analysis

The circle processes were held and recorded through Zoom, with Microsoft Word used to transcribe the dialogue. The transcription needed editing, so I went through the recording and the transcription several times, ensuring that the wording was correct. After the data transcription was complete, I used in vivo coding (Saldana, 2013). As I worked through the coding process, I created a description and themes. Creswell and Creswell, (2018) define a description as a thorough representation of information about places or events (p.194). Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest generating five to seven themes for a study. As a support to my coding, I also

wrote analytic memos (Saldana, 2013, p 41). Analytic memos are opportunities to record information as a way for the researcher to prompt themselves to reflect on what deeper and complex meaning that particular piece of information may relate to (Saldana, 2013, p 41). Analytic memos are a way to support a deepening understanding of the data. Though both circle processes were different, with one feeling more logical or intellectual than the other, I had an idea of possible themes by the time both were finished. Having the participants to share stories was meaningful and put their volunteer work in context. The stories allowed me access to feelings they held for the people they were supporting as volunteers. They also gave me a window into how the participants felt about their experience and how they made sense of it in their life. Each circle process lasted two hours, which is about 20 minutes for each person, which included their introduction. I developed six themes, discussed in chapter 4, based on the research question of what are the life experiences that awaken the desire of volunteers to take compassionate action.

Scope of the Research

Williams Lake is a small town in the interior of British Columbia, with a population of less than 12, 000 (Williamslakechamber.com, n.d). Both the volunteer organizations available as well as the number of volunteers are limited due to the population size. Additionally, using personal contacts is a limitation, with most of the volunteers long-time residents of the area. Originally, I had hoped to do the circle process in person, which was why I had chosen to recruit volunteers from Williams Lake. However, to follow COVID restrictions from Royal Roads University, the circle processes were held online, and so I could have had a more diverse group of volunteers if I had pulled from a larger geographic area. The study was limited by time frame, allowing for only one circle process per group. This study consisted of two circle processes with

5 volunteers each. As well, I tried to include both religious as well as non-religious organizations. The use of technology was a limitation for some, with challenges filling out the consent form online and returning it to me.

One of the barriers that I foresaw for the study was confining it to only formal volunteer experience. I know of situations, and people that donate time to help others in many ways that fall outside of formal volunteering, for that reason, I kept the study open to any volunteer experience.

Summary

This exploratory qualitative study consisted of two virtual circle processes, each with 5 volunteers from Williams Lake. The 10 volunteers were all local to Williams Lake. Both circle processes were different, from my perspective as a host and facilitator. At the end of the day of hosting the circle processes, I felt so honoured and uplifted to have been able to bear witness to the wonderful work that each one of them was doing.

Chapter Four – Findings

> Compassion is, by definition, relational. Compassion literally means "to suffer with," which implies a basic mutuality in the experience of suffering. The emotion of compassion springs from the recognition that the human experience is imperfect.
>
> – Kristin Neff (Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself)

To explore the cultivation of compassion, this study considers the question: what are the life experiences that awaken the desire of volunteers to take compassionate action? This chapter describes the data relevant to the research question and presents findings from the data. The data analysis identified themes that answer the research question.

This study used a network selection strategy to invite 10 participants that volunteer in the community of Williams Lake, aged 30 to 80. Any volunteering experience was accepted and welcome in the narrative style circle process. All had more than one volunteer experience, either formal, informal or both. This study focused more on the experience and the stories of volunteering then on the type of volunteering. Participants were chosen under the premise that donating time in a way that would benefit someone or something else, is considered compassionate action. For simplicity, each participant was given a number, and any quote or reference will be identified by their participant number.

For this study, compassion is defined as the ability to understand another's suffering and the desire to relieve them of their suffering. Compassionate action is the taking of action to relieve a person of their suffering. As mentioned in previous chapters, compassionate action can be considered many things from donating money, to acts of kindness to physically helping someone. One participant told of a time that was not directly volunteering, it was a donation campaign in another country, and she had the privilege of seeing the difference that her money

made to the community. One person told of a lemonade stand her daughter set up as a fundraiser.

Story has long been a cornerstone of civilizations, of cultures, of families. There are mental, physical, and emotional benefits that come through sharing story for both the listeners and the narrators (Huberman, 2021, 1:50). Stories provide a framework, a structure, and an anchor, they are used to teach, to inspire, and to honour (Campbell, 1988). Through my research, I was gifted stories by the participants, which felt nothing less than miraculous.

Themes

First and foremost, the themes are informed by the two virtual circles. The development of the themes was supported through an immersive process of educating myself on compassion. Additionally, my life experience, the literature, and a Buddhist contemplative psychotherapy course on compassion, inform my beliefs, understanding, and thought processes.

1. **Religious anchor:** eight of the 10 participants used a church as a platform, a motivator, or an anchor for behaviour. In Canada, 68% of Canadians have a religious affiliation, a number that has seen a slow but steady decline from 90% in 1985 (Cornelissen, 2021). According to statistics Canada, in 2018, formal volunteers aged 15 and older dedicated on average 110 hours annually to religion (Hahmann, du Plessis and Fournier-Savard, 2020). This was second only to hospitals which averaged 111 (Hahmann, du Plessis and Fournier-Savard, 2020).
2. **Volunteering modeled:** seven of the 10 the participants mentioned having family, specifically parents, that modeled volunteerism and community involvement. Children are shaped by their surroundings, initially developing their morals and values from their

surroundings (McLeod, 2015; Weissbourd, 2009). This was a significant mention in the circle, and exclusively brought up in the question around what inspired them to volunteer.

3. **Recognition of common humanity:** Common humanity is a characteristic coined by Christopher Germer and Kristin Neff as one of the three pillars of self-compassion. Neff (2003b) defines common humanity as the understanding that unpleasant feelings are part of the human experience, that suffering is universal. This ties into Buddhism, in which the first of the four noble truths is that along with being a human, comes suffering (Lopez, n.d). This was recognized in the circles by comments that showed the volunteers were seeing the person under the suffering. One quote by participant 3 that showed how simple this can be, stating "if somebody needed help you went and helped them". One story from the circle process that exemplifies this was about a homeless woman who would come into one of the stores in town. The store would let her come in and warm up (participant 1 argued that she was a customer) and the employees kept a small pot of money for her, to tide her over if she ran out. She would pay them back when she got more money, and they would support her when times were lean.
4. **Recognition of economic inequality:** Economic inequality means disparities among individuals' incomes and wealth (Fontinelle, 2021, para. 1). According to Forbes, the number of billionaires in the world increased to 2,755 in 2021 (Dolan, K.A, Wang, J., and Peterson-Withorn, C., n.d), while the World Bank estimates that in 2021 over 711 million people lived on less than $2.00 per day (Gerszon Mahler et al., 2021). Many of the volunteers recognized the inequality by reflecting that there were things available to them that are not available to everyone. 2 of the Participants explicitly stated how fortunate they consider themselves to be, 1 described helping the poor as a calling, and participant

two explicitly stated that volunteering with under privileged people "really helps you understand the privileges of life".

5. **Connection:** According to Murthy (2020), social connection is a vital need for humans, with human relationships being as essential to our well-being as food and water. Murthy goes on to explain that loneliness can occur in three dimensions, intimate relationships, broader social relationships, and in the collective (Murthy, 2020). Klussman et al. (2020) agree, stating more feelings of connection were strongly related to increased mental health. In some instances, connection was mentioned outright, as a product of the volunteer work. Other times, it was mentioned in relation to an interaction that was had, where connection was not explicitly mentioned, but implied.
6. **It feels good:** The physical responses of a human feeling compassion are slowing down of heart rate, secretion of oxytocin (also called the bonding hormone) and lighting up the areas of the brain linked to empathy, caregiving, and feelings of pleasure (Greater Good Magazine, n.d). These attributes can increase the desire to care for others. Greater Good Magazine (n.d) goes on to state that compassionate action such as donating to a charity, activates pleasure circuits in the brain. This was also mentioned explicitly by participants who stated feeling a sense of connection, as well as implicitly, with my favourite when I was told by participant 10 that "[volunteering] fills my soul".

After analyzing the data and pulling out the above six themes, I found the themes could be grouped into sets of two, one each for internal or unconscious experiences, one for external or conscious experiences and one for experiences that relate to other people. I called the three sets compassion cultivation domains. The names I chose for the compassion cultivation domains are

self, *soul*, and *external* which will be explained in detail in Chapter 5, with a short introduction of each here.

Self

Self really can be defined as who we think we are, it is the cognitive processes we use to make sense of the world. The two themes that fit into the *self* category are recognition of economic inequality and common humanity. These are aspects that are cognitive in nature because it relates to things that one can learn or understand about the world. For example, one can recognize that the accessibility of resources is not equal across the population, and some people have access to more. Common humanity can also be recognized and learned (Neff, 2021). As explained above, a key aspect of common humanity is that everyone suffers in their life, it is a part of being human. The ability to recognize this and operate from the lived experience of the fact that we all suffer, allows us to be more compassionate towards others. During a recent podcast, public figure ALOK made a statement that really resonated with me: “we don’t need comprehension, we need compassion.” This spoke to me because often to avoid the reality of suffering, humans will try to find a way to justify it or get caught in an information gathering mindset.

Recognition of Common Humanity

Common humanity is one of the pillars of self-compassion taught through Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer’s work (Neff, 2003b). It is considered one of the key elements in self compassion because when you can understand that the challenge you are facing has been faced by others, even if the details are different, then developing self-compassion is easier. In some cases, this skill is called normalizing. The ability to see each person as a human, with their own trials, seems to play a part in volunteerism as well. This skill enables one to understand that

someone in a very different situation than you are in could also be you, which seems to make it easier to feel compassion and act on the desire to help someone. This was shown in different ways throughout the circle process, some of the quotes that were used to develop this theme were when Participant 5 stated, “you just don’t know what people have gone through, where they’re at, how maybe what you’re doing could help them.”. Another was “it is just the right thing to do as a human being is to help this person” participant 3 said, as he shared his perspective. Some longer stories were shared, such as this story from participant 4, who often plays music at the local farmers market

> “There’s a woman that comes to the Farmer’s Market that has ongoing seizures and she just loves to hear the singing and you know, I pay a little particular attention to her and you know when I’m finished my little performance, you know that’s the most rewarding thing I probably do in my life is just play their songs they want to hear over and over again. And it’s a little repetitive but it means so much for those people to hear a little bit of nostalgia, it registers extremely deep in people’s brains, and you know, it’s a small thing that I can do but it means just as much or more to me as it does to them.”

These are just some phrases and stories, taken from the circle process participants, that informed the theme of how common humanity can show up in volunteer work.

Recognition of Economic Inequality

The awareness that not everyone has equal opportunity, or equal material wealth came up often throughout the dialogue. Hand in hand with that recognition came the desire to share abundance with others. The desire to share something that could relieve another’s suffering is a way to embody compassion. This is not necessarily a monetary share, with people sharing skills such as music, singing, riding a bike, or sharing time, such as helping at a store or at the ski hill.

Quotes and experiences were gathered to create this theme, including participant 2 stating how volunteering “really helps you understand the privileges of life”. A story shared by participant 5 showed how the recognition of economic inequality could move to practical actions of support in a community by spearheading a hygiene drive for BGC Canada. The motivation to start was to offset the negativity coming from covid, and participant 5 was looking for some way to help. They understood the importance of self-care, especially to teenagers, as well as the recognition of economic inequality resulted in the fundraising and ultimately, the creation of 57 bags of women’s personal hygiene products.

The benefit of taking the perspective of common humanity, or of understanding economic inequality is that it allows one to move to action, without having to seek to understand a larger problem. These two themes under self are cognitive processes that can be developed and perhaps facilitate more community involvement. Both themes in this section are able to be developed.

Soul

Soul refers to the largely unconscious processes that influence our behaviour. Merriam-Webster (2023) defines soul as “the immaterial essence, animating principle or actuating cause of an individual life”. This last domain contains the theme of connection, which is an inherent need for humans and that helping people feels good. As mentioned above, connection is a basic human need, and as essential to our health as food and water. Attachment theory developed out of humans need for connection and shows that a human will choose safety over authenticity. The frequency that connection was mentioned in the circle processes was surprising, and one of the joys discussed by the participants was the ability to meet and connect with people that are different from who the participants usually spent their time with. Feeling good is an unconscious

physical response to participating in compassionate action. According to Dr. Dacher Keltner, humans are wired for compassion so when we participate in compassionate action, there are positive physical sensations as a reward (2012). Participants used phrases such as it feels good, or it is so rewarding when describing their experiences.

Connection

This study suggested that volunteering provides the opportunity for connection in unexpected places. Vivek Murthy's (2020) book, "Together", outlines that humans need intimate connection, social connection, and collective connection. Without this awareness, I was surprised how much connection the circle participants mentioned having with the people they were volunteering for. This indicates acting from a place of compassion rather than sympathy, as sympathy tends to have a power dynamic associated with it, accompanied by a feeling of pity for the person. Many of the stories of connection were small gestures, such as a wave, or noticing that someone is tapping their foot to the music. There were also connections that deepened throughout the volunteer process, over half of the participants had anecdotes regarding building relationships with people that they have met through volunteering:

- Spoken of a homeless woman in town; "I considered her a friend." Participant 1
- Spoken of a family benefitting from a fundraiser "That family is some of my best friends" participant 3
- Spoken of volunteer recipients "I found out other things we have in common" participant 9
- Spoken of the volunteer community "Meeting awesome, totally different people" participant 6
- "It's a fairly simple thing to do, but it's amazing what that little bit of an effort, people's

faces just light up" participant 4

- "The [volunteer side] of my job was the most memorable" participant 7

The potential for volunteers to fulfill a need for social connection through volunteering brings up the question of potential health benefits. According to Murthy (2020), when people are lonely, they are 50% more likely to die from their illnesses than their connected counterparts.

It Feels Good

Humans are designed to be compassionate, with physiological changes such as oxytocin release as an innate reward system (Keltner, 2012). This means that employing compassion does, in fact, feel good. "It does feel good to be able to help out others that are not as fortunate" (participant 9). Intriguingly, throughout the circle process, as I listened to stories about how these volunteers have shown up for their community, I never felt like the feeling the volunteers got were the priority, feeling good seemed to be more of a side effect of volunteerism. When asked why they volunteer, the answer reflected more of a sense of reciprocity then a sense that the volunteer gets something out of it, as evidenced by participant 6's observation that volunteering nurtures a sense of reciprocity, which is a value they deeply believe in. The comments and phrases that indicate that compassionate action is in some way fulfilling, such as this quote by participant 10 "It fills my soul and it brings a richness in that way, brings a sense of pleasure, a kind of worthwhileness", were often mentioned as an afterthought, or unimportant aspect of the story, or in the context of how little they gave. Participant 3 had this to say about his participation in the 870 km bike ride for Cops for Cancer:

> "for the first two times I rode for a little person in our neighboring community that was fighting cancer and when you go and tell your story to various businesses, and I had a select group of businesses that I chose to go after for fund raising, when you tell the story and, how you know, you're doing it, they would say so, what's in it for you? And there's you know, zero other than having a tired bum from sitting on a bicycle riding 150 or 200 km a day and we had to train at least 2500 km before we would ride so we would be in good physical shape. It was explaining that the feeling as a volunteer and to do a caring thing to help some little soul that was, you know, had we go get the odd needle for whatever, we stress and pout about it because we don't like it yet these little children are laying in hospital getting shots hourly".

In addition to referencing work ethic, and reciprocity as drivers for volunteerism, there were also comments around time commitments such as:

- "my husband said why don't you move your bed to the church" participant 1
- "I felt at times it was not only a half time job, but a full-time job" participant 6

In addition to time commitments, there are also emotional costs to volunteering in some fields. One participant commented that "I find that when I'm working for paid work in kind of more of the helping field or the personal connection field… I feel like I have less capacity to do volunteer work that kind of involves compassion" (participant 10) this may be an important nuance for people that do work in a field that requires compassion. In this participant's case, she would choose volunteer options such as helping in a more physical way, which fulfilled her and provided her a less emotional costly way to support her community. Some other benefits shared by the participants were an increase in confidence, a wonderful feeling, a sense that the

participant got as much or more out of it than the person being helped and, as participant 8 said "I volunteer because it feels right".

There are health benefits to altruistic behaviour (Post, 2008) and the varied comments from study participants of positive feelings associated with volunteering makes me wonder if there is a reflective practice that allows them to integrate their experience and bring it more to the conscious or if it remains fulfilling at a largely unconscious level. This theme could help a volunteer organization in supporting their volunteers by bringing these experiences into the conscious realm, informing them of potential benefits from volunteering.

External

This category was titled external because it contains external aspects or life experiences that contributed to the cultivation of compassion within my volunteer group. This heading includes how our parents taught us to behave, what values they modelled for us, as well as typical platforms or social groups that we are involved with. It encompasses anything outside of ourselves that influences the way we behave, which is why there is a social aspect to this. Beliefs and behaviours have been shown to be contagious within a community, which highlights the large influence a need for community and acceptance has on humans (Murthy, 2020). The two themes in this category are religious anchor and volunteering modeled.

Religious Anchor

Approximately 80% of the study participants had a church that they were using as a motivation, a platform, or an anchor for volunteerism. For example, the Catholic church in Williams Lake hosts a St. Vincent de Paul society, where members volunteer to feed the needy (Sacred Heart Parish, n.d). There are also groups such as the Catholic Women's League and other Christian organizations such as the Salvation Army. There were a few circle participants

that had volunteered for the "messy church" program at one of the churches in Williams Lake. They explained this was a children's program, pre-COVID, where families could come. There were activities organized for the children and everyone got fed. In this study, the church was also a way that parents of the participants were involved in volunteerism, which they modeled for their children "Parents were very involved with their church" participant 7. Additionally, the church provides a motivation "It's just something you are called to do, we are called to help the poor" participant 1. Participant 3 referenced some of his volunteer work as "the hands and feet of Jesus". These examples point to the role religious institutions can play in supporting a healthy community. They provide programs for people to utilize as well as a belief system that supports the value of volunteerism. Churches can be important institutions that promote compassionate action. This was exemplified in "I have a Christian faith and so I feel, you know, my faith really inspires me to want to give and to share and help out" (participant 10).

Volunteering Modeled

Above, it was mentioned that activities can be contagious within a community, this includes acts of kindness and compassion (Murthy, 2020). As a specific example of contagion in a community, most of the participants in this study had volunteering modeled for them. This modelling was typically done by their parents and seemed to be a significant driver and motivator for the participant to get involved in volunteering later in life. "Both my parents were very much volunteers in various things" (participant 4). For the participants in my study, seeing the impact of volunteering seemed to be an external factor that contributed to the cultivation of compassion. "Volunteering has been in my blood" participant 3.

> "What draws me the most [to volunteering] is I grew up kind of, well, very, low-income family on welfare in downtown Vancouver so we went to food banks quite a bit,

regularly, and just seeing all the people there that volunteer their time, and also the fact that my mom at the time, was also volunteering even when we were the ones in need" (participant 2).

In this study, 60% of the participants offered that this was a motivator for them getting into volunteering.

A related example is "spin-off volunteerism", where participant 9 shared a story in a project that she spearheaded in Williams Lake, called the Giving Tree, which prompted other organizations to do similar things. The Giving Tree is a tree in a park near the downtown core of Williams Lake. Participant 9 collects donations, usually warm items of clothing, for the tree and then hangs them on it throughout the winter. This Giving Tree has prompted churches and other organizations to start their own giving spaces, one church to line donations up along their fence, and some businesses to place a rack of donated warm clothing outside for people in need. This falls under the *external* category, as it is an influence outside of oneself that could lead to compassionate action.

Another example that relies on community engagement is fundraising. One of the participants shared this story about a fundraising event to support a memorial tournament, where members of the community buy 50-50 tickets and donate the winnings back to the tournament. Experiences of being able to see firsthand the willingness of a community to come together for a cause seemed to foster a sense of hope, support and optimism in the participants, with the mention that experiences in bigger cities didn't yield the same sense of community. Additionally, there seemed to be a bigger view of the benefit of creating a community, stated by the understanding by participant 3 that "if everybody just contributes a little, it makes our community a bit better". Some of the meaningful stories shared were volunteer experiences that were more informal in

nature, such as with outdoor education classes. The participants were no stranger to the difficulty and frustration that can be present in volunteer work, but the benefit seemed to outweigh the difficulty, as they admitted there were tough moments, which was followed up by statements of how rewarding the experience was.

While this study assumes that there is compassionate action in some volunteer experiences, it also assumes that life experiences have an impact on an individual's decision to volunteer.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the themes from the data and grouping them into six categories. The categories are as follows: 1. Recognition of common humanity, 2. Recognition of economic inequality, 3. Connection, 4. It feels good, 5. Religious anchor and 6. Volunteering modeled.

Chapter Five – Discussion

Compassion is to look beyond your own pain, to see the pain of others.

- Yasmin Mogahed

This chapter revisits the findings from my research, describes my interpretation of the results, strengthens my research, and connects back to my research question of what are the life experiences that awaken the desire of volunteers to take compassionate action?

Compassion has grown in popularity over the last decade in North America. There is compassion training offered at well-known universities (Harvard, Stanford, Brown), as well as important research on beneficial impacts of self-compassion (Neff 2003b, Wolf, 2017). Compassion has made newspaper headlines with major media outlets such as The New York Times posting articles related to compassion such as How Self Compassionate Are you? (February 14, 2019), How to Nurture Kindness in a New Generation (November 8, 2021), Give Compassionate Feedback While Still Being Constructive (February 26, 2020), Wellness Challenge: Give Yourself a Break (May 28, 2021) and The Promise of Self Compassion for Stressed-Out Teens (February 20, 2018).

In addition to the real-time practical application of compassion, there is also research into the history of compassion and how it has progressed as humans evolved. Examples in the literature describe primates that feel compassion (Gilbert, 2015). One striking story that illustrates the understanding of compassion in primates that crosses the species barrier, is a story told by Fran Peavey of her experience at Stanford University:

> She explains how there was a crowd of people with cameras surrounding a pair of chimpanzees. The male was loose, and the female was tied to a chain. Fran approached and found out that the spectators were scientists trying to get them to mate. The male

was interested, the female was not. Fran describes how she began to feel sympathy for the female chimpanzee. The female chimpanzee pulled her chain away from the male, walked through the crowd to Fran, took her hand and led her to the only other two women in the crowd. The chimpanzee then joined hands with one of the other women and the three of them stood in a small circle. This illustrates so poignantly to me the need we all have for compassion, and the beauty in the chimpanzee reaching out to ask for it (Co-Intelligence.org, 1986).

For this study, the definition of compassion used is an understanding of another's suffering, and the desire to relive this suffering. This research uses compassionate action as an additional concept to the feeling of compassion, where wise action is taken to relieve the suffering. There is a difference of action between feeling the desire to relieve someone of their suffering and taking action to relieve suffering. The definition of compassion includes the desire to relieve another of their suffering and compassionate action, a term coined by Ram Dass and Mirabai Bush (1995), is a practical step taken to achieve that.

Culturally, Buddhism has compassion, loving kindness, and giving and taking meditations in which compassion, and the cultivation of it, can be practiced. Indeed, one of the highest dedications one can do with the merit from their practice is to wish that all beings everywhere are free from suffering and the root of suffering (Chodron, 2014). For this study, I used Egan's 2007 definition as conflict being the difference between expectation and reality (Egan, 2007). For each compassion cultivation domain, I will explain how conflict could show up and ways that compassion may benefit in the understanding and management of the conflict.

For practical reasons, this research was focused on a type of compassionate action that could be easily measured, volunteering. Both volunteering and compassion are considered pro-

social behaviour (Eca de Abreu et al., 2015) and are considered to have beneficial impacts on the helper such as life-satisfaction, self-esteem, self-rated health, and others (Gilbert, 2015; Murthy, 2020; Wilson, 2000). As participant 2 stated, “it [volunteering] really helps you understand the privileges of life”. Compassion builds and reinforces connections between people (Dutton et al., 2005). However, it is understood that volunteering and the action resulting from it, is not always compassionate, in rare cases it can be sadistic, as in the Milgram experiment, where volunteers were willing to shock other research participants (Mcleod, 2017).

For the purposes of this thesis, I have focused on the kindness and community building that can result from compassion (Dutton et al., 2005). However, I do not want to minimize the full breadth of compassion so would be remiss if I didn’t include a reference the part of compassion that Kristin Neff refers to as Fierce self-compassion. Fierce self-compassion is defined by Kristin Neff (2022) as “acting in the world to alleviate suffering”. According to Neff (2022), it involves protecting, providing for, and motivating ourselves. Kristin Neff has written a book entirely on fierce self-compassion, with exercises throughout to aid in the development of fierce self-compassion (Neff, 2022). There can be a need for fierceness in both compassion for self and compassion for others. There are times that the most compassionate things that we can do for someone is not the nicest or easiest. An example of fierce compassion came up in a recent podcast I was listening to. The presenter, discussing his drug addiction, said, “the most compassionate thing that my mom did for me is to cut me off and kick me out” (McDonald & Clements, 2020). His mom showed fierce self-compassion, by holding a boundary for herself (Neff, 2022). This paper focuses on compassion seen mostly in relation to volunteering, which can be kind and generous, though still requiring boundaries.

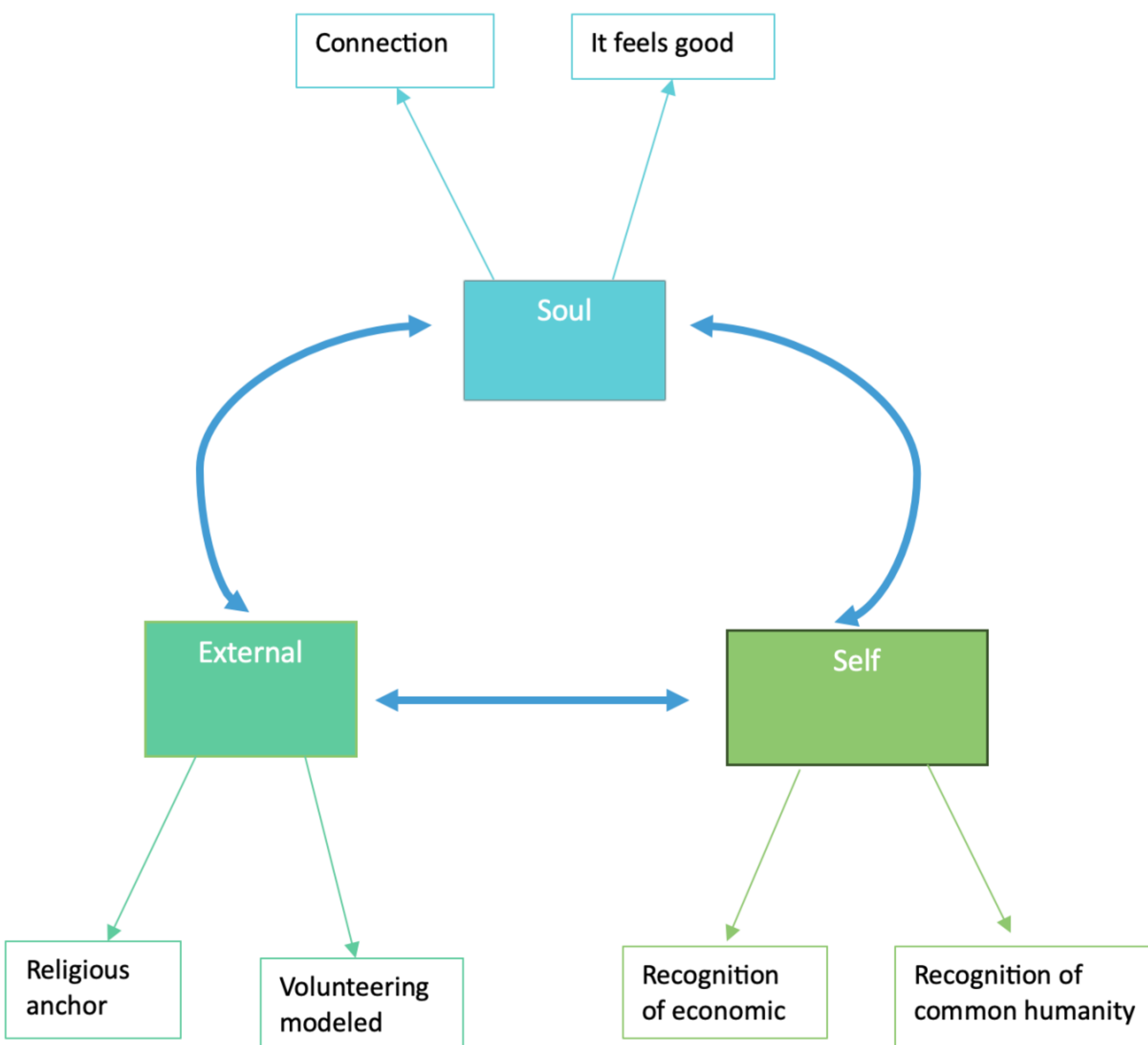
Domains of Compassion Cultivation

The compassion cultivation domains were developed from my own perspective and history. In chapter 3, I described my process of analysing the script from the circle processes. As I pulled the themes out, it seemed that the six themes were easily grouped into pairs. The domain names of *self*, *soul* and *external* seemed intuitive to me. This I would attribute to my worldview and some key life experiences. I grew up Catholic, so have always identified as having both a self and a soul. I care deeply about people in my life and believe that all people are inherently good. I also believe that we have the opportunity and the responsibility to create and care for our community. This, my worldview, was instrumental in both my analysis and my writing. I believe that all humans can choose to take on a path of self-evolution and lead a fulfilling life.

The three domains are *self*, which relates to our internal conscious processes, and includes some aspects of our identity, cognitive response to social pressures, and how each person makes meaning of life. *Soul* refers to unconscious processes, which can be either somatic (for example neurobiological processes) or unconscious beliefs driving our behaviour. *External* relates to the impact of external aspects to the cultivation of compassionate action, these include forces outside of ourselves that either provide a platform or a motivation for people to take compassionate action.

Figure 3 *Compassion cultivation domains*

How the themes relate to the compassion cultivation domains



Each of these overarching themes could influences the other, so for example when you have a child, it is likely that an important aspect of your identity changes (*self*), then perhaps, to stay involved in your child's life, or to ensure there are programs available for him/her, or because it

feels unacceptable socially to not be involved (*external*), you would volunteer at the school or for a sport. This may influence, challenge, or change some of your deep held beliefs, and your perception of where your time is best spent, potentially changing your *soul* aspect. This is a very simplified example, pointing to the fact that as humans, we are not stagnant, and every interaction has the potential to change us.

Self

The first domain of compassion cultivation is *self*. *Self* pertains to oneself, to the cognitive aspects of who we think we are. It is our impression of ourselves, it is how we make sense of the world, and it is how we use our minds to explore our existence. As a motivation to volunteer, *self* would be comparable to intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is motivation that comes from inside, not something that we are doing for an external reward (Deci and Ryan, 1985). In the *self* domain, conflict would present as one's expectations of themselves being different than the reality (Egan, 2007). This may refer to one's ability in a classroom setting, in a physical setting or in a social setting. When one's expectations differ from the reality, it can cause inner conflict (Egan, 2007). This type of conflict can be invisible from the outside.

To cultivate compassion in this domain, we could use cognitive practices such as meditation, visualization, perspective taking, emotional intelligence and learning statistics. Barriers that one might see come up in the domain of self would be rationalizing, justifying, and avoiding. These barriers are helpful to make sense of the world but can prevent someone from opening themselves up to compassionate action. According to Gilbert (2015) common fears of being compassionate come from a sense of not being deserving, concern another might become dependent, or aversion to distress. Not only does our individualistic culture allow us to look out

for number one, but it is also highly adept at providing distractions for us whenever there is something that we would rather avoid (Jinpa, 2015).

There are two themes under this domain, and both contain an aspect of recognition. Oxford Dictionary defines recognition as “acknowledgement of something’s existence, validity or official” (Oxford University Press, 2023). Recognition comes from the courage to look at the reality of the situation, instead of squeezing it into a justification that fits within your worldview.

Recognition of Common Humanity

Common humanity is a term used by Kristin Neff and one of her three pillars of self-compassion. Common humanity is an important concept for both compassion and self-compassion because it requires a perspective shift, recognizing that we are all imperfect (Neff, 2003a, 2004b, 2012, 2022). Part of cultivating compassion for others is recognizing that we all have similar tendencies and fears, and we all want to be safe and loved (Neff, 2022). Common humanity in a broader sense recognizes an interconnectedness between all people (Neff, 2022). Buddhism understand that all humans suffer, considering suffering to be one of The Four Noble Truths (Lopez, n.d). Common humanity is a courageous aspect to developing compassion because it may require someone to look at another and not look away from their pain or suffering.

As an example, I stopped to speak to a man, who appeared homeless outside of a retail store. He was sitting on the sidewalk so I asked him if I could buy him something to eat. While he and I were talking, no one else walking by looked at him. I brought him food and drink, which potentially relieved some of his suffering, but I think the true gift that I gave him, and perhaps that we can all give each other, is that I saw his suffering and didn’t look away. It took courage and I cried for him on my way home, but I think looking for the human under the suffering is a

necessary and brave act. In a personal conversation with Pilar Jennings (personal communication March 16, 2022), she mentioned that perhaps, if someone had seen this man's suffering earlier in life, his life could have turned out differently. This is echoed in an article by Jinpa (2015), where he tells a story of the importance of not looking away from human suffering, and of the gift that is given when we choose to connect with the person underneath the suffering. This shows up in some people, like participant 3, compassionate action has a broad scope as shown by the quote "if somebody needed help, you went and helped them".

In the Buddhist view, we are all interconnected and we have many lives through reincarnation. Buddhism has a beautiful way of expanding definitions and experiences to encompass more than just the individual. So, seeing the earth, and all beings as being deserving of compassion as well as seeing our lifetimes stretched into many, may give people the ability to look further than their own small difficult experience, into vaster, more expanded understanding. Several of the participants were able to express this understanding of common humanity in the stories they shared in the circle process. Some examples of this are: "just the right thing to do as a human being is to help this person" said by participant 3. "It's a really tough time on everyone, how can I make this easier?" by participant 5 and "volunteering is just a natural thing to me, that you give of yourself" stated participant 7.

Skills that increase our capacity for common humanity are taught at some compassion training such as the Compassion Cultivation Training at Stanford University. Jinpa (2015) states that the goal of Compassion Cultivation training is to "target four areas for change: outlook, awareness, capacity for empathy and behaviour" (p. 11).

Recognition of Economic Inequality

Economic inequality is disparity between individual's incomes (Fontinelle, 2021). In 2021, 71 million people were living on less than $2 a day, the same year that the number of billionaires increased to 2755 (Dolan et al., n.d). Forbes billionaires list for 2021 states that every 17 hours last year, there was a new billionaire, with the world's richest people being collectively 5 trillion dollars richer than last year (Dolan et al., n.d). Otto Scharmer's, an economist, wrote Theory U, which outlines within it three divides the population is currently facing, one of which is social. In his book, he states that the eight richest people in the world own as much as half of the rest of the population combined, meaning the half of the population that are on the lower side of the economic spectrum (Scharmer, 2018). He goes on to create a visualization for the reader that the people that own the most in the world could fit into a minivan (Scharmer, 2018). It is a striking thought, to imagine 8 people owning more than a population of approximately 3.9 billion. Through the circle processes, there were several phrases that reflected the understanding and recognition of economic inequality. "It does feel good to be able to help out others that are not as fortunate" from participant 9 is one such example.

Cultivating both the understanding of economic inequality as well as gaining an understanding of how economic inequality comes to be could assist in increasing compassion. For example, the New Leaf Project in Vancouver, British Columbia, tested an initiative in which they chose 115 recently homeless people and gave half of them a lump sum of $7500 (Foundations for Social Change, n.d). New Leaf Project then tracked the recipients over 12 months and what they found was that the participants that received the money were able to move into stable housing sooner, they prioritized spending on staples such as rent, and spent the lump sum over time. This study was instrumental in debunking some of the myths around why people

are homeless and what would happen if they received a lump sum of money. Participant 5 spoke of "the ability to self-reflect, and understanding just how fortunate I am". The mention of the generosity of others in the community, as well as gratitude for what the participants had was a thread heard throughout the circles.

Recognition of economic inequality is related to the second theme in the *self* domain; recognition of common humanity. I see them as related because understanding economic inequality requires a foundation of common humanity. It allows one to understand that it isn't only that people with less don't work as hard, sometimes there are barriers, breakdowns and instances that prevent another from being financially successful. The potential for misfortune can befall anyone.

Soul

The second domain of compassion cultivation developed from themes from my research is *soul*. This domain relates to unconscious processes and deeply held beliefs and relates to implicit motivation. Implicit motivation is different from intrinsic and extrinsic because it happens in the realm of the unconscious. Research indicates that behaviour is a result of two distinct personality systems, an implicit one that is outside of conscious awareness and an explicit one that is at the conscious level (Hendrik et al., 2018). Conflict in this domain would present as an inner conflict that we may not fully understand. This may have to do with an unconscious identity, where for example, if we identify our worth as coming from taking care of others, we may feel an unconscious struggle if we are too tired or are feeling burnt out and want a break from caring for others. This may present in reactions and responses that we don't fully understand. Compassion is key here, understanding our responses and reactions have an

intelligence. Feeling compassion for ourselves when we react in a way that may be embarrassing is the first step in working through the feeling that prompted that reaction.

This domain encompasses deeply held beliefs and identities. These are often developed when we are children and are held in the unconscious unless we start following the threads of our behaviour to help us uncover them. Barriers in this domain may be one of the most difficult barriers to overcome because they are unconscious. The barriers may come from beliefs internalized through society, religion, or a culture. The First Noble Truth in Buddhism requires people to turn toward the fact that nothing is permanent, and suffering is the human condition. This is relevant because if one suffers, or if something bad happens, it is not because one deserves it. This is where the role of Karma comes in, sometimes referred to as the great mystery.

Here we are brought back again to the courage required to be compassionate – it takes courage to turn towards someone’s suffering because if empathy is the felt sense of compassion, then it requires each of us to touch a place within ourselves that knows the pain of another. That is scary and may challenge our deeply held belief that it cannot happen to us because we have done everything right. Pema Chodron touches on these fears and barriers in her book from Fear to Fearlessness (2014). She speaks of how our fear of feeling pain may evoke a coldness and a cruelty in us (Chodron, 2014, track 6, 16:20). Another barrier that might present in this theme is overwhelm, which comes up when touching into the pain of others becomes overwhelming. This overwhelm reflects a fear that blocks the ability to be compassionate (Chodron, 2014). One way this can show up on the conscious level is by justifying why someone may be in their situation, for example, choosing not to help someone who is homeless and justifying it by telling yourself

that they are lazy. This type of justification directly opposes Buddhist belief that we are all interconnected.

Connection

Connection is a basic human need. The detrimental impact of lack of connection can be illustrated using experiments such as the still face experiment, where a parent is interacting with the baby and neutralizes the look on their face. Within two minutes, after trying to regain connection with the parent, the baby is visibly upset (Tronick, 2005). Humans are born with a need for connection, and connection is essential to well-being (Klussman et al., 2020; Tronick, 2005). One example of connection from my research was “every morning he is waiting there in the window to wave at me and the dog as we go by”. An example given by participant 4 of a man in an old folk’s home who watches for him as he walks the same route each day.

According to Murthy (2020) connection is as necessary to humans as food and water. Murthy (2020) states that loneliness is an indicator much like we would feel hunger or thirst. Loneliness indicates that we are not getting as much connection as we need. Participant 9 said of their experiences, “it does feel good to help, apart from just the possibility to make a connection”. Humans need for connection encompasses three dimensions, intimate connection, social connection, and collective connection (Murthy, 2020). Connection over three dimensions is a key aspect to understanding that loneliness can come from a lack of connection in any of the dimensions. It is not enough to only have a healthy intimate relationship, or a warm, connected friend community. As participant 6 said “I get so much back, so whenever I volunteer, it nurtures the sense of reciprocity”. This understanding compliments the results of this study in that connection was mentioned often throughout the dialogue. Sometimes the participants mentioned connection relating to specific relationships they had built with people that they met through

their volunteer work, often the recipients of the volunteering. However, it was also mentioned in relation to a glance, a tapping foot, a shared moment, or a story. Connection was also implied in how giving in the present, connected the person to people from their past. An example of this was a story told by participant 4 who volunteers to sing at the Farmers market as well as at an elderly care facility; “my father had Alzheimer’s and the nurses told me he would lay in bed for hours, singing. I like to keep up on the Alzheimer’s research and I know how deeply in the brain music can touch.”. I got the sense they felt, in a way, that they could connect with their father, by providing something that brought their father so much joy, through this volunteering work.

The positive aspect of this research is that when people feel very lonely and feel helpless, there are simple straightforward ways to move from loneliness to connection. Together (2020) narrated several such stories of people that were struggling and found their way to connection, either through programs offered, or through creating programs of their own.

> One example highlighted the story of a freshman in university, who struggled with the lack of connection after leaving her parents and her friends. In her second year at university, she set up connection nights at a nearby location, inviting new people each time. The connection nights were so popular because they gave lonely students a way to have a heartfelt connection with others. She continued the connection nights throughout her time at the university (Murthy, 2020).

Future research in this domain could explore if the act of volunteering primes the nervous system to be more open to connection, for example with the release of oxytocin. As a participant 5 stated “it is self-fulfilling and helping the community”. Participant 9 spoke about the fact they get a lot of pleasure from volunteering, and that they find it very gratifying.

The volunteers for this study spoke of the sense of community from volunteering, both as a community of volunteers, as well as a sense of being supported by community. Participant 2 relayed “the response in the community is, obviously, incredible”. Participant 6 said “it brings a totally new perspective, not just about the cause, about the world”. And participant 10 noted “definitely gratification, in giving time, in helping to make things happen that wouldn’t happen without volunteers”.

It feels good

According to Dacher Keltner (2012), humans are wired for compassion. This is related to different areas such as the periaqueductal grey in the brain, as well as the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve is also called the wandering nerve and runs from the brain to the intestines, touching in on places such as the heart, stomach, and intestines (Porges, 2007). Mammals all have a vagus nerve, however, the vagus nerve in humans is more developed, with a newer addition, called the smart vagus, or myelinated vagus (Loizzo, 2017; Porges, 2007). The smart vagus gives humans the unique ability to make unconscious actions conscious (Loizzo, 2017). For example, an unconscious act such as breathing can be conscious in humans. The ability to make an unconscious action, such as breathing, conscious matters for compassion because regulating your breath can calm your nervous system. When we choose to take advantage of this, for example by choosing to deepen or hold our breath, it allows us to regulate our nervous systems. When our nervous system is regulated, we are better able to take wise, compassionate action. As participant 4 said “you need to have a lot of compassion for the people you work with and the kids you work with”.

It has been found that humans have a distinctly physical response to compassion which includes slowing of the heart, and the release of oxytocin (Keltner, 2012). Humans have an

attachment system that uses oxytocin and opiates to give a soothing at peace feeling (Gilbert et al., 2008). Though humans are wired for compassion, they are also wired with a strong negativity bias. This means that it is much easier to remember a negative interaction than a positive one and that we are wired to be constantly scanning the environment for threats and danger. To file a positive interaction, or moment, in our memory or to facilitate a shift from trait to state, one must stop and feel what is happening in their body, focusing just on that for 15-20 seconds (Brach, 2019). Nervous system and brain retraining help people bring attention to what state their nervous system is in. When one can understand how their nervous system is responding to a situation, they can address their state, bringing themselves from a state of arousal to a grounded state.

When we act from a grounded, safe nervous system, a vagal mediated state, we are better able to understand what is needed to take compassionate action. This allows us to be more effective in the world, while also receiving a rewarding experience through the internal reward system (Esch & Stefano, 2011). As participant 8 mentioned how volunteering fulfills them, knowing they're "out and about meeting people and feeling that I'm using my time for something worthwhile". Participant 9 shared a story of how, while volunteering at a nursing home, while sharing an inside joke with one of the occupants, they found some hobbies that they have in common. The more I am open to it, the more I recognize that connection is available to us in many interactions of our lives, and the most impactful can be the most surprising.

Ricard et al., (2018) relay a story in which two leopard brothers, raised together, lived together until at some point one of them got hurt, and was crippled. For a while, the fully mobile brother was very caring, but eventually, left the crippled one. This is indicative that the compassion in leopards, though it may be present, may not stretch as far as is does for humans.

One light bulb moment for anthropologists was when they realized that diseased or badly hurt humans were not left behind, and in fact were able to survive because they were being cared for (Ricard et al, 2018). There are challenges to volunteering, as most people with experience will attest to. As participant 6 noted "it was a really hard thing to do, but it felt so meaningful" and participant 3 (in a different circle) echoed that with "there's tough things about it but I'll tell you, it's so rewarding". Participant 4 articulated "open your heart but not get pulled into events or activities that compromise your ability to be a helper or a volunteer".

External

External is the third and final domain of compassion cultivation. This domain references factors outside of ourselves, therefore it may be related to extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is when someone is motivated to do something because of an external reward or validation. For the themes that belong in this domain, it may be that the external reward is acceptance. This may be acceptance from a religious organization, or by parents. Conflict may show up in this domain as external conflict, for example, conflict with another person or organization. An example of this is disagreement with someone who has a different belief system than you or follows a different political party. Compassion cultivation in this regard may rely heavily on Buddhist principles such as we are all interconnected. Additionally, some perspective taking may be useful for compassion cultivation, or a look at one's belief system. A shift in perspective may be choosing to believe that everyone is doing their best, or that everyone is entitled to their own opinion/experience.

For this compassion cultivation domain, social pressures may be both a cultivation doorway, as well as a barrier. For example, in some situations, such as a peer group that is socially involved, the *external* as extrinsic motivation may inspire people to volunteer. There is

also the external pressure of an individualistic culture, which would be considered a barrier within this domain. Along with an individualistic culture, there is a distinct fear of death and denial of suffering, which limits our ability to be present with another's suffering (Chodron, 2014).

The first of the Four Noble Truths is that life is suffering (Lopez, n.d), this being a primary understanding of Buddhism may be the reason that compassion is a foundation of that belief system. With that as a foundation, people can be more open to acknowledging suffering. A barrier in this domain could be that people are concerned about doing the wrong thing to help. Another barrier in this domain may be that if the volunteer organization(s) have a religious ideology, it may prevent people from joining. A final barrier may be finding a volunteer organization or a way to volunteer that aligns with one's values. Though there are a multitude of non-profits and volunteer programs available they aren't always easy to access or find. For example, I went to the United Nations Canada annual Think Global, Act Local meeting and the majority of the 12 organizations in attendance I had not heard of.

Religious Anchor

The second theme under the compassion cultivation domain of *external* is religious anchor. When I went through the codes, 80% of the participants in my study referenced religion or belonging to a church. Examples include "I joined the Catholic Women's League" participant 1, "the hands and feet of Jesus" participant 3. This religious anchor is interesting because though my study group was very small, the religious affiliation seemed to be exclusively Christian. I did not ask volunteers specifically if they were religious, however, some offered that information upfront, and others alluded to it through their affiliation with a church.

As I worked through the themes, and developed this one, I began to wonder if instead of religious anchor, this theme could be broadened to include spirituality, which is where the distinction between an external driver and an internal motivator becomes fuzzy. Through writing this paper, I began to question the simplicity of this theme. The reason for this being that though belief may often come with a religion, and religion can provide a specific platform to volunteer from, I believe that belief without a religion can also provide a desire to volunteer. I did not ask if participants were religious or had a spiritual belief system. If this theme was belief, instead of religion, it would move into the *self* category. Because in my circle processes, this came up specifically in religious examples, it stands as an external factor. However, it would be interesting to test the difference between religion as an external driver for volunteering and a belief system as an internal motivator for volunteering. As an example, one could have a belief that all humans deserve respect, compassion, and basic human rights, which might drive one to volunteer. The best thing is that we get to choose what we believe, and this gives us so much power over how we live our lives, see things and how situations inform our perspective.

Volunteering Modeled

Most of the participants had volunteering modeled which suggests it may be important for compassion cultivation. Though this is just results from one study, it is an easy initiative to incorporate into larger systems, such as the public school system. With the importance of positive role models in the lives of children, it may be an easy place to provide examples of compassionate action, potentially contributing to generations of children that are involved in social change initiatives (Huta, 2012). One of the study participants came from a very low-income family. Seeing the volunteers at the food bank was a key inspiration for them, as well as the fact that their mom volunteered, even though they were the ones in need. They now work at a

large volunteer organization, with another important motivator being from their own experience of “having that one role model outside of your family and just having them consistent and reliable really made a huge difference in my life” (participant 2).

Providing intergenerational programs within a community may begin to break down the barriers between different age groups, contributing to a more inclusive, tolerant society. In a recent conversation with a teacher of mine, she talked about how difficult turning toward suffering can be, and if more people had the capacity to do that for others, it could change lives (P. Jennings, personal communication March 16, 2022). This is not an uncommon belief, with several stories in “Together” about life changing effects of volunteering and social activism (Murthy, 2020). From my research, I wonder if modelling volunteering has the potential to increase one’s capacity to turn towards someone’s suffering and see the person underneath the suffering. The moments when we can see the person, can be life changing for both of us, and if we can see each interaction as an opportunity for transformation, then we may be able to approach things with a more open heart. Participant 6 stated this in their approach to volunteerism “open mind, open heart”.

One of the things I noticed from the volunteers, was how quick they were to point out the generosity of others. Some examples of this were when participant 3 was talking about volunteering for the Salvation Army at Christmas they said “wow, the kindness of our people and the people that you would not think, and what they give! It’s phenomenal”. Participant 2 agreed talking about how members of the community would show up just to donate to a fundraiser for a tournament, in which they ended up with “probably $150,000 worth of prizes”.

The question for this study was what are the life experiences that awaken the desire of volunteers to take compassionate action? The data answers the question by showing that most of

the volunteers had similar external experiences such as religion and volunteering modeled for them. The volunteers also shared experiences of connection and feeling good through their volunteer activities Additionally, the volunteers mentioned skills such as recognition as economic inequality and understanding common humanity.

Relevance of the Research

In the introduction, I had four purposes of the paper, that I will revisit here. The first was to gain an understanding of the role, if any, that life experiences play in motivating someone to take compassionate action. I think it would be very interesting to do a larger study to test some of the themes and domains developed here. In my own life, this provides a solid argument to model some of these things for my children, as well as to consider the development of programs that would support this. For example, modelling volunteering, and the understanding of common humanity are two easy things that I could bring into my life that may support my children in living a more compassionate life.

Secondly, this paper was intended to provide an understanding of compassion, compassionate action, and wisdom by applying the concepts to practical situations. While a complete understanding of wisdom is out of scope for this paper, I find it helpful to retain a gentle reminder of the fact that wisdom is a key part of compassion, and that compassionate action is concerned with taking right action, not taking any action that immediately relieves suffering. There is a difference, and perhaps it is for each of us to find our own way of acting compassionately from a place of wisdom.

Thirdly, the research from this paper was designed to be shared with communities to support the growth of compassionate action in communities. One of the benefits to me of living in a small community, is that it may feel easier to create a sense of a community net. By this, I mean

that there are many familiar faces. I find that as my children get older, and I get to see their friends, or other young adults that I know grow into inspiring, interesting people, and I feel a sense of responsibility for them too. I feel a commitment to make our community a good place to live, and to support others when I can. This comes back to my worldview, and my concern that through technology and challenging times, not many people get to have a sense of community. It is a great sadness to think that people don't live in a place where they recognize their neighbors, or where they have someone to call if they need. A recent podcast with Dr Hyman and Dr. Robert Waldinger (2023) spoke about how some people have no one that they could call in the middle of the night if they were sick or scared. Hyman & Waldinger (2023) go on to discuss the need for connection and how humans need to feel supported to thrive. Sometimes small acts of compassion can remind people that they are not alone. This small, exploratory study allowed me to begin to understand what life experiences may have impacted volunteers' decision to take compassionate action.

Limitations of the Study

Some limitations of this study were low diversity in the volunteer group, both culturally as well as in religious background. Another limitation of the research was that it was created this based on the assumption that some volunteerism is an example of compassionate action. As mentioned previously, this is not always the case. A third assumption that was made for this study, was that life experience influences an individual's choices in life. Lack of research on the impact of life experience indicates this is an area for future research. Lim and DeStano (2016) challenge current paradigms that suggest adverse experiences always relate to negative life outcomes, instead finding that "increasing severity of adversity predicts increased empathy", leading to feeling compassion for others in need (p.175).

Further Research

Areas for potential future research are to repeat this study with a larger, more diverse group of participants to see if the themes from this study are still relevant. Another opportunity would be to determine if the act of volunteering primes the nervous system to be more open to connection, for example with the release of oxytocin, or using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). A third opportunity for further research would be to get more detailed in understanding how much impact volunteering being modeled has on children, and as well as the impact of other life experiences on an individual's choices. Finally, a further opportunity for research would be to gain a more fulsome understanding of where the barriers to compassionate action are.

Final Reflections

From my research, I surmise that there is a balance specific to each individual of motivations and life experiences that would drive them to take compassionate action. Although generalizations cannot be made from this small of a sample size, I feel that my research answered the question, as similar life experiences came up in the circles that may have awakened participants desire to take compassionate action.

One of the most intriguing and beneficial aspects to compassion is that it can be taught, and our capacity to feel compassion for ourselves and others can be expanded. Compassion cultivation seems increasingly relevant to me, as increasing our ability to find and feel compassion for fellow humans seems like a necessary step to a more inclusive, caring society. With compassion cultivation, one can take advantage of the ability and the capacity that we have as humans to draw from a never-ending wellspring of compassion (Ricard et al., 2018). Though it may require courage and commitment to expand our capacity for compassion, from

compassionate action, true happiness is possible (Ricard et al. 2018). The biggest barrier to practicing compassion is articulated so beautifully by Jinpa, (2015) who states, “Compassion acknowledges the fundamental truth of our human condition, that not all pain can be fixed and that there is a limit to what each of us can do in the face of suffering” (p.7). This sentiment, which I feel is equally heartbreaking and liberating, reminds me that we are all in it together.

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Appendix A – Participant Invitation

Participant Invitation (sent via email)

To Whom It May Concern:

Good day, I am a Masters student at Royal Roads University in the Conflict Analysis and Management program. I am working on a research study on compassion for my thesis and would like to invite you to participate in a virtual circle process with other volunteers from Williams Lake. My research question is:

> *What are the life experiences that awaken the desire of volunteers to take compassionate action?*

For the purposes of my study, I am defining compassion as: the ability to understand another's suffering and the desire to relieve another of their suffering.

I would like to invite you to participate in a circle process to discuss compassion and volunteering. The circle will be held virtually on September 27th 2021 at 9:00 or 1:00. I expect the Circle Process to take about two hours, so we will be done by 11:00 am or 3:00 pm respectively.

I look forward to hearing back from you to confirm your spot as soon as possible.

Warm regards,

Stephanie Huska

Appendix B – Informed consent

I have listened to and understood the overview for the research project *The Role of a combined Circle Process and Compassion Training in Reconciliation.*

- [ ] I will be participating in research activities led by Stephanie Huska from Royal Roads University. Contact via email.
- [ ] I will be asked about topics relating to volunteering and compassion. I will be participating in a circle process with some of my peers.
- [ ] I will be supported in sharing my opinions and thoughts on volunteering and compassion
- [ ] The study will occur over approximately 2 weeks and will consist of a virtual circle process, held on Zoom
- [ ] The circle process will be recorded and transcribed. Data from this study may be published. I am able to choose if I want my information shared in the research results.
- [ ] I am able to choose to participate. If I decide not to participate at any point, I can stop. There will be no consequences from the researcher if I choose to stop. If I choose not to participate, I will tell the research team.
- [ ] I am able to opt out of any part of the research study. If I choose not to participate, I will notify the research team.
- [ ] There are no gifts or incentives, monetary or otherwise for participating in this study.

Please circle

Yes I want to participate in this research **No** I do not want to participate in this research

I give permission to (*please circle*):

Allow photographs to be used in publications Yes No

Allow audio recordings to be used in publications Yes No

Allow videos to be used in publications Yes No

In the publications, I agree to be identified by (when appropriate):

Name, age, gender and community Yes No

Pseudonym, age, gender and community Yes No

Name: ______________________________

Date: ______________________ Signature: __________________________________

Appendix C – Interview Guide

There will be two virtual circles, held through Zoom. Both will be recorded. When everyone has arrived, I will start recording the meeting.

To open each circle, I will provide a bit of background on the study and discuss the ground rules for the circle. From there the participants will have an opportunity to suggest and discuss ground rules they would like to include.

To ensure everyone is using the same definition, I will explain that for this study, compassion is defined as: **the ability to understand another's suffering and the desire to take action to relieve another of their suffering.**

1. Tell me what draws you to volunteering? can you share a story about volunteering that was meaningful to you.
2. There may be specific competencies that are required for one organizational job (how to fund raise) that might be difference from another (how to cook)" … "what are the competencies that you bring or (hope to bring) in some of the volunteer experiences you have?
3. Has there been a volunteer experience that surprised you, or an outcome you didn't expect?
    - Some questions that I can use to draw out more detail if needed:
        - What did you bring to this volunteer experience?
        - How did you get to that volunteer experience in the first place?
        - Tell me more about...
        - What motivated you to continue, to find other volunteer experiences