

**When pain is not suffering:  
An integrated literature review to clarify suffering**

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## ABSTRACT

Suffering is thought to be being inevitable and ubiquitous in organizational life (Dutton et al., 2014; Lilius et al., 2008). Compassion literature positions compassion as a way to alleviate suffering in organizational members (Kanov et al., 2017; Lilius et al., 2011). However, the nature of suffering is taken for granted in compassion literature, often equating it with pain events for organizational members such as loss of a loved one, organizational actions, or poorly organized work (Dutton et al., 2014). Or, suffering is synonymous with pain experiences such as grief, burnout, stress, depression, and sleep quality (McClelland & Vogus, 2021; Peticca-Harris, 2018; Simpson et al., 2020). These classic ways of characterizing suffering overlook the meaning of the pain events or pain experiences that determines suffering for individuals. Suffering speaks to the existential meaning of the pain as it pertains to the continued existence of the self (Kahn & Steeves, 1986; Reich, 1989; Worline & Dutton, 2017). Assuming that a pain event or pain experience is the same as suffering misses out on opportunities to understand why suffering occurs and how compassion can alleviate suffering as it relates to the threat to one's sense of self. This integrated literature review offers a framework to guide future research in compassion and suffering, taking into consideration the complex, social nature of suffering.

The framework aims to clarify the suffering experience as being comprised of antecedents that trigger suffering, the harm to the individual, and the type of harm to the individual. Next, the framework describes elements that inform the subjective meaning of the suffering experience. Subjective meaning depends on whether a negative meaning is attached to the pain event or pain experience, how the individual interprets the way the social world reflects 'the self' back to the individual, and whether that interpretation disrupts the meaning of one's self such that self-continuance is threatened. Third, the integrated literature review suggests an enhanced definition of suffering that is more holistic, capturing the subjective and social aspects of suffering. Consistently viewing suffering as a complex, subjective phenomena can facilitate communication amongst researchers to accumulate a common body of knowledge and spur creativity for new compassion theories and interventions.

From a practical perspective, this integrated literature review seeks to position the framework as way for managers to understand how suffering is socially co-created rather than an individual's reaction to an organizational action or person. A more nuanced understanding of suffering means that an employee's experiences of suffering that may normally be overlooked, because they don't fit the classic idea of suffering, are more likely to be heeded. Moreover, if the subjective and social nature of suffering is not taken into account, it poses a risk that compassionate actions will not be properly targeted to suffering. Not only might compassion interventions not necessarily alleviate suffering, they may also contribute to it. Thus, it is vital for future compassion theorizing and compassion-based interventions to clarify the suffering construct to include the context of the whole person and how the meaning of pain is co-created. A more informed understanding of the nature of suffering can enhance employee wellbeing because that understanding can shape how HR practices are designed and implemented to avoid contributing to suffering or keep it to a minimum. Less suffering means a more engaged and productive workforce (Worline & Dutton, 2017).

**Keywords:** suffering, compassion, management, identity, threat, sensemaking

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