

Abstract for Human Relations 75th Anniversary Conference

Embedding Compassion in Work: A Sensemaking Approach for Stigmatized

Occupations

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, management academicians and practitioners have paid close attention to compassion (Kanov et al., 2004; Schabram & Heng, 2021). Through compassion, an individual can alleviate the pain of the sufferer, and management research demonstrates that compassion generates positive emotions in the giver, receiver, and witness of compassionate acts in the workplace (Dutton et al., 2014; Schabram & Heng, 2021). Acts of compassion are motivated by prior or continuous suffering at the individual, organizational, or societal levels, which is an inevitable part of an individual's personal and professional life (Dutton et al., 2006). According to preliminary theories, compassion enables social (trust, legitimacy), cognitive (attention), and affective (pride, dignity) resources (Dutton et al., 2006). By being ingrained in roles, relationships, processes, structures, and cultures, compassion has been shown to have a transformative effect on workplaces and the capacity to enhance results at the individual, team, organizational, and societal levels (Madden et al., 2012; Rynes et al., 2012).

The conceptualization and implications of workplace compassion are demonstrated at different levels through factors woven into the organization and social environment; however, there is a dearth of research linking compassion at different levels with factors embedded in the job and societal context (Dutton et al., 2014). An early evaluation of the literature on compassion and potential areas for future research reveal that power dynamics and occupational settings can influence how compassion is enacted and experienced in the workplace (Dutton et al., 2014; Schabram & Heng, 2021). The current study explores these gaps by studying compassion in one of the stigmatized occupational settings of sanitation work undertaken by municipal corporation workers in India. The World Bank views sanitation work, which includes routinely cleaning roads, pits, septic tanks, public restrooms, and door-to-door garbage collection, as a vital and necessary public service (World Bank, 2019); however, there

are multiple stigmas which overshadow the contribution of sanitation workers towards the public.

The work carried out by sanitation workers falls under the category of dirty work that embeds suffering in the form of moral, physical, and social taints (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). People employed in this work typically have unique occupational and work environments and are at the periphery of their organizational and societal structures. The current study adopts an ethnographic approach with semi-structured interviews to explore how compassion unfolds amongst sanitation workers and what are the possible work outcomes of experiencing and enacting compassion in stigmatized occupations.

As part of the research study (Mikkelsen, 2022), fieldwork at the different wards and semi-structured qualitative interviews with Darogas (sanitation supervisors) and sanitation workers were carried out. The fieldwork is carried out at different locations under a large municipal corporation in India that employs around 900 employees and includes observation, field notes, and visual aids (photos and videos) of the life of sanitation workers in their workplace. The initial findings from the study, with interviews of 28 sanitation workers and three darogas (supervisors), discuss different forms of compassion that are observed in sanitation work. The findings also talk about different work-related approaches used by Darogas and sanitation workers, which facilitate compassion in the workplace. At a macro level, we observed the use of compassion as a sensemaking approach by sanitation workers (who are effectively situated at one of the bottom-most sections of dirty work) to deal with the suffering casted by different taints involved in their work.

The study contributes to the current literature on compassion in stigmatized occupations, such as sanitation work. It posits compassion as a sensemaking approach in addition to other occupational ideologies reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing for people

involved in dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Additionally, it views sanitation work, which is prevalently considered dirty work, through the novel lens of positive organizational scholarship and the benefits of incorporating compassion in such stigmatized occupations. The findings of the study can help researchers and practitioners working with municipal corporations and local governance institutions to develop humane policies for sanitation workers who experience both organizational and social discrimination due to their involvement in dirty work.

Keywords: Workplace compassion, Sanitation work, Positive organizational scholarship, Sensemaking

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