Article

Compassion in the Time of COVID-19: Responding to Suffering in Organizations

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Abstract

This article develops a taxonomy to capture how the COVID-19 pandemic has created particular forms of employee suffering. During the pandemic, employee suffering is initiated by personal or work conditions (or both) that trigger pain and concurrently lead the employee to question their self-worth, identity, and personhood. The article introduces readers to three dimensions of suffering that helps to categorize and distinguish between different forms of suffering: the source of the suffering, the location of the suffering, and employees' perceived control over the suffering. Building on this taxonomy, we develop suggestions for ways in which managers can use compassion to alleviate employee suffering. We further discuss how organizational structures can enhance or impede compassionate responses. Overall, this article provides managers with a useful theory-based tool to facilitate appropriate responses to employee suffering during the pandemic.

Keywords

Compassion, alleviating suffering, management strategies, COVID-19, threat to self, identity, taxonomy

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the boundaries between work and home have become blurrier. For many employees, working from home is the norm. As a consequence, work-to-family and family-to-work conflict are more pronounced (Allen et al., 2021;

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Wang et al., 2021). Issues such as childcare struggles, illness, isolation in "the workplace," or anxiety related to mortality salience triggered by COVID-19 are creating particular forms of suffering (Hu et al., 2020; Rigotti et al., 2021). In addition, economic conditions and work-related consequences, such as mass layoffs, business closures, increased work hours, and stress, alongside pay cuts, affect many households (Sinclair et al., 2021). In this context, an individual's suffering is even more intertwined with and exacerbated by workplace challenges. In this article, we argue that under these and similar crisis conditions (such as fires, floods, or other widespread events) workplaces need to take an active interest and stake in managing their employees' suffering. We identify compassion as a promising approach through which managers can alleviate employee suffering (Dutton et al., 2006; Kanov et al., 2004).

For managers to effectively show compassion to employees, they first need to understand suffering within their organizations. Suffering refers to the "severe or protracted distress people experience when an instance of pain or injury ... disrupts one's basic personhood" (Kanov, 2021, p. 2). Thus, suffering arises when individuals interpret a pain-triggering event as threatening to their experience of personal identity (Kahn & Steeves, 1986; Reich, 1989). The negative affect associated with suffering motivates individuals to alleviate their own suffering (Brady, 2018). Examples of suffering during the pandemic include workers questioning whether they are good employees or adequate providers for their family because they have been laid off. Similarly, parents who feel exhausted and burned out because they have to shoulder childcare and work may start questioning their identities as good parents or their love for their children. As such, suffering is not the layoff or the work–family conflict itself—both are pain triggering events—but the negative meaning individuals attach to that event as it relates to their self-identity.

Existing literature in several academic disciplines has explored how suffering can be prevented or alleviated. The medical literature, for example, suggests that suffering can be alleviated through interaction with a compassionate person during which the sufferer finds meaning and a new sense of self in the midst of suffering (Reich, 1989). In this context, compassion is defined as "the feeling that arises when witnessing another's suffering … that motivates a subsequent desire to help" (Goetz et al., 2010, p. 351). Thus, a sensitivity to suffering in others is accompanied by a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it (Gilbert, 2021). Related forms of compassion in workplaces might include changing work schedules to give healthcare workers more time to detach from work and be more available for their families or to hire a teacher who can remotely supervise employees' children to assist with their homework so that parents can focus on honoring work commitments.

In the management literature, compassion has been conceptualized as a set of interpersonal subprocesses that include noticing, empathy, assessing, and responding (Dutton et al., 2007, 2014; Kanov et al., 2004). These processes are focused and based on connecting with and caring for others (Miller, 2007). They are embedded within the context of the social architecture of an organization which may in turn facilitate or impede compassion from manifesting

(Dutton et al., 2014). This means that employees may choose avenues to alleviate their suffering that run counter to what managers believe is possible or desirable to do, especially if the organization itself is the source of some of the suffering.

The purpose of the current article is to evaluate how managers and organizations can effectively use compassion to alleviate employee suffering in times of systemic crisis, more specifically the current crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the related societal and organizational responses. To achieve this, we first develop a taxonomy of different forms of suffering by reviewing literature across different disciplines and integrate it with the burgeoning literature on the sources of suffering created by the COVID-19 pandemic. We then review and integrate literature on compassion from different disciplines to provide insights into how managers may best address the specific forms of suffering that emanate from the pandemic. Through this conceptual integration of the suffering and compassion literatures, we provide a theory-based practical management tool that can be used to alleviate suffering in the workplace for a range of different organizational and personal conditions.

Suffering and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Suffering has been defined in many ways. Common elements of definitions across various literatures are an undesired experience of pain, injury, or loss of a perceived good of some amount of intensity or duration (Pollock & Sands, 1997; VanderWeele, 2019) that a person assigns a negative meaning to. The negative meaning in turn involves a perceived loss of one's experience of integrity of personal identity, autonomy, or actual humanity (Kahn & Steeves, 1986; Rodgers & Cowles, 1997). Kanov (2021) defines suffering more simply as "the severe or protracted distress people experience when an instance of pain or injury (emotional, physical, or otherwise) disrupts one's basic personhood" (p. 2). Personhood refers to the whole self, instead of only emotions, cognitions, or physical parts of the person. Therefore, suffering is determined by how the individual interprets that pain or injury as a threat to their continued existence (Gill, 2019). For instance, some healthcare workers face stigmatization and exclusion from family members because they can potentially transmit the virus to their family. As a result, they may fear that they are not a good parent or spouse because they jeopardize their own family's health by doing their job (Arasli et al., 2020).

Suffering can emanate from a range of sources. For the purposes of the current article, we will focus on sources embedded in organizational structures and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Kanov (2021), for example, suggests that the way in which workplaces are organized can create threats to the self and, subsequently, employee suffering. In law firms, seasoned senior attorneys are tasked with more complex cases and with the pressure to quickly serve client needs during the pandemic. On the flipside, junior attorneys may fear career stagnation because they are not given challenging assignments to develop their knowledge and experience to become competent attorneys. Along similar lines, Driver (2007) suggests that when organizations undergo large-scale changes or

new initiatives, they put a strain on employees and contribute to sense of displacement, identity loss, and inadequacy because the constant need to adapt to the new work context hobbles the ability of employees to construct meaningful identities at work that create feelings of adequacy.

These workplace structures and responses are likely to cause suffering in employees because the individual feels they have no control over their environment or destiny, and thus perceives a threat to their personhood (Allard-Poesi & Hollet-Haudebert, 2017). For example, organizations may resist making changes to their performance evaluation criteria and systems despite the mounting evidence that women are most affected by the dual burden of childcare and work during the pandemic. As a consequence, female employees may fear that their standing in the organization is undermined by the organization's failure to acknowledge and participate in the amelioration of the additional strain that the pandemic and society put on their careers (Clark et al., 2020).

To better understand the nature and source of suffering in workplaces, the following section provides an overview of different forms of suffering. On the basis of a literature review drawing specifically on literature from philosophy and psychology, we propose three dimensions on which different forms of suffering can be classified and distinguished (Brady, 2018; Frank, 1992; Kauppinen, 2020). Being able to identify and distinguish different forms of suffering subsequently allows managers to better alleviate employee suffering.

Dimensions of Suffering

In our taxonomy, we propose to categorize suffering via three dimensions: the source of the suffering, the location of the suffering, and the perceived control employees have over the suffering (see Figure 1). These dimensions represent ways in which a negative affect intrudes unwantedly upon an employee's psyche while at work (Brady, 2018). The source of the suffering may originate from the employee's personal circumstance or the workplace. In their personal life, workers may, for example, worry for their children's well-being due to forced school closures (Ghosh et al., 2020), experience abuse by their spouse/partner during lockdowns (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2020), or feel isolated during lockdowns (Foa et al., 2020). In a workplace, employees may experience burnout or stress from working long hours or taking care of COVID patients (Chen et al., 2020),

Source	Location	Control
• Personal • Work	• Physical • Mental	• Preventable • Inevitable

Figure 1. Three Dimensions of Organizational Suffering

Source: The authors.

"technostress" from a lack of preparation to use technology to work from home (Vaziri et al., 2020), or being forced to attend work in precarious, low-wage, and low-skill occupations, which feature a higher representation of women and minorities (Kramer & Kramer, 2020).

Although most research has focused on work-to-family or family-to-work conflict, the pandemic draws to our attention that a clear separation between work and personal life no longer exists. Nurses who deal with COVID patients come home from work and physically isolate themselves intentionally from their families, worried they will get family members sick and cause their children anxiety (Hofmeyer & Taylor, 2021). Although these healthcare workers are at home, they cannot completely leave their work context behind. For nonmedical workers, restrictions on movement and leaving home for work reduce the physical boundaries between work and home (Shockley et al., 2021). Because work and home lives no longer potentially exist in separate domains, the COVID context creates a situation where decisions regarding both spouses' work arrangements and home lives are disrupted (Der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020; Etheridge et al., 2020; Hupkau & Petrongolo, 2020; Shockley et al., 2021). For example, home issues such as the immediacy of children's emotional and physical needs interrupt both parents' workdays. To capture the conjoint sources of suffering during the COVID-19 pandemic, our taxonomy recognizes that the source of organizational suffering can originate in employees' personal circumstances or workplace conditions or both.

The second dimension to categorize organizational suffering concerns the difference between physical and mental suffering. Physical suffering is typically associated with the experience of bodily pain (Brady, 2018; Kahn & Steeves, 1986; VanderWeele, 2019). Kauppinen (2020) argues that physical pain becomes suffering (sensory suffering) when the pain has meaning for us. An employee may become sick from exhaustion, working long hours to finish a project to ensure that it is completed to a high standard. However, this physical pain may become suffering if the supervisor were to blame the employee for their own illness, explaining that the extra effort is unnecessary and pointing out that other employees work fewer hours and are still able to adequately complete their tasks. Although some of the current Covid-related literatures study employees' physical pain, they do not necessarily explore physical suffering. Physical pain includes insomnia (da Silva & Neto, 2020), fatigue because of longer working hours and/or owing to staff shortages (da Silva & Neto, 2020; Turale et al., 2020), healthcare workers being assaulted by family members who are distressed about their sick loved ones (Turale et al., 2020), or falling ill to COVID-19 (Culbertson, 2020). When employees feel ostracized or ashamed for contracting COVID-19, for example, or when employees are reprimanded for not being able to work to their fullest capacity owing to their stress-related exhaustion, then the physical pain turns into physical suffering.

Mental suffering is comprised of negative emotional (i.e., fear, shame, and anxiety) and nonemotional states (i.e., boredom, loneliness, and loss of meaning) that are not necessarily tied to physical suffering, but to a person's thoughts about the world and their place in it (Brady, 2018). A mental state such as shame is not

necessarily suffering. It becomes suffering when it is associated with a negative affect, and the individual feels a strong desire to change it because it threatens their sense of self (Kauppinen, 2020). For instance, shame becomes suffering when an older employee is laid off and cannot find a job after multiple failed attempts, leading to their belief that they are unemployable because of their age. Boredom becomes suffering when a less experienced employee believes that he/she is not good enough to be given challenging work. Much of the literature on employee suffering, as it relates to the pandemic, focuses on the experience of mental suffering such as anxiety, fear of death, post-traumatic stress, depression, suicidal tendency, compassion fatigue, burnout, or a sense of isolation due to remote work (Almater et al., 2020; Arasli et al., 2020; Blekas et al., 2020; Hafermalz & Riemer, 2020; Mamun et al., 2020; Ruiz-Fernández et al., 2020; Shahrour & Dardas, 2020; Turale et al., 2020). Despite the fact that many of the cited studies identify threats to the self as associated with mental suffering, they do not explore the relationship between suffering and threat to the self in much depth. For instance, Blekas et al. (2020) explore the psychological impact to healthcare workers assessing the role of PTSD but do not explain how perceived loss of control over stressors is associated with a threat to the self. An exception is Hafermalz and Riemer (2020), who suggest four types of technology-mediated team communication that create a shared professional identity to combat the feeling of lack of belongingness in remote workers.

The third dimension to categorize organizational suffering relates to control, that is, whether the triggering event is perceived as inevitable or preventable (Driver, 2007; Kanov, 2021; Kauppinen, 2020). Suffering involves a sense of lack of control over an unwanted situation, and a feeling that things "could have been otherwise" (Frank, 1992, p. 476; Kauppinen, 2020). This sense of inevitability speaks to a sense of autonomy loss that contributes to suffering (Kanov, 2021; Reich, 1989; Rodgers & Cowles, 1997). For example, healthcare workers caring for a large number of COVID patients and not being able to save them may create a traumatic experience that makes healthcare workers question their competence or the value of their work. School closures and office closures forcing employees to work from home and care for their children may strain the relationship between parents as well as between parents and their children, potentially causing individuals to question the cohesion of their family.

To regain a sense of autonomy in the face of inevitable suffering, the individual needs to find new meaning in the suffering (Reich, 1987). However, in organizations employees are often expected to accept the meaning communicated by the organizational authority rather than allowing space for employees to create their own meaning (Driver, 2007). Thus, organizations may position layoffs as "inevitable" during the pandemic, and employees are resigned to accept that interpretation regardless of whether they personally agree with it. Employees then suffer because they are displeased with the situation and their lack of control over it (Kauppinen, 2020).

On the other hand, how employees react to preventable suffering may depend on the source of the triggering event. If they perceive the source to be personal, it is likely that they will look for a way to alleviate the suffering. If employees

Table 1. Examples of COVID-related Suffering

Examples of Suffering	Threats to Self	Source	Location	Control
Children forced to attend school remotely. Parents need to provide childcare but also need to work.	I'm not a good parent	Personal	Mental	Inevitable
Loss of productivity having to balance duties	I'm not a good employee			
Mass layoffs or wage cuts in response to companies struggling to make money	I'm not a good provider for my family	Work	Mental	Inevitable
Laid off older employee unable to find another job	I'm no longer useful			
Remote workers feeling isolated from the workplace and other coworkers	I don't matter to my team			
Senior attorneys deal with difficult client casework while junior attorneys are bored and worried their careers are stagnating	I'm not competent enough; my career is over			
Healthcare workers putting in long hours with heavy workload; not seeing family much or worried they will get family sick	I'm not a good family member	Work	Physical	Preventable
Lack of PPE and safety protocols to protect employees at work	I'm not important to this organization			
Becoming exhausted and sick from working long hours to ensure a project is completed with quality, and then told the effort is excessive and unnecessary	What I do is never good enough			
Remote workers subjected to increased daily monitoring by their supervisors	I'm not a trustworthy employee	Work	Mental	Preventable

Source: The authors.

perceive the suffering to emanate from the organization, then they may question the organization's role in creating or perpetuating their suffering. Employees may expect the employer to put processes and policies in place to facilitate employees working from home (e.g., through providing home office equipment, contributing to child minding, providing special caregiving leave arrangements), to create a safety plan before allowing workers back into the office, or to provide personal protective equipment to workers to minimize their chance of getting sick from the virus (Ammar et al., 2020; Culbertson, 2020; Lázaro-Pérez et al., 2020). When the organization does not contribute to alleviating trigger events or perceived pain, then employees may question their value to the organization (resulting in suffering), and subsequently may reduce their job engagement and organizational commitment and lead to withdraw from work (Yuan et al., 2021).

Table 1 incorporates the three dimensions of suffering into a taxonomy and provides concrete examples from the COVID-19 pandemic to highlight the relationship between different combinations of the dimensions of suffering and threat to the self. This taxonomy provides a way of understanding organizational suffering and can assist managers in their assessment of an employee's pain and suffering. Subsequently, this deeper understanding can help organizational leaders to generate more effective responses to suffering. In the following section, we introduce compassion as a specific response that holds promise to alleviate different forms of suffering.

Employing Compassion to Alleviate COVID-19-related Suffering

Compassion

When employees infer that their feelings and the challenges they face are not acknowledged by their organization or that they are not in control of their work life, they disengage from their workplace and ruminate on their suffering (Frost, 2004). Organizations subsequently lose out when employees withdraw their loyalty and commitment. For managers to actively manage employee suffering, they need to understand employee suffering from the employee's point of view. Compassion allows managers to develop this understanding and a considerate response to the suffering.

Organizational compassion research has found a range of benefits to employees, including conveying a sense of feeling valued and worthy, facilitating positive meanings about their coworkers and organization, reducing anxiety, increasing the ability to cope with adversity, and creating a sense of belonging (Dutton et al., 2014, 2006; Lilius et al., 2008). Moreover, caring among employees creates interpersonal resources that help employees cope with and potentially reverse the negative effects of emotional exhaustion (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014). In medical settings, compassion has been shown to buffer against strain, lower stress, reduce fears, prevent PTSD, and create perceptions of professional competence (Trzeciak & Mazzarelli, 2019; Vogus & McClelland, 2020).

We describe the subprocesses involved in a compassionate response to suffering next, which include noticing, empathy, assessing, and responding (Dutton et al., 2007, 2014; Kanov et al., 2004; Simpson et al., 2020). We further propose how managers can employ these subprocesses to help employees navigate through their suffering (Kanov et al., 2004; Reich, 1987).

Compassion Subprocesses

The first step in a compassionate response is noticing the suffering. Using the proposed taxonomy in this article, managers can pinpoint the source, location, and sense of control of employee suffering to better understand how a triggering event or work condition creates a threat to the employee's sense of personhood. Noticing involves becoming aware of what is going on and attending to the other person's suffering (Kanov et al., 2004). To be more fully aware, managers need to take the time to be present with the employee and pay attention to employee cues in order to actively listen (Atkins & Parker, 2012). Moreover, managers need to be able to separate their own thoughts and feelings concerning the situation to be more present and observant of the employee's suffering.

Cues to notice could take different forms. For example, an employee may not be able to attend a scheduled virtual work meeting, citing a personal reason such as needing to homeschool children. An employee may seem uncharacteristically withdrawn, not talking much during work meetings amid rumors of impending layoffs. Or an employee may appear listless and irritable when asked to come in and work another long shift. Cues to mental suffering, in particular, may be ambiguous and less prominent, so managers need to use their intuition and active listening skills, and get the help of other organizational employees and leaders to surface potential employee suffering (Worline & Dutton, 2017b).

After noticing potential cues of suffering, managers need to demonstrate empathy with the employee through perspective taking, that is, by either feeling or imagining the other's suffering (Miller, 2007). A manager's empathy and ability to cultivate feelings of similarity with the employee lays the groundwork for compassion (Vogus & McClelland, 2020). Through empathic concern, managers have an opportunity to understand how the employee interprets their suffering as preventable or inevitable (Kanov et al., 2004). Empathic concern is also critical because it provides the manager with motivation to give relief to what the employee suffers from (Dutton et al., 2014). For example, an employee may believe they are a failure due to their inability to meet a project's fixed deadline because family matters keep interrupting them at home, when in reality the manager can recruit other employees on the team to help get the work done on time. It is important to note that empathy should include a caring motive; otherwise, the manager can easily use empathy for manipulative and selfish reasons (Gilbert, 2021).

Along with empathizing with employees, managers assess the employee's suffering through their own sensemaking (Dutton et al., 2014). Before deciding whether to respond to suffering with compassion, managers may contemplate how

relevant the employee's suffering is to them, whether the employee deserves compassion, and if they have the personal resources to respond appropriately to the employee's suffering (Araújo et al., 2019; Atkins & Parker, 2012; Goetz et al., 2010; Worline & Dutton, 2017a). Managers are less likely to show compassion if they: (a) intentionally want the employee to suffer, (b) believe the employee is responsible for his/her own suffering or the employee has poor character, or (c) want to avoid the employee because they feel incapable of coping emotionally when faced with the employee's suffering (Goetz et al., 2010). For managers to make these assessments, they need to be conscious of their own thoughts and feelings to reduce the likelihood of automatically judging the employee, and perhaps even contributing to more employee suffering (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Frost, 2004; Gilbert, 2021).

Finally, employees are not passive recipients of compassion, but active and engaged participants in how compassion unfolds (Kanov et al., 2017). Therefore, in addition to relying on their own thoughts and feelings to assess whether an employee would benefit from compassion, managers should also take into account whether the employee feels the desire to change the situation (Kauppinen, 2020). After all, during the pandemic, employees do not all suffer in the same way. Employees suffer when they encounter conflict between their own desires or needs and the reality of what an organization actually provides (Driver, 2007). For example, Worker A may prefer to work long hours because they are striving for a promotion, while Worker B suffers because the long hours take time away from being with family. A manager giving Worker B more time off from work may be seen as compassionate, whereas the same time off may actually create suffering for Worker A.

If, in fact, employees affectively construe a situation at work in a negative way, managers should determine whether employees feel they themselves need to make change (inward focused) to minimize their suffering or whether they feel that managers have the responsibility to minimize the suffering (outward focused) (Brady, 2018; Kauppinen, 2020). Wang et al. (2021) suggest that employees working from home need to proactively initiate or engage in online interactions, thus pointing to the need for inward-focused change from employees to alleviate suffering from loneliness. If outward change is needed, managers may foster quality virtual interaction within the social network, such as having daily check-in meetings for employees to interact and reduce loneliness. The distinction regarding who should initiate the change allows manager to be more targeted with their compassionate response.

Responding with Compassion

When managers respond with compassionate action, they seek to ease or eliminate another person's suffering (Kanov et al., 2004). Given the varied triggers of suffering during the pandemic, managers may choose to demonstrate compassion in different ways depending on their assessment of an employee's suffering related to the trigger event (Table 2). We now discuss some specific considerations that

Table 2. Examples of COVID-related Compassion

Example of Suffering	Threat to Self	Source	Location	Control	Compassionate Response
Children forced to attend school remotely. Need to provide childcare but also need to work. Forced to work remotely. Loss of productivity having to balance duties.	I'm not a good parent or I'm not a good employee	Personal	Mental	Inevitable	Minimize the organization's contribution to employee suffering, e.g., by using active listening to respond with compassionate silence, allowing the employee space to process the suffering and suggest ways forward
Mass layoffs or wage cuts in response to companies struggling to make money	I'm not a good provider for my family	Work	Mental	Inevitable	Minimize inevitable organizational pain being inflicted, e.g., by being attuned to an employee's situation and expressing appreciation for the employee
Healthcare workers putting in long hours with heavy workload; not seeing family much or worried they will get family sick	I'm not a good family member	Work	Physical	Preventable	Eliminate preventable organizationally inflicted pain, e.g., by adjusting the work schedule to allow more time to detach from work
Remote workers subjected to increased daily monitoring by their supervisors	I'm not a trustworthy employee	Work	Mental	Preventable	Eliminate preventable organizationally inflicted pain, e.g., by creating a joint agreement with the employee on task deadlines and requesting the employee to provide updates at agreed upon intervals

Source: The authors.

managers might want to take into account when deliberating potential responses to address suffering. In particular, we explore how manager awareness of different pain triggers that employees experience informs appropriate compassionate responses that range in increasing effort to eliminate the pain trigger(s).

Minimize the Organization's Contribution to Employee Suffering

Around the world, one of the potential triggers of suffering is school closures. In these instances, parents who need to work from home are simultaneously tasked with caring for their children. Parents with the majority of childcare responsibilities (most often remote working female employees) have been shown to experience low family cohesion, relationship harmony, and job performance (Shockley et al., 2021). Not being able to shift the balance of home childcare responsibilities to be more equally shouldered across parents may contribute to an employee's negative sense of self. Managers may perceive that there is very little they can do to alleviate this inevitable personal source of suffering.

When managers encounter the combination of personal and mental suffering that is inevitable for the employee, they should consider creating environments that allow employees to process their suffering (Vogus & McClelland, 2020). For example, responding with "compassionate silence" by offering an attentive and empathetic ear enables managers to witness the suffering and cultivate a safe space for the employee (Driver, 2007; Kelemen et al., 2018). Acknowledging the employee's sense of loss due to disruptive changes in the workplace provides emotional support that reduces the negative consequences of organizational suffering (McClelland & Vogus, 2021). By being an active listener, managers provide the environment that allows employees to initiate action on how to proceed, rather than the manager trying to solve problem for the employees (Kelemen et al., 2018). The employee may ask for more flexibility in submitting work assignments or time off to attend to family matters to accommodate their needs, which managers can grant if possible. The goal for managers whose employees grapple with inevitable suffering is not to add to the suffering the employee is already experiencing.

Minimize Inevitable Organizational Pain Being Inflicted

Businesses that engage in layoffs, reduced work hours, or furloughs to comply with government mandates regarding public health practices represent another trigger of suffering (Sinclair et al., 2021). This organizational pain trigger combined with the inevitability of businesses complying with government mandates creates fear and anxiety among employees due to the economic uncertainty caused by these organizational actions. If employees cannot change their employment status in a desired way because it is not within their power or because there are few alternative options in an economically depressed market, they may blame themselves for being an inadequate provider for their families (Kauppinen, 2020). Managers are ultimately responsible for implementing these pain-triggering organizational actions, thus they bear the burden of inflicting pain upon their employees (Frost, 2004). Managers can ameliorate this pain through the way in which they deliver organizational messages to employees to minimize potential feelings of demoralization.

Evidence suggests that increased communication with employees during the pandemic to understand employees' personal life experiences has a positive impact on the supervisor–employee relationship (Häggblom, 2020). This personal knowledge helps managers be more attuned to an employee's suffering, thus contributing to a more appropriate compassionate response (Miller, 2007). Besides signaling attunement, managers who signal inclusiveness by showing appreciation of others' contributions and empathizing with employee challenges, regardless of the employee's work status, increase psychological safety, engagement, and compassion among employees (Vogus & McClelland, 2020). Compassionate acts convey to employees that the organization still values and supports them (Lilius et al., 2008) despite difficult circumstances. These types of managerial actions ameliorate an already painful situation for employees due to their companies' response to COVID-19.

Eliminate Preventable Organizationally Inflicted Pain

Insofar as some of the pain inflicted upon employees has been inevitable during the pandemic, there are some examples of preventable organizationally inflicted pain contributing to employee suffering. For instance during the pandemic, nurses experience distress when they worry about getting their families sick because their workplace fails to provide personal protective equipment (Arasli et al., 2020). In this case, the threat to the self may arise from the feeling of being seen as a bad family member or as not being viewed as important enough by the organization to be protected from COVID-19. Another example is an employee becoming severely ill from working long hours in an attempt to meet relentless project deadlines because business has spiked during COVID-19, only to be told the amount of effort is excessive because the employee is a perfectionist. Here, the threat to the self may consist of not being good enough no matter how much effort is made. In all these examples the organization contributes to employee mental or physical suffering because the organization either fails to enact measures to support employees or blames the employee for problems the organization itself creates.

In these situations, managers need to shoulder some of the responsibility to ameliorate the situation, rather than putting the burden of finding ways to alleviate the suffering entirely on the employee. Managers need to draw on their courage to overcome uncertainty by advocating for change in the organization (Kanov et al., 2017). Compassion is an action filled with courage, wisdom, and sacrifice for people (Gilbert, 2021). As employees confront challenges stemming from the pandemic, managers and their organizations play a role in either preventing or exacerbating those challenges.

Knowing how to prevent or avoid exacerbating challenges entails developing an awareness of the different ways organizational structures can inflict pain upon employees. Dutton et al. (2006) subsume the values and routines that structure an organization under the social architecture of the organization. Characteristics of the architecture constrain or enable individual action. When leaders create or support organizational structures that foster compassion, they are able to transform compassion into a social reality (Dutton et al., 2006; Vogus & McClelland, 2020). However, without compassion underpinning this social architecture, these same structures potentially set the stage for organizational suffering.

Creating an Organizational Culture for Compassion

In the previous sections, we argued the importance of managers understanding suffering from the employee's point of view to enable a more calibrated response to organizational suffering. In this section, we highlight how organizational structures that create culture, such as values, norms, beliefs, routines/practices, and leader behaviors, either shape how compassion unfolds (Dutton et al., 2014) or serve as organizational sources of suffering during the COVID-19 pandemic. If managers are to advocate for change in their organizations to activate compassion, they need to determine what part(s) of the organizational culture might hinder compassion from manifesting or might even inflict pain.

An organization's culture conveys certain underlying values that encourage or suppress the expression of compassion (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014; Dutton et al., 2014; Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017). Shared values guide and motivate attention to prioritize addressing the suffering that befalls employees due to unfortunate circumstances (Dutton et al., 2006). In addition to values, norms shape the pattern of expected behaviors that are encouraged over time. Values and norms characterize underlying assumptions that determine whether an organization's culture allows for and supports compassion (Schein, 1990). For example, studies have found that when female faculty members experienced increased caregiving demands working from home during the pandemic, their research productivity decreased 13% compared to their male counterparts, even though total research productivity in the United States increased 35%, taking into account both genders across multiple academic disciplines (Cui et al., 2020). Employees may feel anxiety regarding how annual performance evaluations are conducted in light of how this pain trigger negatively impacts productivity (Clark et al., 2020). Whether the faculty decides to provide caregiving support or postpone performance evaluations and acknowledge the inevitability of additional caregiving demands reflects the values and norms of the organization (Dutton et al., 2006).

On the other hand, shared beliefs determine whether organizational members believe that the organization truly supports compassion (Dutton et al., 2014). When members share stories of suffering or responses to suffering, they create shared perceptions that act as a primer for employee sensemaking (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). An example during the pandemic includes nurses posting stories on Instagram about their work-related source of suffering—such as fears of going to work because they do not feel safe (Arasli et al., 2020). Another example are women sharing stories of shame and guilt (mental suffering) in their WhatsApp chat groups relating to intensified caregiver work, whereas their organizations did nothing to prevent suffering by lowering the workload or offering practical assistance (van Eck & Jammaers, 2020). Through these shared stories, employees may come to believe that the organization does not care about them. As a result, they may refrain from communicating their suffering to their leaders, which in turn does not give the leaders an opportunity to alleviate that suffering with compassion. This rumination over unhealed suffering subsequently drains employee energy and diverts attention away from work issues (Frost, 2004).

Beyond values, norms, and beliefs, routines and practices also signal whether an organization acts compassionately. Routines are "recurring patterns of behavior

of multiple organizational members involved in performing organizational tasks" (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002, p. 311). Routines facilitate shared understandings and social alliances among individuals, inform what patterns of behavior individuals are expected to conform to, and signal whether those routines allow any modifications to enhance compassion (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002). Routines can be detrimental, for example, when healthcare professionals are regularly scheduled for long work shifts during the pandemic (work source of suffering). Without giving these workers time off to detach from work and attend to personal demands at home (personal source of suffering), these long hours and heavy workload contribute to their mental suffering (Britt et al., 2021). Conversely, daily practices shape relationship quality and facilitate exchange of personal information (Lilius et al., 2011). During the pandemic, managers implementing daily practices of increased control and monitoring of their remote workers (work source of suffering) tend to undermine employee well-being (van Eck & Jammaers, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Thus, although routines and practices may appear to foster and maintain business as usual, they have the potential to contribute to organizational suffering.

Managers play an important role in shaping the culture of compassion through their behaviors and their enactment of organizational practices (Araújo et al., 2019; Simpson et al., 2013; Vogus et al., 2021; Worline & Dutton, 2017b). This role is particularly important during times of distress such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when people turn to leaders to manage their frustrations and anxiety (Worline & Dutton, 2017b). One way leaders proactively shape culture is through their communications with employees (Sutcliffe, 2001). Whether managers clearly and frequently communicate with employees impacts employee uncertainty during a pandemic situation (work source of suffering), which can affect employee stress and the manager–employee relationship (Häggblom, 2020; Howe et al., 2020). Engaging in an open and honest dialogue with employees influences whether they interpret compassion as the norm. Moreover, managers shape a compassionate culture when they implement practices that reinforce compassion as a core value (Vogus et al., 2021). For example, when employees are inevitably forced to work from home, whether managers offer some type of financial assistance through their organization's policies demonstrates their ability to symbolically acknowledge the hardships during the transition to a home office setup (Howe et al., 2020). If leaders do not acknowledge the humanity of suffering employees, their lack of other-oriented focus ultimately inhibits organizational compassion (Worline & Dutton, 2017b).

Discussion

In this article, we offer a taxonomy to unpack organizational suffering along three dimensions: source, location, and control. This taxonomy integrates literature from management, psychology, medicine, nursing, and philosophy, and prioritizes the meaning employees associate with pain events. Using this taxonomy, we further provide appropriate compassionate responses for managers who want to

alleviate employee suffering in their organizations. Appropriate compassionate responses can range from "compassionate silence," for example, when an employee is faced with an inevitable personal suffering that the manager cannot help to alleviate, to taking responsibility for initiating organizational change to eliminate preventable organizational suffering.

Although we suggest certain strategies to respond compassionately in accordance with certain forms of suffering, we recognize the influence of the context within which managers operate. If managers are under high time pressure because they are expected to perform above all else (Banker & Bhal, 2018; Kanov et al., 2017), they may not intentionally devote attentional resources to noticing cues of suffering in their employees (Atkins & Parker, 2012). We also acknowledge that managers need to show compassion for themselves as well. Self-compassion is an effective way for managers to cope with how they are handling the challenging situations during the pandemic because it means treating themselves with care and kindness like a good friend would (Neff, 2011). This is relevant because they are in a position to inflict pain on employees. When managers embrace their own suffering, rather than ignoring it, they are better able to validate their difficult feelings and feel less distressed by the pandemic (Waters et al., 2021). If managers are able to care for themselves using self-compassion during COVID-19, they will be in a better position to effectively deal with the organizational suffering their employees face.

Implications from this work may further extend to literature related to crisis management. For example, crises such as floods (Simpson et al., 2013), bushfires (Shepherd & Williams, 2014), wars (De Rond & Lok, 2016), and other manmade or natural disasters (Mao et al., 2018) that are associated with great suffering can be understood through explicating how sources of work and/or personal suffering, mental and/or physical location, and perceptions of control contribute to employee suffering. The taxonomy we propose in this article can be used to understand the threat to the self that these crises pose to the individual to generate appropriate compassionate responses in those contexts. For instance, Mao et al. (2018) state that medical personnel may engage in disaster rescue tasks without adequate equipment, training, or role clarity when they are put into danger danger zones. This situation gives rise to physical and mental suffering. Thus, the threat to the self stems not from inevitable suffering when confronting disasters, but from the workplace not preventing this suffering through adequate training and provision of resources. The appropriate compassionate response is eliminating preventable sources of organizationally inflicted pain, not just providing mental support to rescue workers in the wake of the disaster.

As the pandemic starts to subside with the advent of vaccines and people developing natural immunity to the virus, the workplace will shift again to adjust to another new normal. Employees who got used to working from home may be told to physically go back into the office, even though they may now prefer to work from home. As case numbers drop, mask mandates by governments may be rescinded, putting employees at risk when interacting with customers as viral mutations spread throughout the population. To be effective leaders, managers need to stay vigilant in their understanding of their employees' suffering as the

situation continually evolves. As the workplace situation changes, so will the type of suffering that will potentially manifest for employees as it relates to the pandemic. By eliciting information from their employees to identify dimensions of organizational suffering, managers will be in a better position to provide compassion that effectively alleviates the suffering that the employee experiences. When employees feel that managers truly care about them, they will stay engaged and have more positive work experiences.

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