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This Is Going to Hurt: Compassionate Research Methods

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Abstract

As compassion has become established in the organizational literature as an important area of study, calls for increased compassion in our own work and research have increased. Compassion can take many forms in academic work, but in this article we propose a framework for compassionate research methods. Not only driven by caring for others and a desire for improving their lot, compassionate research methods actually immerse the researcher in compassionate work. We propose that compassionate research methods include three important elements: ethnography, aesthetics, and emotionality. Together, these provide opportunities for emergent theoretical experimentation that can lead to both the alleviation of suffering in the immediate research context and new theoretical insights. To show the possibilities of this method, we use empirical data from a unique setting—the first U.S. permanent death penalty defense team.

Keywords

qualitative research, critical theory, ethnography

The field of organization and management studies is currently grappling with serious concerns about our scholarship (Tsui, 2013; Walsh, 2011). At times, it seems business schools have done more to harm than help society (Ghoshal, 2005; MacKenzie, 2006; Tsui, 2013). Our increasingly managerialist perspective seems to go hand in hand with a dispassionate approach to scholarship and a focus on narrowly defined metrics of effectiveness and efficiency. As our scholarship has pursued these narrow economic objectives over the public good and society, we have become a less happy and healthy profession (Tsui, 2013). Journal lists and rankings have stolen the sacredness of scholarship (Tsui, 2013; Walsh, 2011). It appears we could not care less about making a contribution to society and exist to publish for the sake of having been published.

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> When our work fails to matter, others rightfully question our legitimacy. When we are judged only on how many papers we publish in certain journals and not on whether our research is important to society, we lose meaning in our work. With these problems, how can we feel good about ourselves? When we are under stress, how can we feel compassion? (Tsui, 2013, p. 176)

What is clear from the voices advocating a more caring research purpose is a desire that our research transcend field and topic and embrace a broad agenda of making the world a better place and ours a better profession.

As concerns about our impact have risen, so have calls for greater caring and compassion in our work as a remedy. Compassion has become a vibrant perspective in organizational research, with seminal articles establishing its importance to well-being in organizations (cf. Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Frost, 1999) and space devoted to developing compassion as a focus of theory and research in our major journals (e.g., a special issue of the *Academy of Management Review* in 2012). Engaging with compassion in their work also has become an important part of the research life of many scholars (Dutton & Workman, 2011). Compassionate research can reorient our research to the larger issues in organization and society and in so doing address the problem of growing professional ennui.

There is another important possibility that can come from compassionate research—as a remedy to the dearth of new theory in organization studies (Suddaby, Hardy, & Huy, 2011). We have some history in this regard. Some of the most important theoretical insights that we have about the process of death and dying arose from the research of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1965). Strauss's career-long commitment to medical care for the poor and health care for all drove much of his research agenda, and observations in his early career about the very challenging and problematic handling of death and the dying in hospitals were the impetus for his research (Horowitz, 2003, p. 286). The research was driven by compassion and conducted using many of the methods the authors later described in their landmark work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The impact of their work was considerable. Theory and practice related to treatment of the dying by the medical community and social workers became informed by the study's new theories, sociological theory was enriched by the introduction of new constructs such as "awareness context," and social science was forever transformed by their methodological innovations.

These are the kinds of practical and theoretical outcomes we believe are possible from infusing compassion into our research, but we need a clearer understanding of what a compassionate research lens might be. To realize the social, personal, professional, and theoretical possibilities of compassion in our work, our aim here is to propose a compassionate research lens and methodology and to explore how our scholarship might become more compassionate. We root our approach in the concept of compassion, but distinguish our approach from the study of compassion in organizations and even research driven by compassion. We offer, instead, a new compassionate research methodology. In building a compassionate methodology, we are informed by ethnography, aesthetics, and emotionalism. The combination of these three research strategies is the vehicle through which compassionate research methodology may both alleviate suffering and generate new theory.

To help illustrate compassionate research methods, we relied on experience from an ongoing research context. Hans Hansen is conducting an intensive ethnographic field study of a death penalty defense team (Hansen, 2011, 2012). Over 6 years ago, he helped design and build the country's first permanent death penalty team, using narrative methods to do so. The team's mission is to save the lives of those facing the death penalty in Texas. The most common positive outcome for the team and their defendants is a plea agreement to a sentence of life without parole instead of a death sentence being sought by the state. Through participant observation, Hans became a member of that team, with access to highly sensitive and confidential work products and interactions. There is immense suffering in this setting, and the stakes truly are life and death. Though his inquiry is not

focused on suffering and compassion alone, the field notes from the project reveal it to be a setting rife with suffering and a call to compassion, experienced as a tormenting sense of obligation to alleviate suffering through theoretical invention. Our intent is to take advantage of those data to ground our assertions and illustrate how compassionate research methods might be conceived and conducted.

Because we believe that compassionate research methods provide a new way of seeing, hearing, and feeling within a context, they can engender new perspectives in organizational studies. Just as important, compassionate research methods provide a new way of writing our research; a way of clearing the fog of dispassionate language so that we can better communicate the humanity of those we study as well as our own. In doing so, compassionate research methods may legitimize the pursuit of social objectives as much as economic ones. Our work can become meaningful again, and we can feel as useful as we do productive.

In the following sections we propose that compassionate research methods are a synthesis of ethnography, aesthetics, and emotionality, rooted in compassion. We begin with a brief discussion of compassion in organization studies, and then describe the core elements of compassionate research methods, contrasting them with the more dispassionate approach to research. We show what a compassionate research methodology looks like in practice by using the death penalty research experience. Through it, we show the practical power as well as the generative theoretical possibilities of compassionate research.

Building a Compassionate Lens

Compassion is "an active orientation toward the well-being of others who are in pain" (Tsui, 2013, p. 168). The Latin root *passio* means "to suffer," and the prefix *com* means "to suffer together" (Lilius, Kanov, Dutton, Worline, & Maitlis, 2011). Compassion is a multidimensional process (Lilius et al., 2008) that involves powerful emotions: "noticing another person's suffering, empathically feeling that person's pain, and acting in a manner intended to ease the suffering." Compassion hurts because cosuffering evokes anguish (Lilius et al., 2008) that comes from "imagining the feelings of the person in pain" (Dutton et al., 2006, p. 72), such that feeling empathy is "taking the attitude" of the other (Mead, 1962, p. 366). More recently, Dutton, Workman, and Hardin (2014) further refined the model of the compassion process by adding sensemaking. Understanding and interpretation of what is noticed and felt, they argue, is essential for action. Sensemaking is a key part of the interpretive process through which we direct feelings about the complexities of suffering to appropriate action; in sensemaking, we take the ongoing experience of suffering to a "situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409).

Research "About" Compassion

Compassion has become a focus of research in organization studies because, as Frost (1999) notes, suffering is a pervasive part of the human condition, and is often caused by the very organizations (and, we would add, institutions) we study and hope to inform (Frost, 1999). Following from this assertion, Frost (2003) argues we are obligated as academics to study suffering. Much of the research on compassion in organization studies is rooted in positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003) and clearly focuses on the study of compassion in organizations—to uncover its nature as well as the experience of its absence.

For example, Margolis and Molinsky (2008) interviewed professionals involved in performing duties characterized as "necessary evils," such as managers conducting layoffs or addiction counselors who must practice tough love. Although previous research had focused on how people who

must inflict harm as part of their work psychologically disengage from these difficult interactions, Margolis and Molinsky found that, although these professionals often managed the "unsettling experience" of doing harm by disengaging and distancing themselves psychologically and cognitively from the pain they may be inflicting, many also "engaged with their own emotions, with the target's experience and the negative impact the task has on the target, and with the performer's own humanity" (Margolis & Molinsky, 2008, p. 865). They empathized.

In another study on compassion surrounding a single incident, Dutton et al. (2006) used a qualitative case study to examine "compassionate organizing," in which an organization responded to alleviate the suffering of organization members in crisis. They deliberately explored the feelings those in the organization experienced with regard to the event, their own response to it, and the organization's response. From this, the researchers were able to describe the process through which the scale, scope, speed, and customization of the organization's responses developed. In another study aimed at capturing the emotional tone of experiences of compassion at work, Lilius et al. (2008) found that "when compassion is not extended in times of difficulty, the impact can be devastating" (p. 209).

These studies and others have given us a great deal of insight into the experiences of compassion (and its absence). But the compassionate research lens that we propose here is not the same as research *on* or *about* compassion. Much of this research has taken the path of more traditional inquiry, inspired, perhaps, by compassion and a desire to see it become a focus of organizational life, but somewhat dispassionate and objective in its method. It has been very useful in building an understanding of compassion at work, but another value of this research and its discoveries may be in foreshadowing the potential power of compassion in *our* work as scholars. The research has shown us that just as compassion violates the objective and dispassionate rules of organizational life, it must violate the objective and dispassionate rules of research.

The research also shows how the experience of compassion changes people. Perspectives change. Compassion causes people to look at work and other people in new ways. Compassion "goes beyond an individual feeling of empathy and is expressed through action" (Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000, p. 27). With a compassionate research methodology, the researcher feels with the person in pain, shows kindness and understanding, and gives comfort. Such a method requires a less dispassionate and more subjective ontology.

We must suffer. To be compassionate, it is not enough to recognize the other's pain, empathize with the other, and act to alleviate the pain; we must enable the person to feel "cared for, joined, seen, felt, known, and not alone" (Frost et al., 2000, p. 27). This alternative perspective can have profound effects on theory by exposing us to more and richer experience, even as we work to relieve pain in the immediate context. Feeling what it is like—empathizing—sensitizes us to find the cause of the pain that may be embedded in broader phenomena, to see the circumstances and context. To alleviate pain we must also look to the cause so that it may not occur again. This requires sensemaking—the development of plausible explanations for, or theories of, what is occurring and why (Weick, 1995). These explanations are the basis for both local action and broader theorizing.

In the following section we describe the three core elements of a compassionate research method. We contrast compassionate research methods with objective, arm's-length research strategies. Finally, we show how the core elements can both alleviate pain in the immediate context and generate new theory through emergent and opportunistic theoretical experimentation.

Compassionate Research Methods

The aim to make the world a better place is not strictly a compassionate research agenda. You could argue that almost anyone who studies organizations ultimately hopes that research improves work or life in organizations. Rather, we wish to explore the possibilities of embracing compassion in our

research by forgoing claims to objectivity and engaging ourselves in compassionate work. A compassionate research methodology has a dual purpose that distinguishes it from simple compassionate work (work that has as its primary purpose the direct alleviation of pain) and research methods aimed at generating new theoretical insights. The compassionate research methodology we propose involves both as purposes of research, but incorporates the defining components of compassion—witnessing the suffering of others, feeling their pain with them, making sense of it, and seeking to alleviate their suffering. The dual purposes of alleviating suffering in the immediate context and informing theory is achieved *through infusing compassion into the research process itself*, and involves three essential elements: ethnography, aesthetic inquiry, and emotionalism.

The witness to suffering must be experienced as personal, requiring ethnographic methods. Hearing and creating the personal stories from the research experience are a "way to reawaken ethical and aesthetic sensitivities" that are often scrubbed from traditional science (Apple, 1996, p. xiii). The ethnographic method, in other words, creates the conditions in which pain can be witnessed and understood within the conditions that caused it. Ethnographic methods create the conditions in which the aesthetic and emotional experience of witnessing suffering can be used for theoretical experimentation—the pragmatic sensemaking that enables the researcher to anticipate or hypothesize what will happen through action options that might alleviate the suffering and lead to theoretical insights (Xenakis & Arnellos, 2015).

In compassionate research, aesthetics explores the sensory experience of pain. An aesthetic experience is one that distinguishes itself from the stream of everyday experience as distinctive (Shusterman, 2011). This connects to the notion that compassion does not simply recognize suffering, but involves "feeling with" the persons suffering. Aesthetic experience allows us to feel "what it is like," and to consider the "qualitative feel of human experience" (Irvin, 2010, p. 371). Unless we are able to "feel with" those in pain, the feeling of empathy that is key to compassion is missing.

Emotions are part of the physical experience of "what it is like" (James, 1884) and are our call to action. The response of fear, anger, joy, tenderness, sorrow, or revulsion gives rise to our desire for redress or palliation. Emotionalism in the research process, as a result, is critical to the motivation to alleviate suffering in the immediate context and to move us to broader theoretical resolution. Emotions give meaning to the aesthetic experience; if we felt something, emotions help us understand what it means and move us to act.

It is important to recognize that emotionality is not just part of what is observed in the experience of those we study, or even just empathy. It also is the emotional experience of the researcher in response to what is observed. Empathizing with someone's pain may invoke anger or a sense of resolve. The response to the pain focuses our attention on its source and provides the impetus to understand it, make sense of it, and act on it. Contrary to the arguments of Silverman (1989), who warns against the romanticism of expressing the inner world of the artist (or researcher) rather than the subjects of research, compassionate research methods unabashedly involve researchers as subjects. Compassionate research methods are certainly descriptive, and, just as in ethnographic research, the experience of interactions and context act as a check on overprivileging of emotion. In addition, however, compassionate research methods also leverage emotions in the theorizing process. We reflexively elicit emotions, but to inform other idioms, such as the "what" of social structure in naturalism and the "how" of social structuring in ethnomethodology. It was Whiteman's (2010) emotional reaction during an ethnographic study that highlighted shortcomings of existing management theory in explaining her observations. Whiteman, Muller, and Johnson (2009) show how the analysis of emotional experiences during qualitative research can actually enrich organizational studies by offering new questions, concepts, and theories. Research that is emotionless is more objective, though limited, because it is less interesting, rich, engaging, and insightful. The aesthetic and emotional experience can take us out of our own perspective, and "render us more sensitive to

the needs of others and more capable of responding to them with effectively willed action'' (Shusterman, 2008, p. 43).

While the emotional elements of fieldwork are often overlooked (Coffey, 1999), these dimensions add to the richness of the data (Warren, 2008). Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013) stress the importance of negotiating certain ''hyphen-spaces'' that are part of the process of making choices about research design and our relationship with respondents. The four hyphen-spaces to consider are (a) insiderness–outsiderness, the extent to which the researcher is or becomes part of the group being studied; (b) sameness–difference, the extent to which the researcher is similar to the research subjects; (c) engagement–distance, the extent to which the researcher is involved (emotionally and practically) in the daily activities with participants in their setting; and (d) activism–neutrality, the extent to which the researcher is involved or intervenes in the agendas of research subjects. Applying this framework to the death penalty setting, Hans became an *insider*, who came to empathize with a group *different* from him. Hans was emotionally and actively *engaged* in their daily interactions, and was *not neutral* because he was actively trying to change the outcome of the process—to stop an execution.

The three elements of compassionate research methods—ethnography, aesthetics, and emotionalism—are chosen because of their direct connection to the defining elements of compassion—noticing pain, feeling empathy with the persons suffering, and seeking to alleviate the pain. In the research context these elements provide the researcher with important cues to finding solutions both to the focal problem and to understanding the broader context in which the problems occurred. The researcher uses the ethnographic data, aesthetic experience, and emotional data in a sensemaking process that connects the field experience to the search for plausible theories that will alleviate pain in the immediate context and to inform theory by bringing the often more tacit experiences and meanings into the theoretical realm.

This theoretical work is opportunistic and emergent. Just as in grounded theory, where researchers move back and forth between data and theory to produce theoretical insights, in compassionate research methods the researcher moves back and forth between data and the three elements of compassionate research in a sensemaking process. The process of theoretical experimentation in compassionate research methods is much like the process of disciplined imagination that Weick (1989) advocates as a means of building theory. The problem at hand stimulates a need to make sense—to create categories and order while accessing a variety of theories to find the ones that will help ease the suffering. This act of sensemaking moves toward a solution to the problem and also engages a parallel process of theorization—moving between data and theory, induction and deduction. Compassion is the check on the tendency toward paradigmatic or theoretical myopia. An openness to whatever theory will alleviate pain is essential; to limit theoretical experimentation or ''thought trials'' (Weick, 1989) to a paradigm is to risk excluding ways to alleviate suffering.

In this process of conjecture or experimentation, theory is accessed to discover strategies to alleviate pain in the immediate context and to consider whether theory itself should be problematized based on the experiences, interactions, and contexts found in the immediate experience. In any particular context, theory may be helpless to contribute or flawed in its representations, and these are opportunities for new experimentation and theorizing. Whether solving a local problem or contributing to our broader understandings, in each case a new narrative, one local and pragmatic, the other abstract and theoretical, is produced. This process is illustrated in Figure 1.

Studies Using Compassionate Research

There have been a number of studies that largely resemble the sort of compassionate research method we advocate. These demonstrate that a compassionate research methodology could (and should) be used in many fields such as sociology, cultural anthropology, feminist studies, and

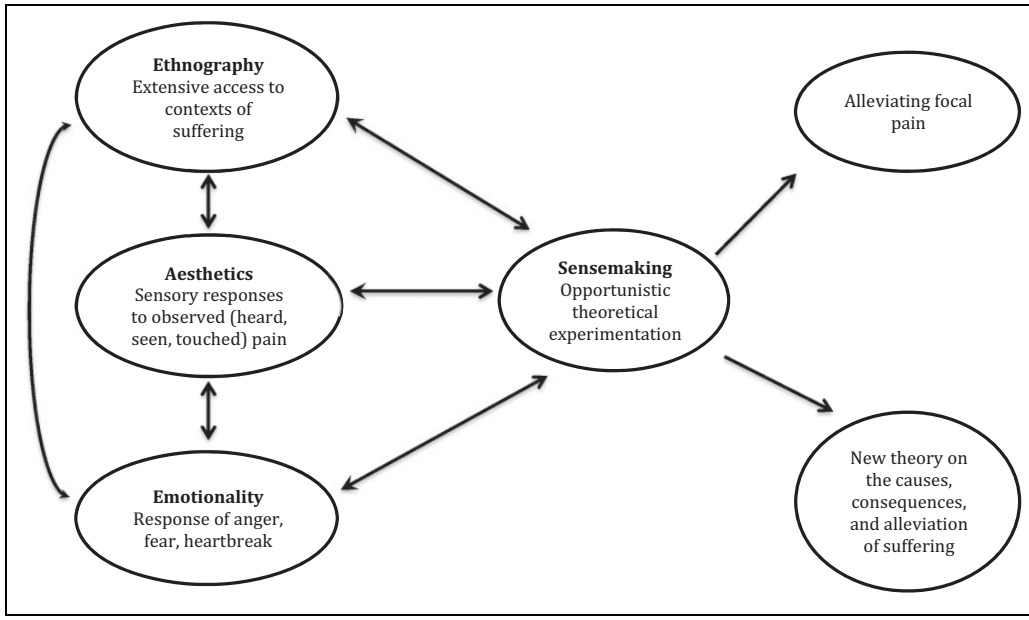

Figure 1. Compassionate research methods.

education, in addition to organizational studies. For example, sociologist Kai Erikson's (1976) book *Everything in Its Path* chronicles the devastating effects of the Buffalo Creek Flood of 1972. The disaster occurred when a coal company's impoundment dams burst, releasing a wave of black water waste, coal slurry sediment, and coarse mining refuse into the Buffalo Creek hollow, along which several mining towns were located. The wave swept away the town of Saunders completely. While the flood demolished other towns to rubble, Saunders was "scraped from the ground cleanly, as if bulldozers had done it" (Erikson, 1976, p. 28). The flood rolled through five towns; 125 people were killed and 4,000 were left homeless. "Everyone on Buffalo Creek has been damaged by the disaster . . . every man, woman, and child in the place—every one—was suffering" (Erikson, 1976, p. 136). Even years later, everyone endured their "own peculiar species of pain" (Erikson, 1976, p. 48).

Very similar to Hans's story, Erikson was contacted by a team of lawyers, in Erikson's case, looking for his recommendation on who might inquire into the social and psychological damage caused by a disaster. Erikson hesitantly agreed to make a brief visit to Buffalo Creek so that he could make an informed recommendation. "I came back from that visit so awed and depressed by what I had seen that I volunteered my own services to the firm" (Erikson, 1976, p. 10). He admits it was an emotional response, because he knew nothing about Appalachia, or coal mining, or disasters, but he encountered "people so wounded they almost constituted a different culture," and he said "the sense of being in the presence of deep and numbing pain remained an important part of the emotional climate" for the entire study (Erikson, 1976, p. 11). On his first encounter in the setting, he reported confronting fears and "had to fight off a compelling urge to drive away, to escape. I had been in the hollow for only twelve hours" (Erikson, 1976, p. 11).

Erikson worked with a legal team attempting to get compensation for victims of the flood, but also conducted a study of the disaster specifically, and social trauma in general. He was attempting to alleviate the suffering he encountered, but in doing so, he made theoretical contributions to research on social responses to disaster. He showed a strong desire to make the world better for

victims of the flood. He reported anxiety, depression, acute psychological disorders, posttraumatic neurosis, and drug abuse in subjects. The people ''have suffered in much the same way'' (Erikson, 1976), ''but the nearest expressions in everyday English would be something like confusion, despair, and hopelessness'' (Erikson, 1976, p. 157). People are without their homes, but also without emotional shelter (Erikson, 1976). They engaged in ''an anesthetization of the senses, a closing of some inner valve so that no more horror could reach to the seat of their being,'' blocking out ''screams for help so wrenching that one scarcely heard them'' (Erikson, 1976, p. 163).

The touchstones with compassionate research are found in empathy with subjects and alleviation of their suffering. He also explored the aesthetics of trauma, not only to inquire into the subjective experiences of respondents, but as devices to convey his findings, to tell us not only what it was like, but what it felt like to be there. ''We should now try to imagine what the disaster *felt* [italics original] like'' (Erikson, 1976, p. 156). This aesthetic experience of feeling the disaster connects to the emotions that help define it. Emotions are the ''audience'' to our aesthetic experience, giving it expression and focus, as well as pointing toward new theory partly grounded in that aesthetic experience.

The work's theoretical impact has been considerable. The study and understanding of the effects of trauma were forever transformed by Erikson's work. His theoretical innovation ''was to conceptualize the difference between collective and individual trauma'' (Alexander, 2003, pp. 87-88). The move from a distinctively psychoanalytic understanding of trauma to a sociological one had a profound effect on the examination of disasters as occasions in which the dissolution of social relationships was a source of pain. Furthermore, theories began to recognize the ''collectively emergent properties'' of trauma (Alexander, 2003, p. 88). As the perception that connections to community have been broken unfolds, so does the experience of trauma. It is a ''gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared'' (Erikson, 1976, p. 153). This dissolution of the collective is now understood to be a ''second trauma'' to any disaster, a phenomenon that would play into many subsequent studies of disaster, including important recent work on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (e.g., Pais & Elliott, 2008; Sharkey, 2007). No longer are disasters considered ''natural,'' but they are rather political, economic, and social.

In an example from feminist research, Jane Gilgun's (1999) research on perpetrators of violence highlights aesthetic experience, researcher emotions, and suffering as part of compassionate inquiry. Gilgun began her examination of gender and violence by using Barthes's (1974) semiotics in describing encounters with a killer. Feeling that Barthes's approach was too ''distant and cool'' (Gilgun, 1999, p. 183), she brought herself closer to the text and included her own emotional reactions in its interpretation. She was ''prepared to do a cool and distant analysis'' until she realized the ''horrors'' she would encounter in her setting.

As a result of her own emotional responses to the texts, she developed a method for dealing with emotionally challenging and deeply disturbing narrative data (Gilgun, 1999, p. 182). She found that she needed to improvise and to recognize her emotional reactions rather than guard against them, and emphasized reflexivity to understand violence from the view of the perpetrator. The adaptation led her to new understandings of how gender-role socialization connects to the commission of violent acts. Gilgun has herself described a transformation in her own understanding of the meaning of violence and sexual abuse to the perpetrator, and influenced other researchers to consider the meaning systems of perpetrators. This has become an important vehicle for understanding gender and violence as well as for the development of diagnostic tools and interventions (Hartley, 2001).

Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013) explore the emotions of doing ethnography in a challenging organizational context that exemplifies compassionate research. During ethnographic fieldwork, Karunanayake empathized with her subjects, but also wrestled with how to position herself among them. Emotional engagement can be an uncomfortable and frightening space to be in: Feelings of

Table 1. Comparing Dispassionate and Compassionate Inquiry.

Traditional Dispassionate Inquiry	Compassionate Inquiry
Objective description	Subjective and aesthetically rooted (felt meaning) intervention
Description of events/situation	Attempts to notice, empathize with, and alleviate suffering (interventionist/advocacy)
Researcher emotion is marginalized, concealed, or ignored	Emotions are central to inquiry, treated as valuable and enriching data, motivating action, and focusing attention
Researcher presumed to be unbiased or overcomes biases	Leverages biases as an interpretive resource
Guard against "going native" and becoming biased	Going native is not a concern, and you may hope to do so (providing a motivating bias)
Research is detached from context/subjects	Researcher is attached to context/subjects
Research and data driven	Data driven, but defines data more broadly, and includes emotions and more complex descriptions of context
"Collects" stories, as if they are inanimate artifacts and "takes" them to be dispassionately analyzed	Stories remain alive, rife with feeling and emotion, embodied
Data collected by an objective observer	Data experienced by a committed participant
Detached scholarship	Engaged, activist scholarship

concern, sympathy, anxiety, and even fear can lead to a sense of vulnerability, of not knowing what to do or whether to get involved (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013). Karunanayake found herself championing subject issues and questioning roles of engagement versus disengagement as a researcher. She struggled with choices between an activist and neutral approach because she confronted poverty, caste, gender inequalities, and a lack of opportunity in her research setting. Her emotionally moving experiences revealed a deeper understanding of the day-to-day issues faced by the workers in her setting. An important contribution of this work was a framework for understanding the aforementioned "hyphen-spaces" in which ethnographers work and their importance for defining a more ethical research practice.

Just as Whiteman influenced research on compassion and suffering (Dutton, Workman, & Hardin, 2014) and led to advocacy of intervention in settings that demand courage (Adler & Hansen, 2012), these studies exemplify the connection between compassionate research methods and both practical and theoretical contribution. A compassionate research methodology would dismiss questions of engagement versus disengagement and activism versus neutrality. It would be, instead, deliberately and unapologetically engaged and activist. It is also clear from these three cases that the research itself involves suffering, but that very suffering opens the researcher to empirical detail and theoretical insights not possible in dispassionate research.

Comparing Dispassionate to Compassionate Research

The dispassionate approach is rooted in positivist assumptions (cf. Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which are aligned with the functionalist paradigm in social science (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) in contrast to the interpretive or postpositivist paradigm. In dispassionate research, the ontology is objective, which views reality as "out there," separate and independent from the researcher and immune to any theorizing about it. That is, our theories do not influence or change reality; they are only accurate or inaccurate representations of it. See Table 1 for a comparison between dispassionate and compassionate research approaches.

A positivist epistemology places the researcher at "arm's length" from the phenomena under study and maintains a separation between researcher and subjects (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers are "regarded as standing apart from the world and able to experiment and theorize about it objectively and dispassionately" (Hesse, 1980, p. vii). Such analytical distance allows for the dispassionate analysis of phenomena and purportedly unbiased and objective observations and measurement. In a postpositivist epistemology there is no separation between the knower and known. The research shapes, and is shaped by, the phenomena under study. Reality is not independent, but dependent on our descriptions of it. Our research changes the way things are. There is no façade of separation between the researcher and the researched. The researcher is a subject who is taking notes.

There is an assumption that as researchers we are "unbiased experts who maintain their neutrality by remaining uninvolved and distant from respondents" (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013, p. 368). We compel researchers to maintain "a perspective outside of, apart from, the social objects of inquiry" so they can "dispassionately examine" subjects (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 43). An inability to do so means you risk "going native" (Tedlock, 2000), losing your outsider (rational) perspective and letting emotional bias taint your observations. Distance from social problems and subjects are seen as essential to produce an accurate and unbiased account (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013). While this distance should be maintained for analysis, for compassionate research it must be accompanied by "closeness" in observation and engagement with subjects and emotions, including the researcher's.

The problem is that the underlying assumptions that make up the dominant dispassionate approach preclude any possibility of compassionate engagement. "Ideals such as objectivity, neutrality, distance, control, and rationality have marginalized ideals such as empathy and closeness" (Alvesson & Karreman, 2011, p. 6). Frost (1999) argued for engagement over dispassionate detachment, noting that most researchers are trained to generate abstractions that marginalize the dignity and humanity of those we study. He admonished us about the hazards of the dispassionate approach (Frost, 1999, p. 128):

> As organizational researchers, we tend to see organizations and their members with little other than a dispassionate eye and a training that inclines us toward abstractions that do not include consideration of the dignity and humanity of those in our lens. Our hearts, our compassion, are not engaged and we end up being outside of and missing the humanity, the "aliveness" of organizational life . . . . As a result, we miss some pretty fundamental and important aspects of organizational life and functioning, and our theories and practices probably distort more than they illuminate what they purport to explain.

In marginalizing compassion, we are missing an important part of organizational life as well as important theoretical insights. We know less about organizations than we might. Our knowledge is truncated by the deliberate partitioning of our experience as feeling people. If there is suffering in our research settings, we are not only denying the humanity of those we study, we are ignoring our own humanity when we close ourselves off to compassion.

In the following section, we use the death penalty project as a vehicle for describing the distinct methods associated with compassionate research methods and show how ethnography, aesthetics and emotionalism are integrated in a sensemaking process to produce both alleviation of suffering and theoretical insights.

Doing Compassionate Research: Methods and Illustration

In this section, we outline compassionate research methods. Although presented in step-by-step fashion, it is important to understand that the research moves continuously between ethnography,

aesthetics, and emotionalism and theoretical sensemaking during the engagement. We focus on instructions for doing compassionate research because we are sensitive to the idea that a call to action is misguided if nobody knows how to begin. In describing the method, we use illustrations from the country's first permanent death penalty defense team.

The Texas Regional Public Defender for Capital Cases was created seven years ago. The office, the first of its kind, represents indigent defendants who have been charged with capital crimes and are facing the death penalty. Replacing the traditional court appointed system for death penalty defense, the office works only on death penalty cases, but all the death penalty cases, across most of Texas.

Hans joined the team at its inception. His involvement began with a cold call from the newly established group to "help with teambuilding." Initially, he agreed to help design and organize the office, but on seeing they had a chance to rewrite the way the death penalty defense operates, Hans was asked to join the team. He conducted a long-term ethnography and organized the team by creating a collective strategic narrative (Barry & Elmes, 1997) about how the team members would interact and go about their everyday tasks in defending clients against the death penalty. Represented in that narrative were the institutional forces pushing for executions and the voices of the victim's family, judges, district attorneys (DAs), and systems connected to the complex political, legal, and social process of executing a defendant. The team aimed to create and enact a new narrative—one that affected the outcomes of individual defendants as well as how the system would work in the future. The narrative intends to make different outcomes—most often a sentence of life without parole instead of death—the norm in the system. The team has been successful in resisting or circumventing the traditional narrative and institutional pressures in this process by invoking a new narrative of death penalty defense, and have lost only once out of 70 cases. These results are remarkable because when the state of Texas seeks death in a capital murder trial, they get it over 90% of the time.

The suffering in the setting is immense. The death penalty is reserved for "the worst of the worst" offenders who commit the most heinous or atrocious crimes (Sundby, 2007). A death penalty case involves suffering of the victim's family members, who are often related to the defendant. Professionals working on the case, including attorneys, mitigators, and fact investigators, all are in contact with those suffering, including the defendant, and feel the pain of loss and fear from that experience. Everyone in the office is invested in saving the lives of clients against seemingly insurmountable odds when facing an often brutal and biased justice system. Death penalty attorneys face incredible stress and experience high levels of burnout (Davis, 2008). The defendant, who has caused much suffering and done much damage, is usually damaged and suffering as well. We do not make qualifications on who deserves to have suffering alleviated. If there is suffering, compassion demands we do something about it, without qualifying whether the sufferers are deserving of relief.

The new narrative that guides the team seeks to save a client's life and alleviate some of their suffering, but the alleviation of suffering in the *entire* setting often comes as part of saving a client's life. As the team proceeded through its work, compassion for the DAs and others in the state's death penalty apparatus became part of the team's narrative: we came to see these actors as trapped or anchored, perhaps, in a system that they did not design, and they often are under enormous pressure. To give an example of how our new narrative evolved, defense teams typically view the DA as a stark adversary, but Hans's team often worked with the DA to find ways to relieve tremendous institutional or political pressures that were pushing him or her to seek the death penalty, offering alternative narratives whose enactment would result in a plea bargain of life without parole. One common routine the team enacted was to provide the DA with an advance draft of a mitigation packet, usually prepared for the sentencing phase of a capital trial. This packet provided a narrative of the defendant's life, and cued the DA to legal reasons the defendant may one day be ruled ineligible for the death penalty (e.g., a history of mental disability) as well as social reasons why

a jury may be hesitant to deliver a death verdict (e.g., a positive record of military service). This relieved pressure to kill and provided the DA with an ''out'' or rationale for offering a plea. Recognizing the pervasiveness of pain in this setting, attending to others—not just the client—opened the team's work to possibilities that it might not have otherwise found. With the dual purpose of saving a life and changing the norms of the system, more complex narratives as theories of action became possible. This also serves as an example of how theoretical experimentation, deciding to apply an institutional theory lens, shifted focus to alleviate suffering not just of the defendant, but all parties in the system. Understanding that everyone was subject to the institutional order allowed the team to rethink traditional, adversarial positions that simply reified the order through practices of secrecy and gaming.

In the following, we use the traditional sequence of research design and describe how the compassionate lens can inform research questions, choice of settings, data collection and analysis, theorizing, and writing.

Compassionate Research Questions

Compassionate research questions, whatever the setting or topic, seek to understand or describe suffering, and find ways to alleviate it in the focal situation, but also stop suffering more generally by capturing the complexities of the context and its processes. This type of research question is a sensitizing one that opens the inquiry to empathy and emotional response. Exploring how suffering can be alleviated makes a contribution to research because it inherently theorizes solutions. Compassionate research may begin with a grievance or desire to right some societal wrong (Van Maanen, 2010), but also to alleviate more immediate pain.

In the death penalty research context, traditional research may have asked: As an institution, what pressures created the death penalty, how has it changed over time, and what pressures does it bring to bear on actors operating within its domain? It might ask: Are there some groups more harmed by it more than others? Or, what types of crimes or types of victims most likely lead to calls for the death penalty? The compassionate question might be: How do you stop *this* execution and others? Action to alleviate pain is the initial motive, but that action also implicates the interpersonal, legal, political, historical, and institutional details of the broader context. Although the traditional research questions may have in their purpose a call to notice injustice, compassionate research focuses on taking action to alleviate pain and correct the injustice. In the death penalty team setting, Hans sought to alleviate suffering by using narrative theory.

All the components of compassion were present, but perhaps not in the order often theorized in the process model Dutton et al. (2014) described. Hans joined the defense team and very soon after came to share their aim of saving lives. Once the decision was made to attempt to alleviate that suffering, the researcher moved on to empathizing with clients facing the death penalty. So instead of noticing suffering, empathizing, and attempting to alleviate suffering, as has happened in some of the research described earlier in the article, compassion was practiced by noticing suffering, making a decision to alleviate that suffering, and then trying to empathize to achieve that aim. Consistent with our model that shows movement between ethnography, aesthetics, and emotionalism, a compassionate research question may start with any of these, and implicate the others in the process of research.

Compassionate Research Settings

Compassionate research settings are those where human suffering occurs. Corresponding with the concept of compassion, the suffering must be noticed and the researcher must be afforded enough access and opportunity to empathize with those suffering. As Frost (1999) notes, suffering permeates

organizations and social life, and a glib description of a compassionate research setting might be ''anywhere,'' but a setting must afford a researcher access to the lived experiences of those suffering. The abstraction of ''the death penalty'' may invoke compassion for the defendant, but to engage in compassionate research methods is to understand that pain directly.

The research setting in our illustrative case involved an ethnography of a death penalty defense team. Observations of their daily interactions took place in the team's main office, but also in courtrooms, jails, dusty towns, dark bars, long car trips, some nice hotels, and a few frightening neighborhoods. Hans sat in locked rooms, face-to-face with defendants, in living rooms with their families and in courtrooms where the pain of victims' families was palpable.

The Texas Regional Public Defender Office for Capital Cases has one overarching goal, to save the lives of their clients, whom the state of Texas intends to execute. There are many institutional pressures (legal/coercive, cultural, cognitive) directing participants (the state, prosecutors, jury, etc.) toward death. One death penalty defense attorney describes the pressure: ''They [the state] get to run everything downhill and we have to run uphill.'' The pressure the team faces is intense, and comes from the fundamental strategy used by prosecutors and the state—to dehumanize the defendants to diminish the gravity of killing them. At its heart, this dehumanization process is designed to divest the defendant from humanness; they ''lose the capacity to evoke compassion and moral emotions'' (Haslam, 2006, p. 254). Alternatively, the defense team must humanize the defendant so the jury cannot bring themselves to kill the defendant. To feel compassion toward the defendant, the defense team—and the jury—had to always be aware of the defendant's humanity.

The site was one of great suffering among the victim's family members, witnesses, the death penalty team members, jurors, and even prosecutors—nearly everyone involved in a death penalty case is suffering from trauma, secondary trauma and even institutional pressure to kill another person. Inquiry into the causes of that suffering allowed Hans to theorize about how to alleviate it, and ultimately change the death penalty in Texas. To be aware of the defendant's humanity was just part of the compassionate agenda; it created awareness of the subjective experiences of pain others felt in the setting. Compassion for the defendant implied the need for compassion for the jury members being encouraged to kill that person as well as for the prosecutors determined to make it happen.

Compassionate Data Collection and Analysis

The processes of doing ethnography, aesthetics and emotionalism in the context of such suffering is at the heart of compassionate research methods. Although we discuss them separately, they are integrated processes.

Doing Compassionate Ethnography. Observation of emotion includes emotional displays in research subjects, but also our own reactions as researchers, both in fieldwork or when analyzing field notes or other text data. Emotions are an inevitable part of research, helping researchers understand particular experiences, but also shaping our response to those experiences. Some research sites are emotional spaces by their very nature and emotional engagement is what brings unique insight (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013).

From the outside, the engagement with the death penalty defense team could easily be described as a traditional ethnography involving long-term participant observation that includes taking on a work role, such as Van Maanen's (see 1988, 1991) getting a job at Disney or going through training to become a police officer in the course of conducting an ethnography. In compassionate research methods, however, the goal is not only to describe and theorize about a context but also to alleviate suffering—to engage in compassionate work. In the death penalty defense setting, Hans participated in a variety of interactions (strategy sessions, visits with witnesses, courtroom hearings, and

meetings with DAs), took detailed field notes, and conducted interviews with team members, other defense attorneys in Texas, DAs, judges, jurors, and others. The dual focus of compassionate research makes traditional approaches to recording and reflecting on ethnographic field experiences somewhat problematic. The traditional recommendation is for ethnographers to scribble field notes and to keep separate notebooks for developing thematic memos, and a reflexive journal (cf. Emerson, Fritz, & Staw, 1995) to describe their own feelings and emotions related to the field work, which often make for material that goes into confessional tales (Van Maanen, 1988).

We suggest here that keeping separate journals may impose limitations on compassionate research methods because of the goals of compassionate research. Hans found it important not to separate out observations that would go into a ''reflexive journal'' of feelings and emotions that could be cross-referenced with events in the ''real'' field notes, as is often advised in ethnography. He found it impractical to switch between types of journals based on whether he was transcribing ''unbiased'' observation or his feelings and emotions about what was occurring. Not only did the separation seem artificial, it would have damaged the representation of the field experience. Emotions were critical in capturing meaning in the flow of experience in the field. Furthermore, action to alleviate suffering often must occur in real time, requiring immediate, emergent theorization of solutions based on immediate (and time constrained) experience.

Cordoning emotional responses in the context of compassionate research methodology by moving them off into a separate journal would have echoed the exact same marginalization of feeling (Gagliardi, 1996; Strati, 1992), emotions (Fineman, 1996), and compassion (Frost, 1999) that has too long occurred in organizational research. Decrying the marginalization of felt meanings in organizational scholarship, while simultaneously marginalizing emotion in the empirical data collection in this instance, would be, at best, ironic. At worst, it would have undermined the very work of humanization that is at the heart of the defense's work and the ends of compassionate research methods. So while he transcribed his observations of action, events, and talk with as much accuracy as possible, he did the same for his own feelings about the events. It did not take away from the ''thickness'' of the descriptions, but added richness to it. Because emotions in this context are used as leverage for the processes of alleviation of suffering and theorization by providing motive and focus, they are part of the compassionate work and the research work. The naturalist approach used in ethnography offsets or balances the dangers associated with emotional representations, but the researcher's emotion can target points of tension that are the seeds both action and of theory. In the context of compassionate work the luxury of accessing and reflecting on emotions as a later, solitary experience by the researcher is not always feasible. The immediate work of the researcher to alleviate pain requires emotional reflexivity to occur in ''real time.''

Ethnography, including the adaptation of new approaches to creating field notes and journaling, enables sensitivity to the context and enables immediate examination of felt meaning and the use of emotions—both observed and subjectively experienced. In the following sections we discuss how aesthetic inquiry and emotions are ''done'' in compassionate research.

Doing Aesthetic Inquiry. Applying an aesthetic lens in compassionate research cues us to felt meanings in the field. Aesthetics inquires into meaning, but felt meanings rather than shared cultural meanings. Aesthetic inquiry involves the tacit feel of a place, object, or interaction (Taylor & Hansen, 2005). To get at felt meanings related to aesthetic experiences in organizations, Strati (1999) suggests ethnography and discourse/narrative analysis, and encourages reflexivity by ''turning on the senses'' and focusing on the aesthetic aspects of situations—an aesthetic epistemology. The approach relies on observation to capture the details of experience along with emotion that emerges from it, and applies analytical rigor to the interpretation of data—an empathetic-logical approach. This resonates with the approach Dutton et al. (2006) took in developing the theory of compassionate organizing. It does not require choosing between logico-analytical methods and aesthetics, but

keeps the tension of both forms of knowledge, ''balancing reflection and emotion, empathy and analytic detachment'' that is the essence of ethnographic work (Gagliardi, 1996, p. 578). An aesthetic sensitivity can cue moments of compassion because it connects context and emotion. Felt meaning sets the stage for action.

Aesthetic sensitivity cued the death penalty team as to which parts or which ''storylines'' in their narrative should be enacted based on appropriateness as judged by the aesthetics of the particular situation, prompting a search for plausible alternatives. Traditionally, it has sometimes been necessary for defense attorneys, in reaching a plea agreement, to ''play hardball'' with their clients to persuade them that circumstances would not go their way at trial, such as the unlikelihood of a jury believing their version of events (''I did not do it'') in light of physical crime evidence. An attorney may confront the client, ''Fine, if you insist on pursuing that defense, we'll go to trial and you'll see what happens, but remember what I advised you to do.'' This may not be productive, and may mean that the attorney is actually constructing a narrative that absolves them of blame for less than successful performance in the trial. Sensitivity to the felt meanings of both the defendant and the attorney can suggest an alternative to the traditional ''hardball'' tactics.

On issues such as this, Hans interpreted his observations with an aesthetic consciousness to determine strategies for proceeding. The team took a compassionate approach with one client unwilling to accept an existing plea offer made by the DA, which would have spared him the death penalty but result in life in prison. The client was overly optimistic about his chances at trial because his thinking was impaired, perhaps by fear or even overconfidence. The client's sense of his own situation was connected to his emotional response to the suggestion that he accept the plea deal. To approach him, the team needed to understand his narrative in regard to his situation; to the defense team he seemed unable to comprehend the decision he faced.

To Hans, the aesthetics of that situation made confronting the defendant *feel* like an inappropriate response. A psychologist had indicated that the defendant had a more visual learning style. The team decided to task the defendant with sorting stacks of green and red note cards representing the ''good'' and ''bad'' facts in his case. The defendant went over each fact provided by the team, and decided if it should be written on a green or red card. For instance, that the defendant took the injured infant to the hospital was a good fact. That the defendant caused the injuries, which resulted in the infant's death, was a bad fact. There were almost a hundred facts in his case. The team let him suggest additional facts, and had him stack the cards into piles as the process continued. About halfway through the process, seeing the relative heights of the ''bad'' and ''good'' deck of facts, he comprehended his own circumstances for the first time and agreed to the plea bargain that would spare his life. Seeing and feeling the growing disparity in the size of the stacks he began to make sense of his situation the way a lawyer's argument could not.

We might be tempted to think of this as a cognitive adjustment—he was no longer ''impaired'' in the psychological sense, but Hans's field notes show it to be a much more sensory, physical moment.

> Jeff described how he sat in the cell with Cedric and sorted through the ''good'' and ''bad'' facts of his case on color-coded cards. Randomly, Jeff would pull another card out of the box and hand it to Cedric, who would read it, and put it in the appropriate pile. The ''bad'' facts pile towered over the ''good'' facts.
>
> ''He wasn't half-way done when he just stopped,'' Jeff said. ''Cedric's shoulders dropped and he looked down at the table and sighed, then looked up to me and said, 'I really blew it didn't I?'''
>
> Cedric, who had insisted he never would, agreed to the plea offer.

The approach also created theoretically interesting possibilities by introducing aesthetics and the ''felt meaning'' of situations as important ways of understanding such phenomena as overconfidence or other decision making biases largely considered cognitive in nature. The possibilities of exploring

decision biases from an aesthetic perspective are opened as a theoretical complication. What, in the context of that situation and in those interactions, provides broader understanding of decisional impairment and its remedies? Adding new types of narrative accounts of the experience of making such decisions extends our theoretical understanding of overconfidence. The defendant's experience of his situation, as well as the way it was resolved, was revealed to be a physical, aesthetic experience as much as a "purely" cognitive one.

It was Cedric's feelings about his self, his identity, not just the recognition of the situation's hopelessness that had changed. In that context and those interactions we see such decisions as far more complex than right or wrong or better or worse in a given choice but rather what the whole situation means for the self. In such a case the hardball tactic is shown to be irrelevant; the "objective" logic offered by the person presenting the choice doesn't exist for the subject. The remedy used by the team—to give the defendant voice and produce a narrative in his own way, to give him agency (and, thus, humanity)—was based on compassion for the defendant, triggered by something Hans felt in the moment.

Doing Emotionalism. Emotions are data too. Observation of emotion includes emotional displays not only in research subjects, but also our own emotional reactions as researchers, both in fieldwork and when analyzing field notes or other text data. When Hans noted the elements of the situation with the overconfident defendant who wanted to maintain his innocence, he responded emotionally to what he saw, and the emotions led him to seek a narrative alternative to the "hardball" or rational persuasion approach often used.

During analysis in the death penalty setting, Hans looked for violation points in his data and the experience that resulted in an emotional response. This technique could be described as "emotional deconstruction," applied to various texts to produce additional or alternative interpretations. The main emotions experienced were fear, anger, despair, worry, frustration, and an overwhelming sense of responsibility to do something about the situations he faced. Looking back at events or observations that made him angry, Hans could reflect on what assumptions he held that were violated and where theory could or could not explain the event. He could attempt to examine that violation using any theoretical framework that made sense in the situation, and theorize about how to counteract the violation. The feeling of dissonance between what he believed "should" be and what he experienced triggered the sensemaking processes and the opportunistic experimentation with theory.

In this process, emotions are both a data source and analytical tool. To engage in emotional deconstruction is to become sensitized to emotional responses to data that may highlight a gap between the observation and expectations and trigger a search for explanations for and resolutions of the gap. For example, a critical incident technique (Czarniawska, 2004) was used in the death penalty research, where follow-up questions were posed to team members immediately after a salient event, such as a plea negotiation meeting with the DA. Defense attorneys were asked to give a play-by-play of what occurred and what they thought of the interaction, including their feelings about the events. Such techniques provide rich information, and it can initiate a subject's sensemaking processes. The places where emotional responses led to sensemaking were places where theoretical experimentation was activated.

Compassionate research methods also follow a logic described by Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody (2002). Emotions become important at three important levels of analysis. The first two levels involve familiar narrative and discourse analysis techniques, in which the narrative is analyzed to ascertain the subject understandings, then explored with a deconstructive eye, looking for underlying meanings, contradictions and omissions. Beyond this more typical approach, their third level explores the emotions of the researcher in response to the data. Each level is related to the others. For example, a contradiction exposed in the process of deconstruction might spur an emotion in the researcher, who then turns in Level 3 to an inquiry as to why the emotional response occurred.

In the context of compassionate research, emotional responses can include negative emotional experiences such as disappointment, fatigue, strain, bitterness, resentment, anger, indignation, rage, embarrassment, pain, disgust, surprise, shock, regret, guilt, sorrow, fear, desperation, uncertainty, rejection, worry, and frustration (Frost, 2003). These incite the sensemaking process and the search for redress.

An opportunity for such theorization occurred as a result of the emotional deconstruction of Hans's reaction to what is known as the "10-2 rule" in Texas, which is part of the instructions the judge gives to the jury in death penalty sentencing. That instruction erroneously leads jurors to believe that all 12 jurors must agree to deliver a death sentence (true), and that at least 10 jurors must agree to give the defendant a life sentence (false). While that is how jurors are instructed, in actuality, if even one juror votes against death, the judge must find the jury "unable to agree" and is directed to enter a sentence of life without parole by default. The effect of this discourse is that a holdout juror is given the intentionally false impression that they must persuade at least 9 other jurors to their verdict. Feeling unable to do that, holdout jurors quickly cave in and agree to death sentences. Hans was infuriated by this sentencing instruction and used narrative theory as a theoretical lens to examine how the discourse misguided jurors to enact death sentences. His anger at the myth of unanimity allowed him to identify the locus of the untoward pressure to kill. The field notes reveal the depth of that anger.

> Frank, the defense attorney had asked if there were any questions and a person from the jury panel raised their hand.
>
> "But what happens if we don't agree?"
>
> The DA had described the sentencing process to the entire jury pool, so that those eventually selected would have all gotten the same information.
>
> In doing so, the DA used a highway metaphor on PowerPoint slides to illustrate the two questions the jury decides during sentencing deliberations (in the event the jury finds the defendant guilty). First, if the jury agrees the defendant would be a danger in the future, the PowerPoint showed an arrow that was labeled "All agree" continuing along a highway, with "disagree" being a "detour," with no other details besides an arrow marked "disagree" pointing off the highway. A second question asks if there are any mitigating circumstances that warrant a sentence of less than death. Once again, an arrow labeled "All agree" indicated the jury would stay on the highway, which led to the word "Death penalty." And once again, an arrow labeled "disagree" pointed to a nondescript exit off the highway, but it was not labeled.
>
> "I can't say," said the defense attorney. The DA nodded in agreement.
>
> "You mean you don't know, or you know, but you can't tell us?" the potential juror persisted.
>
> Nobody would answer. Nobody was allowed. Under Texas law, you cannot inform the jury the consequences of their failure to agree unanimously on a sentence. They believe they must all be for death, or all be for life, to deliver a sentence. In fact, it is also law that if they fail to agree, the judge must enter a sentence of life without parole.
>
> My blood felt like it was boiling and I struggled to contain myself in the gallery. How had the judge approved this presentation?! It was so clearly biased to lead the jury to presume death was smooth sailing along a highway while anything other than unanimous agreement resulted in a vague "detour," which presumably to be avoided as is the nearly universal cultural norm – that detours are things to be avoided. But that was beside a larger point. The fact that it was Texas statute that, even if asked directly, the defense attorney, DA, even the judge, nobody, was ALLOWED to tell the jury the truth about their failure to agree on a sentence. Texas purposely wants the truth to be either 1) an unknown to be avoided, at best, but more likely it is that 2) they know that the jury presumes, because of false but widely held cultural

> myths and depictions of courtroom drama on TV, that if the jury disagrees, they will be labeled a "hung jury" and the judge will declare "a mistrial," after which, some jurors even presume the defendant may be told they are "free to go," all after having just been found guilty of murder! But in fact, once found guilty, the minimum sentence is automatically life without parole, and the jury is really only deciding if they will increase that default sentence to death. Everyone knows the jury is confused about what will happen if they don't agree to kill the defendant, and Texas makes it illegal to clarify it!! Texas knows that the widely held cultural misperceptions lead to more death sentences.
>
> Rage set me to fight. If the jury only knew what they were really deciding, lives could be saved. I directed my anger into tireless effort.

Deconstructing the anger he felt at the dissonance allowed him to more carefully look at the complexity of the situation. He constructed an ante-narrative (Boje, 2001) to oppose the state's narrative and to inform jurors of how sentencing actually works.

Attorneys then used that new narrative during jury selection. It was a story using analogies to explain "what deliberations are like," since most jurors come with institutionalized myths about the requirement for all to agree. The new narrative is that deliberations are *not* like going to a movie theatre with a group of people, where you all have to agree on which *one* film you have to see. Instead, deliberations are like going to a restaurant with a group of people, where you each get to put in your own independent order. If someone orders fish, and someone else wants steak, they do not have to agree. The server, who we likened to the judge, will accept their orders without question. Jurors alone are in charge of determining their orders, and the judge will never ask the jurors to agree on a sentence, despite the misleading connotation in the jury instructions.

The narrative was designed to counteract institutionalized myths about the jurors having to reach an agreement or be declared a hung jury. There is no such thing as a hung jury in the sentencing phase of a capital trial. If the jury does not agree, the judge must, by default, enter a sentence of life without parole. However, the jury is under the assumption that a mistrial will be declared and the defendant will be awarded a retrial, or worse, be told he is "free to go." Facing pressure from this institutionalized misimpression, reified by the wording of the judge's instructions, holdout jurors nearly always capitulate and agree to sentence the defendant to death.

The goal was to alleviate suffering experienced by jurors who would feel pressure to conform to the Texas jury instructions, to emancipate them from an institutional structure that directed them toward death. Rooted in an emotional response, Hans used the theoretical framework of narrative to pursue a compassionate agenda, but institutional theory provided a means to make sense of myths surrounding jury deliberations and offered alternative institutionalized scripts to counter those myths.

It should be clear from the discussion of data collection and analysis that theoretical experimentation was intrinsic to the process—and to the compassionate work in which the team was engaged. The broad new theory that came from this work can be described as *narrative structuration*, the process of creating and enacting a new narrative in the context of ongoing institutional and social action. The process is a conscious attempt to enact an alternative narrative structure even as the existing structure is acknowledged. This enactment can be used to alleviate suffering *and* confront the structure that is causing suffering.

Narrative structuration is thus a type of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) that disrupts the institution even as it functions within it. While those who oppose the death penalty use a number of arguments to do so—sometimes rational (it costs more to put someone to death than it does to incarcerate them) and sometimes moral (it is cruel and inhuman), the use of compassionate research methods opened up the theoretical possibilities of institutional disruption through narrative structuration. The material practices that provided the cognitive underpinnings of widely shared

beliefs caused jurors to assume that defection would lead to an injustice—that the defendant who had committed an awful crime would go free or be tried again. In many ways, the system relied on conformity to the myth. Hans's sense of outrage at how the myth was used to support the system and his concern for jurors who felt compelled to conform to a decision they did not embrace caused him to look for a plausible way to explain the 10/2 rule. The alternative narrative gave the 10/2 rule new meaning and it was embedded into ongoing material practice without changing the rule itself—narrative structuration.

In the death penalty study, inquiry into the causes of pervasive suffering allowed Hans to theorize about how to alleviate it, which not only alleviated suffering through saving a single life, but generated organizational theory that could be applied to other contexts. The entire team was collectively trying to figure out—to theorize—how to stop a brutal system. That focus shifted between figuring out how to stop an execution in particular, with each case, and theorizing about how to fight the death penalty in general—looking for ways the institution can be undermined and thwarted. During these processes, Hans employed several theoretical lenses to inform and enrich his understanding. He synthesized narrative, structuration, and institutional theory to analyze how the death penalty operates in practice, in a context of multiple, complex, and subtle (but powerful) pressures, at varying levels of awareness, all guiding institutional actors to seek or conform to the death penalty. From these, conceptual and theoretical discoveries emerged: emotional deconstruction as part of the sensemaking process, the recognition that subjectivity to the institutional order made everyone in it vulnerable to pain (not just the defendant), and narrative structuration as a form of institutional work changing the meaning of the rules even as the rules stay the same.

Writing Compassionate Research

Writing that emerges from compassionate research methods has a different purpose from writing in more dispassionate forms of research. It aims to invoke empathy in the reader and engender both practical action and theoretical insight. To do so, the writing must describe the experience of the research in such a way as to encourage an aesthetic and emotional response in the reader. This would require us to set aside conventions of traditional, solely descriptive research and instead use writing that enables the reader to see and feel what the researcher saw and felt, a form of writing that captures not just the thickness, but the richness of the research experience.

Compassionate research methods induce in the researcher a need to capture the reader's gaze and heart. More than alleviating pain in the immediate context, using these methods provides the words and images that will spark the senses and induce the emotional pivots that lead to understanding and to action. Pinker (2015) describes skillful writers as keenly aware of the readers' vantage point and the target of their gaze. They also possess a very particular attitude. The best writers, he argues,

> do not hide the passion and relish that drive them to tell us about their subjects. They write as if they have something important to say. But no, that doesn't capture it. They write as if they have something important to *show.* (p. 16)

Just as compassionate research methods open the possibilities for solving immediate problems and extending theory, the writing that is possible from compassionate research methods can connect to the aesthetic experience and emotions of readers for the same purposes. This connection can establish a more complex and meaningful understanding of theory and have a greater impact on the reader. Dispassionate writing is limiting our theorizing and attenuating its usefulness. Yet more artistic forms of writing are thought to obscure our research rather than give it life (Van Maanen, 1995).

Denzin (1997) has suggested an interpretive ethnography that is autoethnographic, vulnerable, performative, and critical, calling for a return to narrative as a political act with teeth. Researchers

must make themselves visible in the text and convey the conditions of oppression they find in their research with "literary craftsmanship that is compelling, with memorable characters and unforgettable scenes." The very noticing, feelings, and responses of the researchers that are intrinsic to compassionate research methods are the seeds of the story the researcher must tell.

Literary narratives (cf. Hansen, 2012) are one approach. Literary tales combine a reporter's sense of what is noteworthy with a novelist's sense of narration, and are meant to provide an emotional charge to the reader (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 132). We suggest "aesthetically and emotionally-rich description," to play off the term "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). Our writing must convey, not betray, the compassionate field experience so that readers may become "passionately engrossed" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 59). After the intensity of experience that is intrinsic of compassionate research methods, using traditional modes of representation would not only impede understanding (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997) but also serve to dehumanize the researcher and all those who were part of the experience.

Conclusion

Compassionate research methods bring to organizational studies possibilities for new theory as well as a purpose that connects it to practice, and especially the alleviation of pain. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) explain how innovative research perspectives open up new research problems, turn conventional wisdom and assumptions upside down by challenging traditional beliefs, and generate interesting and influential theory (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). But it is the tight coupling of researcher to the context of pain, enabled by a deliberately compassionate and committed position, that is the essence of compassionate research methods. It is distinguished from research on compassion by its engagement with compassionate work, and is distinct from compassionate work by its interest in informing theory.

The connection to context and openness to plural theoretical positions as well as theoretical experimentation reflects a kind of "radical reflexivity" (Pollner, 1991, p. 370). Radical reflexivity involves an "unsettling," a "deliberate insecurity regarding basic assumptions." Rather than carrying a theory to practice to test it or walking into a context armed with the codes and paradigms we expect will solve problems, in compassionate research we wade into a world that generates pain and seek to alleviate it with initial theoretical agnosticism. Like Weick's (1989) disciplined imagination, Pollner (1991) says that radical reflexivity "defines and enriches the sociological imagination." More recently, Suddaby (2014, p. 408) has warned against theoretical fetishism "where theory becomes an exercise in writing and interpretation but is detached from the empirical world."

The arenas in which compassionate research methods are needed extend to any context in which pain is experienced. But for researchers seeking meaning in their work, knowing that they can work to alleviate pain in these contexts and from that work make theoretical contributions opens research opportunities across disciplines. For example, current debates on the quality of education focus on compassion for children, especially the poor, who often do not have access to first-rate educational opportunities. Compassionate research methods, seeking to alleviate the pain of these children would also use ethnography, aesthetics and emotionality to map and represent those contexts in complex ways. In the United States, standard solutions to inequities in education are connected to economic theories—teacher accountability systems based on agency theory and school choice strategies modeled on the idea that competition between schools for students will lead to improved performance—with scant attention to the role of the school in neighborhoods, communities, and the social system (Ravich, 2013; Russakoff, 2015). The situation is ripe for "unsettling" (Pollner, 1991), and compassionate research methods could be the vehicle through which it could be done.

More traditional management and organizational research topics can and must be revisited with a compassionate research lens. There are obvious places in which pain is a part of organizational life—incivility and bullying, layoffs, toxic leaders, discrimination of many kinds, finding work–life

balance, as well as the more minor cuts and indignities often present in organizations. But as Frost (1999) noted, organizations are rife with pain, some of it assumed to be necessary, some of it, perhaps, unnoticed. Compassionate research methods offer a way to get the pain noticed, felt, and alleviated as well as contribute to a much richer theoretical understanding of these phenomena.

Compassionate research methods can change society, our theorizing, and our professional practice for the better. But this will call for a dramatic shift in our views of research: "If care and compassion were to move to the forefront of organizational scholarship, the results might be truly radical" (Rynes, Bartunek, Dutton, & Margolis, 2012, p. 518). However, more constructive perspectives in organizational research will not progress unless many scholars redirect their work at considerable risk to their careers (Ghoshal, 2005). Perhaps in the future, our pursuit of compassion will be more vigorous than our suppression of it. Perhaps we will realize the same as a field, and researcher reflexivity will not only end suppression of emotion and advocacy, but also introduce a new era of theoretical advancement through compassionate research. Perhaps it is an answer to the question of why our theories are so trivial (Weick, 1989) and why we haven't seen anything new in 20 years (Suddaby et al., 2011). Maybe we will produce theories that matter when we really make compassion count.

Viktor Frankl (1959), a psychotherapist who survived several Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust argues there is great opportunity in suffering. Like Peter Frost (1999), who first compelled scholars to consider compassion in organizations, Frankl considered suffering an inevitable part of life. The task then is to look for meaning in suffering. This implies a responsibility in our suffering. Frankl quotes Dostoevsky: "There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings."

Hans's field notes illustrate that advocacy does not always mean winning (Van Maanen, 2010), but compassionate research and the need to make sense of failure can make us continue to ask questions by infusing the experience with meaning. Gains come in many forms, including experiencing the pain inherent to our own humanity. Hans wrote,

> I spent my university's Spring Break going to death row to see the client we couldn't keep from being sent there. I did it to look him in the eye, not for me, not to seek any sort of absolution, but for him, because I felt I owed him my presence. To be there, in that reality. I wanted him to know, wholly, to see me say it with confidence and to his face, that there was nothing more he could have done, because I didn't want him to feel bad about how good a job he did (assisting in his own defense, his testimony on the stand). I didn't want him second-guessing himself.
>
> "You didn't come all this way just to see me, did you?" he asked. That made me want to cry, because we let him down but he spent the whole time telling me to thank everyone and tell them not to take it so hard.
>
> It also hurts because not only do I have a friend on death row, I feel like I put him there. And now even team victories torment me, because we have managed to stop the death penalty so many times but we couldn't stop it *that* time. We knew what to do but couldn't do it. I can explain why he's on death row because I know how the death penalty really works; all the factors, all the complex institutional pressures and scripts, the multiple structures guiding action, all the assumptions and biases . . . . I can explain it really, really well in subtle detail.
>
> I just can't make sense of it.

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