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Compassionate Communication, Embodied Aboutness, and Homeless Young Adults

Timothy P. Huffman

This qualitative project draws from the experiences of homeless young adults in non-profit organizations in an effort to deepen our understanding of compassionate communication and improve human services. The young adults identify four communication practices as particularly compassionate: presence, nonverbal immediacy, organizational immediacy, and acts of service. Together, this set of practices constitutes “embodied aboutness,” which I define as making one’s body about the other. These practices broaden our understanding of compassion by highlighting the way bodies are interpreted in service delivery. Embodied aboutness informs us how to communicate compassionately in social justice contexts and beyond.

Keywords: Compassion; Embodied Aboutness; Homelessness; Nonprofit; Organization; Participatory Action Research

In the United States, over 60,000 young adults (18–24) are homeless on any given night (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013). Homeless young adults are more likely to suffer from health and mental health issues that range from asthma to depression (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007; U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010) and are more likely to be targeted by crime (Gaetz, 2004). Despite these effects, more cities are changing laws to criminalize

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homelessness (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2014). Although many nonprofits exist to deliver much-needed services, communication between young adults and staff in these organizations can be problematic, and negative interaction can lead to disruptions in their effectiveness (de Winter & Noom, 2003; Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak, & Brokaw, 2005). Consequently, the ability to successfully communicate becomes an important part of service delivery.

To this end, I engaged in a long-term, qualitative, participatory action research project that provided outreach to homeless and at-risk young adults. During the project, I interviewed homeless young adults about their experiences inside nonprofit organizations. In initial interviews, the young adults raised the communication of care and compassion as central issues to improving services. Fortunately, compassion, and the ways it is communicated, has seen an upsurge of scholarly attention of late (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000; Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov, & Maitlis, 2011; Way & Tracy, 2012). However, much of the work on organizational compassion uses a three-part process model (notice, connect, and respond or recognize, relate, and [re]act). While these models reveal the process of compassion, they do not account for its texture.

The choice to focus on issues surrounding homeless young adults was based on my commitment to improve the social and material conditions they face as a marginalized group. The choice to focus on young adults' experiences instead of volunteers' was driven by the fact that most empirical work has focused on the provider of compassion (Way & Tracy, 2012). Listening to the young adult experience helps identify effective and ineffective compassion practices. Because homeless young adults suffer from broad social stigma (Farrugia, 2010), their perceptions may reveal dynamics of the social phenomenon not yet articulated.

The homeless young adults' reflections on compassionate interactions based on their experiences in nonprofit organizations called attention to a set of embodied practices. Compassionate communication stems from embodied aboutness, which is a combination of presence, immediacy, and acts of service.

COMPASSION, ORGANIZING, AND HOMELESSNESS

Compassion in Organizations

Studies focusing on compassion in communication are on the rise. Scholars in the medical and nursing community have written about compassionate care for some time (Barber, 1976; Wear & Zarconi, 2008), but compassion has been examined more recently by organization and management scholars (Kanov et al., 2004; Lilius et al., 2011, 2008). The study of compassion in organized life sheds light on various phenomena. For instance, compassion can have rejuvenating effects on those who practice it (Lilius, 2012). It can be taught to help overcome deeply seated hatred between groups (Gubkin, 2013). It can help alleviate the suffering of the bereaved in workplaces and create community (Hall, Shucksmith, & Russell, 2013). It can serve as a form of philanthropic emotion management for the sake of bereaved customers

(O'Donohoe & Turley, 2006). Although compassion has been lauded by religious, spiritual, and ethical thinkers since antiquity, recent organizational scholarship affirms that it is a meaningful and potentially transformative force in organizations.

Compassion is often depicted as a tripartite model of its subprocesses: notice, connect, and respond (Batson, 1994; Dutton et al., 2006; Reich, 1989; Solomon, 1998). Miller (2007) and Way and Tracy (2012) focused on the communicative aspects of compassion. Moving beyond the cognitive/affective/behavioral account of the notice/connect/respond breakdown, Way and Tracy showed how each of the subprocesses of compassion involve communication. By looking at the emotional lives of hospice nurses, they updated the linear model proposed by others by highlighting the circular and iterative nature of compassionate behaviors and renaming the subprocesses recognize, relate, and (re)act. Additionally, they joined Boyatzis, Smith, and Blaize (2006) in highlighting the ways compassion can combat stress and burnout instead of always contributing to emotional fatigue. These and other studies make a compelling argument that compassion is a valuable aspect of organized life.

Recently, there has been a call for scholars to articulate compassion at the organizational level as opposed to the individual level. In response, Kanov et al. (2004) and Lilius et al. (2011) modeled organization-level compassion. Kanov et al. argued that compassion is a dynamic, relational process that can be found in individuals and relationships. They made the case that collective compassion exists when it is "legitimated within an organizational context and propagated among organizational members" (Kanov et al., 2004, p. 810). While organizations do not have feelings in the same ways a human does, an organization's capacity for collective compassion is not unlike its capacity for collective mind. Just as Weick and Roberts (1993) laid out how heedful interrelating creates collective mind, Kanov et al. suggested that collective compassion may also hinge on conscientious interactions. They offered propagation, legitimation, and coordination as three potential subprocesses of collective compassion but called for research on how organizations create collective compassion in practice.

Lilius et al. (2011) augmented the above conceptualizations by demonstrating how everyday compassionate practices create compassionate capability. Practices such as orienting, acknowledging, help-offering, and bounded playing contribute to compassionate relational conditions. They emphasized two relational conditions: high-quality connections and dynamic boundary permeability. High-quality connections involve positive regard, mutuality, and tensility, or the ability to bend under pressure (Lilius et al., 2011). Boundary permeability occurs when work and nonwork realities come together. Lilius et al. (2011) recognized that the boundary permeability in the compassionate work environment is not static, but rather a dynamic process, as workers are able to maintain and overcome said boundaries as situations require. Lilius et al. (2011) ultimately asserted that these two relational characteristics develop the compassionate capacity of the organization. They create the opportunity for sharing, supporting, knowing, and caring about each other. Compassion has transformative potential in the case of nonprofit organizing regarding homeless young adults.

Communication and Homelessness

This study is also situated within communicative understandings of homelessness. Past communication research on homelessness tends to focus variously on democracy and advocacy (Middleton, 2014b; Novak & Harter, 2008; Toft, 2011), media representations (Calder, Richter, Burns, & Mao, 2011; Campbell & Reeves, 1989), discourse (Harter et al., 2005), capitalism (Pascale, 2005), urban space and place (Kaplan, 2008), and identity (Farrugia, 2010) (see also Peterson, Antony, & Thomas, 2012). Common to these studies is attention to the ontological inextricability of material conditions and social realities, particularly discourses of stigma and direct interaction.

Mainstream discourses about homelessness in the U.S. often cast people living without homes as drugged, diseased, damaged, deviant, dirty, and failed subjects trapped in the present (Loehwing, 2010; Middleton, 2014a; Peterson et al., 2012). Throughout history, being without a home for a period of time may not have necessarily made a person “homeless” (Pascale, 2005); its meaning has changed over time. U.S. culture uses terminological differences to enforce the otherness of unhoused people by calling their sleeping spaces “encampments” and their everyday items of living “paraphernalia.” While discourses about people without homes are sometimes deployed strategically to make appeals for immediate action (Loehwing, 2010), these discourses often have stigmatizing effects. Stigmatization pushes unhomed people out of public spaces, decreases their visibility, and forces them to accept such stigmatized identities in order to receive services (Harter et al., 2005).

In a study of homeless young adults, Farrugia (2010) articulated the emotional dimensions of stigma. Homeless young adults often feel shamed and devalued. But even as they are discursively constructed as passive subjects, they clearly are not. Homeless young adults construct new spaces for lessening the symbolic burden of homelessness (Farrugia, 2010). Similarly, Kaplan’s (2008) fieldwork showed that campers “talk back” to dominant discourses and critique. Even as journalistic accounts of homelessness are often caricatures, activist organizing can discursively reconfigure people without homes as having agency (Middleton, 2014b).

Communication studies have also investigated direct interaction between housed and unhoused people. For instance, homeless youth are subject to various nonverbal marginalization, including “dirty looks,” being avoided, and having more space put between them (Farrugia, 2010). Being homeless leads to poorer face-to-face interactions and can mean being rejected by peers (Kidd, 2007; Lankenau, 1999; Roschelle & Kaufman, 2004). Harter et al. (2005) noted that these negative interactions can cause youth to become aggressive or withdrawn.

But direct interaction is not always negative. In his activist ethnography of organizing, space, and technology, Toft (2011) argued that face-to-face communication in the context of organizing and advocacy can break down stereotypes. Novak and Harter (2008) demonstrated that writing and selling a newspaper offers people without homes a journalistic venue for engagement and citizenship. This practice reframes discourses of poverty by reclaiming what it means to stand on the street and engage passersby. It is work, not panhandling, and it enables conversations that may not have

otherwise happened (Novak & Harter, 2008). Within homeless communities, interacting face-to-face helps turn “personal trauma into collective grievance” (Middleton, 2014b, p. 331). Although discourses of homelessness can stigmatize and complicate interaction, positive, potentially transformative opportunities also exist.

Inspired by the work of management and communication scholars on organizational compassion (Dutton et al., 2006; Lilius et al., 2011; Miller, 2007; Way & Tracy, 2012) and issues surrounding homelessness, stigma, and interaction (Farrugia, 2010; Novak & Harter, 2008; Toft, 2011), this project asks the following research question:

RQ: What do the experiences of homeless young adults reveal about the practice of compassionate communication inside organizations?

METHODS

I engaged in a long-term, qualitative, participatory action project to contribute to communication theory and social action. As a researcher, I took the position of fully engaged actor and activist by volunteering, networking, and organizing for and with homeless young adults. Through this process, I learned rules of appropriateness, became acquainted with members of the nonprofit and homeless communities, performed interviews, and observed. For 3½ years, I was involved in StandUp For Kids (SUFK), which served ages 18 to 25. I also formed relationships with several other homeless human service organizations. My research and activism was inspired and informed by my experiences and learning during a 6-month period of intentional homelessness. Based on my disciplinary and justice-oriented commitments, I was driven by the research problem: “How can communication improve the service homeless young adults receive from nonprofit organizations?”

I used a method of community-based research called pragmatic fieldwork (Huffman, 2013) that iteratively moves between direct action in the field, data collection and analysis, and writing. This method was supplemented by using a grounded approach (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I use the eight practices of pragmatic fieldwork: ask, observe, labor, serve, reflect, envision, gather, and present (Huffman, 2013) to frame my involvement with SUFK.

Observe and Ask

There were four primary places the study unfolded. These included SUFK’s youth house, Tumbleweed Tempe Youth Resource Center, the urban space around the local shelter system, and an area downtown where many homeless people spend time. I took scratch notes when it was appropriate and feasible. Since my involvement was regularly interactive and physical, I often did not have free hands or free moments to take notes. In these situations, I created head notes. Upon returning home, I wrote complete field notes based on the day’s experiences. My field notes totaled 140 single-spaced pages. The focus of my observations was interactional; I looked to the ways homeless young adults interacted with volunteers. Data collected by observation helped me describe and conceptualize interactions, corroborate and problematize interview data, and fully engage the embodied component of organized life.

I performed 23 in-depth interviews ranging from 13 to 70 minutes (30-minute average). Interviews were recorded and transcribed into 275 single-spaced pages. I also performed ethnographic interviews during fieldwork, which were included in my field notes. The goal of the interviews was to tap into the experience of homeless young adults and invite them into academic and organizational discourses on compassion, emotion, and program effectiveness. The interview had five sections: (1) describing organizations that had served them; (2) describing interactions they had had inside said organizations; (3) identifying particularly positive, negative, helpful, and unhelpful interactions; (4) identifying and reflecting on compassionate organizations and staff; and (5) suggesting ways organizations could improve services.

Labor and Serve

My work with SUFK involved both direct service and background organizational labor. I interacted with homeless young adults on outreach and at its drop-in center. Outreach involved going to various locations around the city with food, water, clothing, and hygiene supplies. I learned how to identify places in the city where homeless young adults could be found, as well as how to appropriately talk to them, ask them what they needed, and give them what we had. SUFK also ran a drop-in center where the young adults could shower, wash their clothing, eat a hot meal, access clothing donations, use the computer, watch a movie, and socialize in a relaxed, noninstitutional environment. SUFK delivered direct services while also striving to create positive and enabling relationships with the homeless young adults. This meant a lot of shared stories, laughter, sorrows, and joys. In addition to direct service, I also coordinated and trained volunteers, networked, and organized on behalf of SUFK. Finally, twice a year, I ran a 3-day street retreat during which volunteers and young adults lived without shelter and taught each other leadership and urban survival skills.

Involvement in SUFK helped this project in three ways. Since I was interested in how experiences of homeless young adults could extend theories of compassion in organizations, fostering relationships with them and performing interviews was key. Second, participation allowed me to be a part of and observe the interactions between the young adults and the staff/volunteers, which allowed me to witness the activities and events the youth reported on. Finally, participation in SUFK allowed me to act in ways to improve the lives of the young adults. I volunteered roughly 1,000 hours of direct client interaction service and about 400 hours of background labor on behalf of the organization.

Gather and Present

Pragmatic fieldwork holds that in addition to labor and service, gathering people/resources and presenting ideas improve both the intellectual and activist goals of the project (Huffman, 2013). My three gathering efforts included human resources (recruiting volunteers, networking with other organizations), material resources (cocoordinating monetary and in-kind donation drives), and intellectual resources

(drawing on organizational and conflict theory to improve the organizational processes). Over the course of the project, I presented ideas and information within SUFK (volunteer training, staff meetings, and leadership development retreats), represented SUFK in other contexts (interorganizational collaborations, fundraisers), and spoke and wrote on issues of homelessness in various contexts (campus events, conferences, and academic papers). Gathering and presenting not only served practical organizational functions, but also contributed to the process of analysis. Social interaction during this practice drew me into various discursive spaces in and around the issues of homelessness in a way that deepened my sensitivity and sharpened my analysis. Both performing and writing have transformative potential (Spry, 2011), and I engaged these as opportunities to prototype, critique, and nuance my nascent claims.

Reflect and Envision

Data analysis was guided by an iterative approach to grounded theory. Iterative analysis involves analyzing data while continuing to collect data (Charmaz, 2006). Rather than saving all analysis for after data collection, the researcher engages in early interpretation that guides further data collection.

I coded and theorized using grounded theory's three coding modes: open coding (fracturing data into categories), axial coding (identifying relationships between categories), and selective coding (finding key concepts that help explain the other concepts) (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I wrote analytic memos during each phase of coding to track and deepen analysis. I also followed Charmaz's (2011) suggestion to code for gerunds as a way to focus on action. I generated a codebook as a product of open coding, used diagrams to identify context and intervening/causal conditions via axial coding, and identified the core category and storyline via selective coding. I also employed theoretical sampling, performed negative case analysis, and used conditional matrices to build broad and nuanced theorization that lives up to grounded theory's criteria of fit, understanding, generality, and control/application (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

For instance, when open coding one of the interviews, the statement "They wouldn't be there if they didn't give a shit" stood out to me. So I made the note "Being there." Later, other references like "They keep showing up, don't they, darn it!" sharpened my attention to the fact that the young adults see presence as an indication of compassion. And so the code "Presence" was born. Using NVivo, I coded my interviews and field notes with "Presence" as a category, drew together all the instances of presence, reread them, and wrote about the set. As I wrote analytic memos, I began to see that presence was separate from but related to the subprocesses of compassion identified by Miller (2007) and Way and Tracy (2012). The notion of presence came to structure much of the data, so I initially posited the idea that presence was an essential aspect of compassion and then engaged in negative case analysis to test the claim. Significantly, the young adults also reflected on staff who were "there just for a paycheck" or "just sitting there clicking their keyboards." This prompted a deeper analysis that distinguished between the types of presence the young adults perceived as compassionate and the ones they did not. This helped identify the practices of immediacy (both interpersonal and

organizational) and acts of service. In the end, the common thread between these practices was what I term “embodied aboutness.”

COMPASSIONATE PRACTICES

The study was designed to identify various practices homeless young adults considered compassionate. Because of the dynamics of interaction, the young adult experience of compassion speaks to practices of the volunteers and staff. This yielded four recurrent practices: being present, nonverbal immediacy, organizational immediacy, and acts of service.

Being Present

Homeless young adults often read presence as an indicator of deeply held care. Consider the reflection of Amber, a homeless young woman I met and interviewed at Tumbleweed Youth Resource Center. The 20-year-old who became homeless after moving and failing to get a job, said she felt compassion from the workers because “They keep showing up, don’t they, darn it! They come here, they work here. If they keep showing up, they care. And that’s what counts to me. Seriously. That they keep showing up.” Amber’s continued reflection reveals the (re)acting subcomponent of compassion, as she mentions “doing stuff for us.” However, the actual service provided takes a secondary role to the mere act of ongoing presence. The choice to show up, apparently, bears semiotic weight.

Harry, a 21-year-old who I have known for several years through SUFK, had accessed various homeless young adult serving organizations. Harry said he preferred SUFK because, in his view, the volunteers “legitimately” cared. When asked about how compassion is demonstrated by the volunteers, he said they “come out because they wanna do it.” For Harry, the voluntary nature of the participation is inspiring, but the basic act of care is physically showing up. Being present indicates care. Elliot, a 19-year-old young man who ended his homelessness with the help of Crossroads, a drug rehabilitation community, made a similar point. When I asked him about an organization that demonstrated compassion, he put his analysis succinctly: “They wouldn’t be there if they didn’t give a shit.”

Elliot, Harry, and Amber each highlight how choosing to be present is indicative of a genuine compassionate way of being. They could, of course, be wrong. Paid staff members could simply be very good at emotional labor and actually care relatively little about any particular client they serve. However, it is useful in crafting theory and practice to be reminded that the co-occupation of space and time is seen as a significant indicator of compassion. This relates to Conquergood’s (1991) conceptualization of coeval. He attested to the transformative power that sharing space can have on the way people think about the world because the body and knowing are closely related. Simply sharing space with another has profound power. Elliot described sharing time and space with the staff of his rehabilitation organization. “We talk about whatever. We crack jokes. We smile. We laugh. We enjoy each

other's company." Despite prior conflicts, despite liking, and perhaps even despite respect, sharing time and space, in this case while smoking, communicates a basic willingness to be part of the other's life. Although physical presence is not always compassionate (as it can also be intimidating, invasive, etc.; see Huffman, 2015), the homeless young adults marked it as a foundational condition for communicating care.

Nonverbal Immediacy

Physical presence helps communicate concern, but homeless young adults also explain that turning toward the other—with one's eyes, face, and body—shows compassion. Jacob, a 23-year-old young man I met on outreach, recalled a transformative compassionate interaction from 8 years prior. Following his grandmother's death, Jacob's "bottled up" suffering had been noticed by a staff member. The staff member asked if anything was wrong, and while Jacob declined to talk about it, the event had a profound impact on him.

Me: When they asked you the question, do you remember how they were acting?
Do you remember the interaction pretty well?

Jacob: They looked at my face and ... [He looks me in the eye.]

Me: Made eye contact ...

Jacob: Yeah they saw, they're all like wait a minute "Is there something wrong?" And they gave like a facial expression I can't describe. [Pantomiming, he turns his head slightly to the side and furrows his brow a little.]

Me: Sure. Like a little turn to the side and ... [Mirroring his expression, I turn my head to the right and lean a little forward, look directly at him, and furrow my brow.]

Jacob: Yeah! Like "What's wrong?" It shows that that person does—that person does care. No matter who you are. For whatever reason. That person did stop. That person did show that. They're only asking to help. And you know what, if there's people like that, you know what, that's the best thing to know.

This account reflects recognizing, relating, and (re)acting in full force (Way & Tracy, 2012). It also reveals that Jacob is attentive to the staff member stopping, making eye contact, and turning his face.

Another example of the nonverbal relevance of the face direction is manifest in various complaints about staff on computers. CJ, a 23-year-old I met through SUFK, complained about an organization that runs a drop-in center by saying, "And they just open it, and that's it. They just open it." When pressed about what they do that is so frustrating, he says that they just sit all day and look at the computer. He admits that he does not know what they are doing on the computer, but doubts it is an important institutional task. In CJ's case, lack of compassion is indicated by a lack of immediacy.

Throughout my observations, turning toward the other was a way to enhance noticing, connecting, and responding. On one level, this is not surprising. Most human sensory organs face forward. Hands work better in front of the body. But

homeless young adults, who are the subject of various forms of scorn from the general public, highlight the fundamental reality that we can communicate compassion by turning toward the other.

Turning toward the other is ultimately a form of immediacy. Immediacy is a well-studied interpersonal phenomenon. It is comprised of readiness, attentiveness, and a focus on the present interaction. Andersen, Andersen, and Jensen (1979) defined immediacy as communicative behaviors that convey availability or attention, increase sensory stimulation, and reduce psychological distance (p. 153). Despite being a well-established interpersonal variable, apart from a brief mention of immediacy in a patient-clinician piece on compassionate silence (Back, Bauer-Wu, Rushton, & Halifax, 2009), I could find no scholarly articulations of the connection between immediacy and compassion. However, the young adults I interviewed were quick to see the connection.

David, a 21-year-old I met on outreach who had spent only about a month homeless before landing a job at a mechanic shop, articulated how immediacy, or lack thereof, construes compassion. “[It’s] by the way they act. You’ve got someone whose like [in a grunting voice] ‘Yeah, yeah. Here you go, here you go.’ It’s either just repetition, or they’re just there for the paycheck.” In this case, the nonverbal repetitiveness indicated a lack of care. In fact, the phrase “Just there for the paycheck” suggests that presence alone does not indicate compassion. Later, David said that compassion can be communicated by a smile (a positive nonverbal) or remembering names (proactive engagement).

Organizational Immediacy

In addition to demonstrating interpersonal immediacy through nonverbal actions, compassion can be displayed through acts of *organizational* immediacy. Danny, a 21-year-old who had been left behind when his family moved and became homeless when he lost his job, expressed the value of initiating communication. “Compassion to homeless youth is the organization simply driving out during the day or evening looking for them at places that they preferably shouldn’t be, such as the homeless shelter or even just anywhere in that parking lot.” (“That parking lot” is a reference to a local overflow shelter, where half the clients are “housed” in a parking lot.) Danny conceptualizes compassion as going out and initiating connection. By going out, by initiating interaction, it reduces potential embarrassments about asking for services. If immediacy signals availability and reduces psychological distance, then when Danny describes the proactive initiation of presence, he is identifying a form of organizational immediacy.

A corollary to initiating connections is being welcoming. When asked what makes a good organization, Amber said, “Very welcoming. If they can be welcoming, that’s the bomb diggidy.” Going out to find someone and welcoming them when they come in are both forms of organizational immediacy. Immediacy can be conceived as energetic attention to the other. Immediacy is the positive remedy to disengaged, repetitive, and distant communication styles that the young adults find so

unappealing. Immediacy is, in part, a function of organizational practices, namely providing outreach or having inviting intake procedures.

Acts of Service

The final practice involves physical acts of service. Compassion is manifest when, for a period of time, the body of one person lives and moves for the sake of the other. When I asked CJ how he could tell that someone thinks compassion is important, he said, "The volunteers stand in a 100-degree kitchen and cook bacon, pancakes, and eggs for two hours. And then maybe another hour later they go back into that same 100-degree kitchen and make lunch. If that's not compassion, then what is?" Amber provided a related food narrative when asked about displays of compassion. "Great food! Her cooking is amazing. You have to put a lot into that cooking honestly. You know what I'm saying? You know how cooking is. You put work into it, and it always tastes really really good here." Amber highlights the work and love put in above and beyond a peanut butter sandwich. Through the labor of cooking, the staff member makes her body about others, she expends her calories so the young adults can consume theirs. This embodied aboutness is not lost on the young adults.

EMBODIED ABOUTNESS

Presence, immediacy, and acts of service communicate compassion. These practices also collectively represent a communicative orientation I call embodied aboutness. This concept extends compassion theory and improves compassionate practice. Although being present, being immediate, and physically serving are distinct behaviors, they comprise embodied aboutness, or making one's body *about* the other. Being physically present requires one's body. In the case of immediacy, one turns toward the other. Immediacy involves a nonverbal, representational aboutness. "About," as a preposition, means "on the subject of." Turning toward the other is a way of making one's body attend to the subject of the other. In the case of organizational immediacy, the staff embodies a stance (either going out or being welcoming) that makes the organization function "on the subject of" the other. In the case of service, one both performs tasks for the sake of the other and makes a person's body about the other. Presence, immediacy, and acts of service are all instances of embodied aboutness because they involve bodily engagement in the life of the other.

Seeing presence, immediacy, and service as forms of embodied aboutness is more than just an idle categorization. While presence, nonverbal behaviors, organizational stances, and doing for others are ways to be compassionate, noticing the commonalities among these activities helps address the issue of why these practices are read as compassionate. Being willing to make one's body about the other powerfully indicates concern. Embodied aboutness shares our most precious resource—ourselves. Or, as Peters (2000) states, "Touch and time, the two nonreproducible things we can share, are our only guarantees of sincerity" (pp. 270–271).

The concept embodied aboutness extends compassionate communication scholarship in various ways. It supplements two aspects of compassionate organizing outlined by Lilius et al. (2011): high-quality connections and dynamic boundary permeability. Lilius et al. (2011) ultimately labeled high-quality connections and dynamic boundary permeability as relational conditions. Under this frame, practices of embodied aboutness contribute to the relational condition of coembodiment because they help identify how the well-established processes of noticing, connecting, and responding unfold.

Embodied aboutness is not simply physical kindness. In fact, the focus of the young adults on the importance of the body invites a Levinasian approach to communicating compassion. Levinas (1991a) described humans as beings who transcend their physical and social conditions through a preconscious responsibility for and attention to the other. For Levinas (1991b), we are always and already called and compelled by the face of the other. This radical, preontological immediacy of the flesh undergirds all aspects of communication, compassion included. Framed within Levinas's thinking, embodied aboutness can be understood as a compassionate, hospitable orientation to being human in the world.

Guided by this sensibility, each of the subcomponents of compassion—*noticing, connecting, and responding* (Dutton et al., 2006; Miller, 2007)—are improved by attending to embodied aboutness. How can someone notice the suffering of someone they cannot see? How can a person relate to someone they are not with? How does one act to address a need held by a person who is nowhere to be found? One cannot recognize, respond, or react without some form of embodiment. Embodiment is a necessary condition for other functions of compassion to move forward. There is nothing essentially compassionate about noticing, connecting, or responding. Yet, adding embodied aboutness—making one's body about the other—to the other three practices helps the model explain why some forms of noticing, connecting, and responding are compassionate and some are not. Stepping over a collapsed person on the street certainly requires the walker to notice him/her. The walker may even notice the problem. But it is not until the act of noticing involves embodying for the sake of the other that noticing begins to be compassionate.

Way and Tracy (2012) envisioned compassion as the dynamic, nonlinear interrelation between recognizing, relating, and (re)acting with (re)acting at the heart of compassion because it can be done even in the absence of the other two. In this version, embodied aboutness takes on the dual role of context and outcome. Embodied aboutness serves as the context in which the other processes operate. Additionally, when paired with (re)action, presence becomes an outcome of compassion. Compassion enables, drives, and motivates a person to become bodily present, maintain immediacy, and make one's body about the other. Way and Tracy use the heart as a prevailing metaphor for compassion; embodied aboutness serves as a reminder that compassionate hearts abide in and empower bodies.

The reflections of the homeless young adults highlight that bodies are an important part of communicated compassion in organizations. While this dynamic is particularly appropriate for understanding compassion with regard to homeless young adults, I suspect that they see what many others have the luxury of being able to take for

granted. Consider the common social technique of not turning toward a person asking for money. Before I started thinking about homelessness differently, when I walked through a populated urban space, I would strategically not turn toward someone who was begging. I deployed this strategy for various reasons. Sometimes I was afraid. Sometimes I was busy. Sometimes it was to lessen the cognitive dissonance of not helping. Sometimes I was anxious or embarrassed. But whatever the reason, one implication of the practice is that I deprived the person I passed a moment of shared time and space by refusing to let my body be about them.

A single act, or a small series of isolated acts, would likely be beneath notice. But the systematic, ongoing, and nearly ubiquitous practice of denying embodied aboutness constitutes a powerful enactment of marginalization that relegates people living homelessly to the literal periphery of society's collective senses. This isolation is compounded by "no urban camping" laws that force homeless people to live in hidden places, law enforcement practices that sweep homeless people out of highly trafficked areas, and urban development and organizational trends that centralize homeless services out of the public eye. As such, it is no accident that this receiver-focused study of compassion of a marginalized group reveals shared bodies and turning toward as additional aspects of compassion, for although embodied aboutness is an action on the part of the provider, its importance had been missed in provider-focused studies. Perhaps these dynamics were previously underarticulated by prior work because it focused on interaction between people who occupy similar social strata and are less familiar with being treated like they do not exist.

Attending to embodied aboutness as part of the demonstration of compassion highlights the often embodied nature of compassionate communication. It draws attention to bodies, how they are turned, and what they are doing. Communication theories are often processual and abstract, and although this can emphasize important dynamics, it can also obfuscate the physical bodies of the communicators. The young adults call us to reattend to bodies and, in so doing, reaffirm Miller's (2007) prediction that compassion does indeed involve nonverbal components.

Embodied aboutness also has relevance to scholarship beyond compassionate communication. For instance, compassionate communication is related to listening. While merely hearing is often constructed as an individual experience, listening requires attention to the life of the other (Bodie & Crick, 2014). Specifically, listening literature echoes social justice and embodied components. Dutta (2014) presents a vivid account of the socially transformational capability of listening. For Dutta, listening has the potential to interrogate and reimagine oppressive cultural and structural regimes that favor the global elite at the expense of the marginalized. With regard to bodies, studies of active listening draw attention to its nonverbal aspects (Bodie, Cannava, Vickery, & Jones, 2016).

Compassion relates to the communication of social support as well, including emotional, instrumental, informational, appraisal, and companionship support (House, 1981; Wills, 1991). These different strains can be separated conceptually, but in practice they are usually blended together (Heaney & Israel, 2008). Social support includes actions and interactions that the provider intends to be helpful (MacGeorge,

Feng, & Burleson, 2011). However, like compassionate communication (Huffman, 2015), not all support is received or felt by the one it is intended to help (High & Solomon, 2016). Embodied aboutness links nonverbal listening behaviors to other forms of social support expression. Perhaps the human experience of feeling heard and feeling cared for can be authenticated by the same seal: the body of the other.

Homelessness research benefits from embodied aboutness. Discourses of homelessness construct homeless bodies as broken and separate from whole and homed bodies (Loehwing, 2010). Not only is the homeless body a locus for rhetorical construction, the symbolic burden of homelessness is often carried by people without homes in embodied ways (Farrugia, 2010). Massumi (2002) argued that subjectivity is lived. It is not merely a linguistic articulation, but an embodied experience. As such, the marginalization, judgment, and disdain associated with homelessness can become an attack on the embodied experience of the person, which, in turn, can threaten his or her sense of ontological worth (Farrugia, 2010) as the body becomes saturated in historicized power relations (Bourdieu, 1984). Bodies, what they mean, and what they are “worth” become a profoundly painful dimension of social inequity. As such, it stands to reason that the equitable and dignifying use of bodies become a powerful communicative opportunity for building, or rather, reembodying a just society. Embodied aboutness offers a direct, interactional communication strategy that operates within the broader cultural, organizational, and discursive realities of living without a home described by communication scholars.

Embodied Aboutness in Practice

This scholarship serves as a reminder that the young adults’ perceptions of service provider motivations matter and that these perceptions are largely determined by nonverbal and embodied communicative dynamics. Embodied aboutness is valuable for organizational service providers who wish to demonstrate care to others and become frustrated when someone suggests they do not care enough. Demonstrating embodied aboutness can be achieved in various ways. With regard to nonverbal immediacy, turning toward, looking at, making eye contact, and attending to the other are read as indicators of authentic care. Although computers are often an important part of intake, making an effort to turn one’s body toward the other communicates presence and, potentially, compassion. This may mean turning a chair so the default position is toward the client/customer/patient as opposed to the computer or employing tablets to enable more immediacy. Immediacy also can guide daily interactions. In busy environments, it is easy to get frustrated by people coming up to ask questions. However, finding ways to respond to questions and requests with immediacy by using moments of totally engaged nonverbal behavior has value. Ultimately, immediacy supports arguments for client-centered processes.

With regard to physical acts of service, going above and beyond, even if just in little ways, can profoundly affect the way clients perceive themselves, the staff, the organization, and even humanity or the world at large. As such, it is worth fostering personal care in work. Indeed, customer service scholars affirm the value of personalized care and attentiveness (Gabbott & Hogg, 2000; Wuthnow, 1991; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, &

Berry, 1990). However, embodied aboutness serves as a conceptual tool and can be used by organizations as a guiding heuristic for generating compassionate communication practices specific to their contexts.

On the broader policy end, these findings are also instructive. Since homeless young adults read so much into presence, immediacy, and acts of service, delivering effective, compassionate service with limited staff is challenging especially in an age when staff is smaller and clients more numerous (Baines, 2010). The ability to fund enough well-trained staff continues to be a central issue (Boris, de Leon, Roeger, & Nikolova, 2010) even though not all acts of compassion require more time. In the cases where compassionate communication does take more time, I suggest that a more strategic use of volunteers in service delivery has promise. There are many ways to structure paid staff and volunteer contributions (Brody, 2005) as hosts, client advocates, and organizational boundary spanners.

Finally, these findings in this study serve as a critique of physical spaces that disrupt immediacy, like service windows and food kitchen lines. Although the homeless young adults used organizations like these, they did not report them as sources of compassionate interaction. Creating compassionate communication probably calls for rethinking or dismantling the physical structures that control movement inside organizations (see Papa, Papa, Kandath, Worrell, & Muthuswamy, 2005).

Limitations and Future Research

Prior homeless communication scholarship challenges and limits the notion of embodied aboutness. Specifically, Loehwing (2010) contends that discourse constructs people without homes as victims of present-centeredness. Thus, housing becomes a signifier for investment in the future. As such, the unhomed become pathologically mired in the present. Emphasizing the present is echoed when charitable organizations make appeals to immediacy with regard to outreach. However, the consequence of these discursive constructions is an image of people without homes as wounded subjects unable to consider the future and, therefore, unable to fully participate in the democratic conversations of interdependency we must engage as a society.

While my study's findings are indeed a discourse of immediacy and presence, it is worth taking a moment to put it in context. The communication of compassion is deepened by present-centeredness. However, compassion is by no means the only ethical or requisite response to issues of homelessness. All social inequity, homelessness included, requires strategic planning, long-term action, and attention to historical and structural forces. While compassion may manifest when we use our bodies for the sake of other, compassion is not enough. The work of social justice also demands respect, democracy, mutuality, and structural change.

The experiences of homeless young adults in nonprofit organizations extend our understanding of which communication practices are interpreted as compassionate. Embodied aboutness may well be pivotal to all compassionate communication and perhaps it is merely more legible in the context of homelessness. The intentional use of one's body to indicate care is a powerful communication practice applicable to all human endeavors.

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