

The Community of Ethics

Short note

Compassion as an attribute of Ethics of Public Service

In my session on the 'Ethics of Public Service', I have sometimes related the incident of my encounter with a large group of polio stricken children. Seeing more than two hundred young children on crutches was a life changing experience and it naturally brought up feeling of compassion in a hard boiled bureaucrat like me. What I did to help them is another story. But it set me thinking that administrative officers like deputy commissioners and commissioners would also have seen the same spectacle on their visits to the area. Did they react the same way I did? If not, why not?

Then it occurred to me that people in authority could amplify the value of their service to the people if they could be nudged to feel compassion in day to day situations faced by them.

We the civil servants are not always very good at understanding what the other person is thinking or feeling even when trying to put ourselves in their shoes. Our brains often trick us into seeing only what we already believe; for example we see different levels of protester violence depending on whether we agree with the cause being protested. We cannot see the same event the same way.

More often than not, we see our differences. We fail to see our commonalities. We do not identify ourselves with the prototype of the civil services and claim that 'I am different'. We do not realize that this can create a lot of antipathy. We always cannot trust ourselves to see others clearly. Seeing our limitations is a good first step in recognizing the reality. 'How I see my infallibility determines how willing I am to demonise the people who are on the other side'.

Though it is a well known trait of kindness and religions talk about human suffering and compassionate acts to ameliorate it, research has paid meagre attention to the subject of Compassion as a component/complement of social or professional Ethics.

What is compassion in the context of public service?

There appears to be a broad consensus that compassion involves feeling for a person who is suffering and being motivated to act to help them. Within Buddhism, compassion is seen not only as an emotional response but also as a response

founded on reason and wisdom which is embedded in an ethical framework concerned with the selfless intention of freeing others from suffering.

I believe that compassion shown as a normal self expression by civil servants is a commendable attribute of Ethics of Public Service. A lady officer saw an old man standing silently in a corner while making a field inspection and enquired whether he had any problem. When told by the other villagers that the poor man had cataract in both his eyes and had no one to look after him, she took the old man in her vehicle to the eye hospital. She left instructions with the medical superintendent to do the necessary surgery free of charge and to send him back to his village. (Usha Padhi)

Compassion is often confused with empathy. Empathy is defined as the emotional experience of another person's feelings. It is, in a sense, an automatic mirroring of another's emotion, like tears coming to one's eyes at the grief of a dear friend.

Altruism is an action that benefits someone else. It may or may not be accompanied by empathy or compassion, for example in the case of making a donation to a trust for tax purposes.

Although these terms are related to compassion, they are not identical. Compassion often does involve an empathic response and an altruistic behaviour. However, compassion is defined as the emotional response when perceiving suffering and involves an authentic desire to help. Connecting with others in a meaningful way helps us enjoy better mental and physical health and speeds up recovery from disease. It may even lengthen our life spans.

In another case, a young civil servant serving as a district magistrate was so moved by the sight of little children in the hot Rajasthan villages going around barefoot because their families were too poor to afford footwear for them. He made it his conviction to distribute shoes by starting the 'Operation Charan Paduka' and till now more than a lakh pairs have been distributed under the project. (Jitendra Soni)

An additional way in which compassion may increase our well-being is by enhancing a sense of connection to others. Compassion may also help broaden our perspective beyond ourselves and may serve as a buffer against stress

Compassion at times is contagious. Even seeing someone helping another person creates a state of elevation. It releases the hormone Oxytocin and makes us feel good. That elevation then inspires us to help others and it may just be the force behind a chain reaction of giving.

You may have seen one of the news reports about chain reactions that occur when someone pays for the coffee of the drivers behind them at a drive-through restaurant or at a highway tollbooth. People keep the generous behaviour going for hours.

Although compassion appears to be a naturally evolved instinct, it sometimes helps to receive some training. A number of studies have now shown that a variety of compassion and meditation practices derived out of traditional Buddhist practices may help cultivate compassion. A number of efforts have been made to measure the level of compassion based upon the ingredients identified.

More research is needed to understand exactly how compassion training improves well-being and promotes altruistic behaviour.

In collaboration with Thupten Jinpa, personal assistant to the Dalai Lama, CCARE (The Centre for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education) of Stanford University has developed a secular compassion training program known as the Compassion Cultivation Training Program. Preliminary research suggests that it is helpful in reducing ailments such as social anxiety and that it elevates different compassion measures.

It may be a good idea to study the subject of compassion as a component of Ethics of Public Service.

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