



Compassion practice, evolutionary advantage, and social resilience: the triad worth SEPR community's attention

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By now, the COVID-19 pandemic has been around for over 20 months. What has it shown to the world which we the socio-ecological practice research (SEPR) community should take notice of and, better yet, can dig into for insight?

First, it is a recurring global common threat and super wicked problem.

If the COVID-19 pandemic has ever shown anything about itself that is beyond a shadow of a doubt, it is that the pandemic has a dual identity inherited from the 1918 influenza pandemic, nicknamed “the mother of all pandemics” by American virologists David Morens and Jeffery Taubenberger (Morens & Taubenberger 2018, p.1449). That is, it is a global common threat to which no human being on the

earth is immune; and a super wicked problem to which a solution of any kind creates new and often worse problems.¹

Exhibiting this infamous ancestral identity to its fullest extent, the COVID-19 pandemic has been doing exactly, if not more aggressively, what its ancestor did notoriously over a century ago. Since late 2019, it has dealt a punishing, devastating blow indiscriminately to human life in every corner of the world and triggered globally a tsunami of mutually exacerbating catastrophes. Once again, it has turned the global village upside down into a distrusting, fearful swamp where “a [public] health crisis became an economic crisis, a food crisis, a housing crisis, a political crisis. Everything collided with everything else.” (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 2020, p.4).²

Second, suffering is a shared human experience; compassion practice promotes survival and well-being.

If the COVID-19 pandemic has ever proven anything about us, *Homo sapiens*, which is also beyond a shadow of a doubt, it is the same dual reality our ancestors experienced

¹ [1] The characteristic of wicked problems, “proposed ‘solutions’ often turn out to be worse than the symptoms” (Churchman 1967, p.B-141), can be described with a medical term *iatrogenic* in that solutions to an existing problem will almost inevitably induce new, equally if not more wicked problems that could be well beyond people’s imaginations (Xiang 2021a, p.76). For definition of iatrogenic, see Collins English Dictionary (2020). [2] For a summary on “wicked problems and tame problems”, see Xiang (2021a, pp.76–77); for the origin of the conceptions, see Churchman (1967) and Skaburskis (2008); for a recent literature review, see Termeer et al. (2019). [3] A common threat is a danger—something or someone that can hurt or harm people—that may happen to every individual human being in a certain place (e.g., the earth, a country, a region, a city, a village, or a community) to the extent that no one in that place is immune; a common threat can come from a natural disaster, a human conflict, or a combination of both (Palko & Xiang 2020, p.260; Xiang 2020, p.200). Some choose to use “collective threat” in lieu of “common threat” with comparable meaning [e.g., Gelfand (2021); Gelfand et al. (2021)].

² Throughout the essay, parentheses in direct quotations are added by the author for clarity unless noted otherwise.

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during the 1918 pandemic. That is, in the presence of such vicious global common threat and super wicked problem, suffering is a shared human experience from which no one is exempt, and practicing compassion is both a moral behavior and an effective strategy for human survival and well-being.

This time, like our ancestors in the 1918 pandemic, all of us are involuntarily on the virus' blacklist, and to a varying extent, we are all victims of, *inter alia*, the related sickness, loss of loved ones, fear, loneliness, depression, economic hardships, domestic violence, deepened poverty, social unrest, and political turmoil. But at the same time, we are also witnesses and beneficiaries of numerous instances of compassion practice, in which people helped those, including total strangers, who were in danger or distress, even if doing so could incur a risk to their own lives and/or well-being.³ The compassionate acts people took, whether donating personal protective equipment (PPE) and vaccines,⁴ volunteering at hospitals and nursing homes in the hardest-hit cities (e.g., Wuhan, China and New York City, the USA), or just observing social distancing and self-isolation rules, getting fully vaccinated, and wearing mask, helped save lives and assuage the suffering of others. Compassion practice has been borne out once more to be what British naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–1882) proposed 150 years ago—a moral behavior and an effective strategy for human survival and well-being that may confer an evolutionary advantage to communities and societies.

In his 1871 book *The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex*, “Darwin proposed that natural selection would favor the occurrence of compassion,” writes American psychologist Paul Ekman in a 2010 essay entitled *Darwin's compassionate view of human nature* (Ekman 2010, p.557).

According to Paul Ekman, in the fourth chapter of this “greatest unread book, ... Darwin explained the origin of what he called sympathy (which today would be termed empathy, altruism, or compassion—sic), describing how humans and other animals come to the aid of others in distress. ... (H)e wrote that the highest moral achievement is

concern for the welfare of all living beings, human and non-human.” (*Ibid.*) Darwin then proposed that in this capacity, compassion practice confers an evolutionary advantage to communities where compassion is widely practiced:

In however complex a manner this feeling [of sympathy, or compassion—see Ekman's note in the above quote] may have originated, as it is one of high importance to all those animals which aid and defend one another, *it will have been increased through natural selection; for those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic [i.e., compassionate] members, would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring* (Darwin 1871/2004, p.130; italics by the author of this essay).

It is noteworthy that even though this facet of Darwin's thinking about compassion practice and human evolution is unknown to many (Ekman 2010, p.557), some scholars have followed his line of reasoning inadvertently and proposed comparable ideas.⁵

The evolutionary advantage compassion practice confers to communities and societies is an essential part of their collective ability to effectively cope with the vicissitudes of the surrounding world. Throughout human history, it is this ability that has enabled many communities and societies to overcome extreme difficulties and survive unpredictable vicissitudes of nature and life. This ability is codified by contemporary scholars as *social resilience*, a nomenclature rooted in the 1973 seminal work of Canadian ecologist Crawford Holling (1930–2019) (Holling 1973).⁶

³ [1] Compassion and compassion practice are related yet distinct constructs (Chen & Xiang 2020, pp.338–341). Compassion is an affective and motivational thought of a human being about the well-being of other human beings or even all sentient beings. It comprises a dual mental state: a sympathetic emotion about the suffering of another individual or group; and a concomitant desire to help assuage the suffering for the welfare of that individual or group. Compassion practice is a mental-behavioral process in which one reaches the dual mental state through meditation or contemplation; and fulfills the desire to help through actions (*Ibid.*, p.338). [2] For a useful comparison of compassion with other related yet distinct constructs of altruism, compassionate love, empathy, pity, and sympathy, see Jimenez (2009, pp. 210–211); for the relationship between compassion and self-compassion, see Chen & Xiang (2020, p. 339).

⁴ Personal protective equipment (PPE) is specialized clothing or equipment, worn by a healthcare worker for protection against infectious materials. It includes gloves, gowns/aprons, masks and respirators, respirators, goggles, and face shields (CDC 2004).

⁵ For a recent example, American scholar Michael Garstang generalizes in his 2015 book that for all sentient beings, evolutionarily moral behaviors are those that promote survival (Garstang 2015, p.x). In *Elephant sense and sensibility: behavior and cognition*, he writes, drawing on a lifelong research on African elephants, “Even though value is seen as a human creation, made both possible and necessary by human rationality, *the basis for moral behavior rests upon behavior that promoted survival. Elements of such behavior are present in all species ...*” (*Ibid.*; italics by the author of this essay).

⁶ [1] For definitions of social resilience, see Adger (2000), Keck & Sakdapolrak (2013), and Kwok et al. (2016). For reviews about the art and science of resilience, see Beller et al. (2018), Biggs et al. (2015), Folke et al. (2021), Gunderson (2000), Meerow et al. (2016), Romero-Lankao et al. (2016), and Wu & Wu (2013), among others. [2] As human communities and societies are dependent on ecological systems for their livelihoods and human activities have increasingly significant impacts on ecosystems [Daily 1997; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), 2005], social resilience is closely connected with *ecological resilience*—the ability of natural ecosystems to sustain themselves in the face of disturbance (Adger 2000). In the literature, some use *social-ecological resilience*—“the resilience of social-ecological systems” (Folke et al. 2021, p.1774; Gret-Regamey et al. 2019, p.290)—to highlight this connection [e.g., Folke et al. (2021, p.1776)]. [3] In this essay, the choice of using *social resilience* in lieu of *social-ecological resilience* was made deliberately for a more streamlined and focused discussion.

Compassion practice as such becomes a way to build social resilience through the evolutionary advantage it confers. At the risk of oversimplification, the nexus between compassion practice, evolutionary advantage, and social resilience can be expressed as follows:

The greater the number of compassionate members in a community or society, the bigger the evolutionary advantage their compassion practice would confer, and the more resilient the community or society could become; and vice versa.

In a recent essay with a provocative title *Resilience: now more than ever*, Swedish resilience scholar Carl Folke and coauthor colleagues advocate “nurturing resilience” as a strategy to seize the window of opportunity the COVID-19 pandemic provides for making major systemic transformational changes in the human society (Folke et al. 2021, pp.1175–1176). They write,

Clearly, nurturing resilience is of great significance in such systemic transformational change towards sustainable futures and *requires collective action on multiple fronts, action that is already being tested by increasing turbulence incurred by seemingly unrelated shocks* (*Ibid.*, p.1176; italics by the author of this essay).

Compassion practice is certainly well-qualified as one such collective action. As articulated earlier in this essay, not only is it “already being tested by” the COVID-19 pandemic and continuously going strong, but it has also passed many tests of “turbulence” throughout human history, including the one over 100 years ago by “the mother of all pandemics.”

For the SEPR community, there is a triad of social responsibilities coming along with the triad of compassion practice, evolutionary advantage, and social resilience. These are:

1. *practicing compassion in life and work* to nurture social resilience in communities and societies;
2. *advocating the nexus* between compassion practice, evolutionary advantage, and social resilience; and
3. *publicizing exemplary instances of compassion practice* in the history of socio-ecological practice.⁷

⁷ [1] In fact, many have already acted on this triad and, through SEPR, some shared their experience and convictions. Examples of (1) *practicing compassion in life and work* include Chen & Yuan (2020), Douglas (2020a-b), and Wang (2020); (2) *advocating the nexus* include Forester & McKibbin (2020), Hu (2020), Palko & Xiang (2020), and Zheng (2020); and Chen & Xiang (2020) is an example of (3) *publicizing exemplary instances of compassion practice in socio-ecological practice*. [2] Advocating compassion practice in the academy is not new. See, for example, Lyles & White (2019), Lyles et al. (2018), and Tsui (2013).

Fulfilling this triad of responsibilities will enable the SEPR community to better serve the ultimate purpose of socio-ecological practice—“to bring about a secure, harmonious, and sustainable socio-ecological condition serving human beings’ need for survival, development, and flourishing.” (Xiang 2019a, p.7) The knowledge the community members generate while fulfilling one or any combination of the three responsibilities will contribute to the scholarship of *ecopracticology*—the study of socio-ecological practice. Therefore, both the process and outcome of this worthy endeavor should be archived and publicized through the community’s flagship journal *Socio-Ecological Practice Research*.⁸ As the editor, I pledge that they will, and hereby invite all members of the SEPR community to participate and contribute.

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⁸ For an introduction to the emerging field *ecopracticology*, see Xiang (2019a); for an overview of the journal, including its 11 article types, see Xiang (2019b).

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