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Chapter

From Empathy to the Aggression–Compassion Continuum

Neil E. Grunberg and Erin S. Barry

Abstract

Empathy is relevant to but not sufficient to fully understand relationships. Recent research has proposed that empathy is part of a continuum—from pity to sympathy to empathy to compassion—and that compassion is the key to building good relationships because it includes actions. We offer an extension of this concept to include neutrality (apathy) and add four constructs of opposition—from antipathy to animosity to hostility to aggression. We describe all nine constructs with regard to cognitive, emotional, and behavioral support or opposition. Further, we propose that it is useful to consider these constructs in terms of character, competence, context, and communication at four psychosocial levels—personal, interpersonal, team, and organizational. We believe that relationships can be best addressed with these concepts in mind and that application of the support versus oppose poles of the aggression-compassion continuum are not equivalent to good and bad.

Keywords: compassion, empathy, sympathy, pity, apathy, antipathy, animosity, hostility, aggression

1. Introduction

Over the past millennium, countless individuals have offered some version of the concept that actions are particularly important to human relationships. In the 1200s, Francisican friar Anthony of Padua is attributed with saying, "... let your words teach and your actions speak." In 1628, John Pym said, "... actions are more precious than words." In 1693, Thomas Manton wrote, "... Work and Scope ... speak much louder than Words." In 1856, Abraham Lincoln said, "'Actions speak louder than words' is the maxim." Or, in modern vernacular, "Don't just talk the talk; walk the walk [1]." Yet, what we do depends on what we think and feel. Therefore, it is important to understand how thinking, feeling, and behaving relate to each other.

Psychology involves cognitions, motivations/emotions, and behaviors. Cognitions are what we perceive, think, and believe. Motivations/emotions are how we feel and underlie why we think and act as we do. Behaviors are actions that we take, for and against ourselves and others. What we think matters; what we feel matters; what we say matters; but what we actually do probably matters most, especially with regard to treatment and relationships with others.

During the twentieth century and continuing to this day, empathy has received interest and attention from counselors, educators, life coaches, spiritual leaders, political leaders, scholars, and researchers in the social sciences and neurosciences because of its relevance to all aspects of life and interactions with others. The fact that empathy is the subject of this volume exemplifies the breadth and depth of interest is this psychosocial concept.

Recently, the question has been raised whether empathy *per se* is sufficient to understand and to help improve relationships and the human condition or, instead, that actions must flow from feelings to truly matter. Hougaard and colleagues [2, 3] have proposed that empathy alone is necessary but not sufficient to optimize relationships; instead, compassion that includes actions is necessary to build better relationships. These authors further propose that empathy lies along a continuum of feeling and acting with regard to others, ranging from pity to sympathy to empathy to compassion. We agree that distinguishing among these concepts and how they relate to each other is valuable, but we believe that these concepts are a subset of a broader psychosocial continuum that ranges from aggression to compassion. In addition, we suggest that understanding the psychological constructs which exist along this broader continuum also requires consideration of four elements of each of us at four psychosocial levels [4–7]. This chapter addresses these topics.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the scholarly origins of empathy because of the substantial attention already given to this particular concept and because empathy is the focus of this volume. That discussion introduces the importance of actions beyond thoughts and feelings. Next, we present nine different psychological constructs along an aggression-compassion continuum that includes two dimensions. Each construct is defined and briefly explained. Then, we present four biopsychosocial aspects of people—character, competence, context, communication—and four psychosocial levels—personal, interpersonal, team, organizational. We relate these eight elements to the constructs of the Aggression-Compassion Continuum. Finally, we discuss how the constructs that appear on the Aggression-Compassion Continuum are distinguished from good and bad cognitions, emotions, and behaviors.

2. Scholarly origins of "empathy"

Empathy refers to cognitive and emotional responses aligned with others' thoughts and feelings. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, empathy is "understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner [8]."

Interestingly, in 1871 Charles Darwin described how humans and animals come to help others. Darwin's discussion of what he called "sympathy" included concern and actions that are more similar to what we now refer to as "empathy" and "compassion [9]." This focus on concern and actions for the welfare of others complemented Darwin's notions of competition and survival of the fittest [10].

Consistent with Darwin's Theory of Continuity of Species, primatologist Frans de Waal has noted that apes and other infrahuman species also demonstrate behaviors that involve caring for others and, perhaps, feeling the emotions of others [11]. Shortly after Darwin's [9] discussion about humans and animals helping others, the German concept of "Einfühlung"—or "feeling into"—was introduced by Robert Vischer in 1873 to explain relations of people to others and to artwork [12]. This

particular application of "feeling into" to understand other people as well as reactions to artwork was further discussed by Theodor Lipps [13, 14] (cf. Curtis and Elliott [15] for a historical overview). Edward Titchener [16] and James Ward (cf. Lanzoni [17]) translated this concept with the English word "empathy [12]."

In the twentieth century, empathy has been addressed in more detail by authors, scholars, and scientists with a wide range of interests and expertise. The study and analysis of empathy and how it relates to other psychological constructs, such as sympathy and compassion, is ongoing among psychologists and neuroscientists.

For example, author and motivational speaker Brené Brown has offered that empathy involves four qualities that distinguish it from sympathy [18–21]:

- To be able to see the world as others see it

- To be nonjudgmental

- To understand another's feelings

- To communicate your understanding of that person's feelings

Other researchers have differentiated between "emotional or affective empathy" and "cognitive empathy," where "affective empathy" involves sensations and feelings in response to others' emotions and "cognitive empathy" involves identification and understanding of others' emotions [22, 23].

Emotional empathy consists of three separate components, according to Hodges and Myers:

- Feeling the same emotion as another person

- Personal distress in response to perceiving another's plight

- Feeling compassion for another person

Cognitive empathy (or empathic accuracy) refers to how well we can perceive and understand the emotions of another [23, 24].

Psychologists Daniel Goleman and Paul Ekman have identified three components of empathy, that include cognitive and emotional (or affective) and adding "compassionate empathy"— a prelude to Hougaard and Carter's distinction between empathy and compassion [22]. With regard to these three components of empathy [11, 22, 25]:

- Emotional empathy involves sharing another's feelings and matching that person's behavioral states by "simulation"

- Cognitive empathy or perspective taking or theory of mind involves thinking about and understanding another's feelings

- Empathetic concern, or compassion, adds motivation and intent to act in order to do something about another's suffering

Denworth [26] has suggested that empathetic concern is "compassion" and includes motivation to help; i.e., to take action. Neuroscientists also are studying

empathy and compassion and are seeking to identify neural circuits and specific regions of the brain that are involved in and that distinguish between these constructs [27, 28]. Empathy requires the involvement of neural networks that underlie perception of others' emotions, ability to connect with them emotionally and cognitively, and ability to distinguish between our own and others' emotions [29].

Social neuroscientists have offered two theories of empathy: (a) Simulation Theory and (b) Theory of the Mind. Simulation Theory proposes that empathy occurs because when we see another person experiencing an emotion, we simulate that to know what it feels like. It has been suggested that this phenomenon involves "mirror neurons" that are activated when we observe and experience emotion and that the medial prefrontal cortex is primarily involved. Theory of Mind proposes that we use thought processes to explain the mental state of others. In addition, context and situation affect which of these empathetic responses occur [23, 30, 28].

With regard to compassion, Gilbert [31] has suggested that compassion arose from the evolutionary advantage of caring for others, especially offspring, kin, and in-group allies. Rasmus Hougaard [32] has proposed that compassion is better for humanity than empathy for four reasons:

- Empathy is impulsive. Compassion is deliberate.

- Empathy is divisive. Compassion is unifying.

- Empathy is inert. Compassion is active.

- Empathy is draining. Compassion is regenerative.

He also argues that: compassion can be developed; we should have more self-compassion; and that we should practice compassion daily [32].

Neff has emphasized the importance of self-compassion as well as compassion for other people [33–35]. Hougaard and colleagues [2, 3] went even further and proposed that empathy alone is not sufficient to optimize relationships. Instead, these authors emphasized that compassion is necessary to influence relationships because compassion includes actions. These authors offered a pictorial representation of a continuum of feeling and acting with regard to others, ranging from pity to sympathy to empathy to compassion. We believe that this representation is important and relevant to consider in building relationships, but that it is only part of a broader continuum and additional, related concepts.

3. The aggression-compassion continuum

Figure 1 depicts nine constructs that we believe are relevant to human relations and well-being (including self, dyads, teams, and organizations): Aggression, Hostility, Animosity, Antipathy, Apathy, Pity, Sympathy, Empathy, Compassion. The four constructs that appear in the upper right quadrant and in the manner presented in **Figure 1** are based on Hougaard and Carter [2]. The addition of the other five constructs with the particular two-dimension labels is new. We have labelled the axes differently from Hougaard and Carter [2] to capture the three key aspects of psychology: cognitions, emotions, and behaviors. The x-axis is labelled "Cognitive and Emotional"
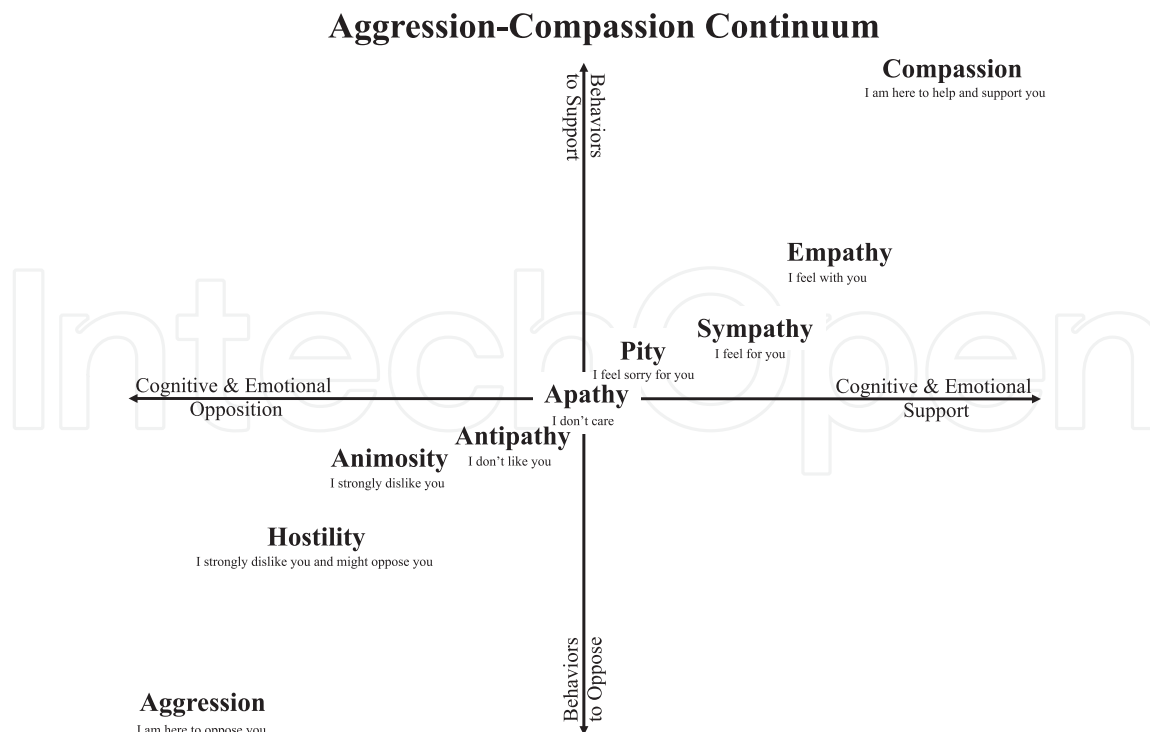
Aggression-Compassion Continuum

Figure 1.
Aggression-compassion continuum.

ranging from "Opposition" on the far left to "Support" on the far right; the y-axis is labelled as "Behaviors" from "Opposition" on the bottom to "Support" on the top. In addition, each construct appears in **Figure 1** in a location meant to correspond to the relative amount of each type of support or opposition. Each of the nine constructs is defined and differentiated in this section of the chapter following a comment about word meanings.

3.1 A comment about word meanings

The study of the origin of words and the way in which their meanings change (Etymology) is relevant to understand the distinctions among the concepts along the Aggression-Compassion continuum. Words with the "–ion" suffix (including Aggression and Compassion) are nouns of state, condition, or action. Words with the "–ity" suffix (including Pity, Apathy, Antipathy, Animosity, Hostility) are nouns of condition or quality of being. Words that include "–path" refer to "suffering" and "–pathy" refers to "one versed in" (for example, Apathy, Antipathy) [36]. Based on this information about word origins, Aggression and Compassion are appropriate poles on the Action (Behavior) axis of **Figure 1**.

3.2 The "support" quadrant of the aggression-compassion continuum

The upper right quadrant of **Figure 1** lists four psychological constructs and can be broadly categorized as the "support" quadrant because all of the constructs that appear in this quadrant provide some sort of support. The support can be cognitive and emotional; it also can be behavioral support. The four constructs that appear in this quadrant increase in amount of all types of support provided from pity to sympathy to empathy to compassion.

Pity refers to one's own cognitive response to another's negative experiences or an expression of sorrow. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines pity as "sympathetic sorrow for one suffering, distressed, or unhappy [37]." Pity can be summed up by, "I feel sorry for you [2, 38]."

Sympathy refers to one's own thoughts and deep feelings of concern for others. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines sympathy as "an affinity, association, or relationship between persons or things wherein whatever affects one similarly affects the other [39]." Sympathy involves a deeper, more personal level of concern than pity with pity as an expression of sorrow. Sympathy involves understanding from one's own perspective and does not include shared emotion with others. Sympathy can be summed up by, "I feel for you [2]."

Empathy refers to cognitive and emotional responses aligned with others' thoughts and feelings. It involves a cognitive and emotional connection that assumes the perspective and feelings of others and includes understanding why others feel as they do. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, empathy involves "understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner [8]." Empathy can be summed up by, "I feel with you [2, 40]."

Compassion refers to cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses (or intention to act) in response to others' thoughts and feelings. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines compassion as "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it [41]." Compassion can be summed up by, "I am here to help and support you [2, 35]."

3.3 The neutral point of the aggression-compassion continuum

Apathy refers to a lack of thoughts or feelings. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines apathy as a "lack of feeling or emotion; impassiveness; lack of interest or concern; indifference [42]." Apathy turns a blind eye to issues, situations, and people. It is, therefore, the "neutral" point on the Aggression-Compassion Continuum and can be summed up by, "I don't care [40]."

3.4 The "Oppose" quadrant of the aggression-compassion continuum

The lower left quadrant of **Figure 1** lists four psychological constructs and can be broadly categorized as the "oppose" quadrant because all of the constructs that appear in this quadrant provide some sort of opposition. The opposition can be cognitive and emotional; it also can be behavioral opposition. The four constructs that appear in this quadrant increase in amount of all types of opposition provided from antipathy to animosity to hostility to aggression.

Antipathy refers to dislike according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary [43]. It includes opposition in feeling, aversion, dislike, repugnance, distaste. Antipathy can be summed up as, "I don't like you [44]."

Animosity refers to a stronger dislike. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines animosity as "a strong feeling of dislike or hatred; ill will or resentment tending toward active hostility; an antagonistic attitude [45]." Animosity is violent hatred leading to opposition and active enmity. Animosity can be summed up as, "I strongly dislike you [44]."

Hostility refers to dislike that is so strong that it may include intent to take action against others. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines hostility as "deep-seated usually mutual ill will, conflict, opposition, or resistance in thought or principle [46]." Both animosity and hostility refer to strong dislike and opposition, but hostility includes unfriendliness or opposition that can lead to actions. Hostility can be summed as, "I strongly dislike you and might oppose you [47]."

Aggression refers to taking actions to oppose, dominate, or injure others. According the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, aggression is "a forceful action or procedure especially when intended to dominate or master; the practice of making attacks or encroachments; hostile, injurious, or destructive behavior or outlook [48]." Aggression has action associated with the thoughts and feelings and can be summed up as, "I am here to oppose you [49]."

4. Psychosocial elements to consider

With regard to the nine psychological constructs on the Aggression-Compassion continuum, there may be a tendency to think about these nine psychological constructs as involving relationships only between oneself and another individual. In fact, they are relevant to four psychosocial levels: Personal, Interpersonal, Team, Organizational. These four categories have been described as part of the Leader-Follower Framework (LF2) because they refer to and help guide understanding of the individual (personal or self), relationships between two people (interpersonal), interactions within small teams, and consideration of large groups, cultures, systems (organizational). The LF2 also distinguishes among four biopsychosocial aspects of people: character (who we are), competence (what we think, feel, and do), context (when and where we are), and communication (how we express ourselves and seek understanding). Each of these topics is described below [4–7]:

Character (Who we are) refers to biological, psychological, and social aspects of each person or group (e.g., physical characteristics, demographics, personality, attitudes, beliefs, values, biases). Character includes integrity, reliability, responsibility, dependability, and moral compass, but also can include the opposite of each of these admirable qualities.

Competence (What we know and do) refers to knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) relevant to a particular role, position, task, or situation as well as to more general KSAs (e.g., critical thinking, decision-making, problem solving, open-mindedness, emotional intelligence).

Context (When and Where we are) includes physical (outside and inside us), psychological, social, and cultural environments, such as time of day, climates, nutritional state, sleep, mental and behavioral health, size of group, relationships within a group, societal practices, and belief systems. Context also includes effects of physical and mental stress or misunderstanding that can alter thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Communication (How we strive for understanding) includes sending and receiving information, verbally and nonverbally.

Personal refers to psychological, biological, and experiential aspects of the individual or oneself. *Personal Character* includes demographics, attitudes, values, beliefs, biases, personality, emotions, motivations, and self-awareness. *Personal Competence* includes knowledge, skills, abilities, and actions. *Personal Context* includes physical,

psychosocial, and situational environments outside and within ourself. *Personal Communication* includes abilities to take in and record information (e.g., reading, understanding, notes, reflections, how others perceive us vs how we perceive ourself).

Interpersonal refers to dyadic relationships between two people. *Interpersonal Character* includes shared or opposing cognitions and emotions. *Interpersonal Competence* includes shared or opposing actions. *Interpersonal Context* includes physical and psychosocial environments relevant to the dyad. *Interpersonal Communication* involves sharing information and understanding (or lack thereof) between the dyad.

Team is a small group of people mutually committed to common goals. *Team Character* refers to shared values and trust among the members. *Team Competence* refers to understanding the KSAs of the members. *Team Context* refers to the environments and situations in which the members exist. *Team Communication* involves shared understanding among the members.

Organizational refers to large groups of people, institutions, and systems. *Organizational Character* refers to the large group's values and mission. *Organizational Competence* refers to the large group's KSAs. *Organizational Context* refers to the large group's culture. *Organizational Communication* involves understanding among the members of the large groups.

5. Relating the LF2 elements to the constructs of the aggression-compassion continuum

We submit that all eight of the LF2 elements should be applied to better understand each of the nine constructs along the Aggression-Compassion Continuum. This type of analysis will likely reveal contributing factors to each of the constructs. Such understanding may suggest how to better work with others.

For example, consider Aggression and each of the LF2 elements. Is the reason an individual acts aggressively because of character (e.g., personality, differing values, mental health), competence (e.g., KSAs to act aggressively or the lack of KSAs to control oneself and to not act aggressively), context (e.g., hunger, tiredness, stress, situation, existential threat), or communication (e.g., the only option to convey intended meaning or lack of options to reach understanding)? Is the individual acting aggressively towards oneself (personal), one other (interpersonal), a team, or an organization/culture system? Also, is the individual acting aggressively because of personal (e.g., self-hate, frustration), interpersonal (e.g., disagreement with a single other person), team (e.g., going along with others or opposing particular others), or organizational (e.g., the culture of the larger group) reasons? A similar analysis can be applied to the other three constructs in the Opposition Quadrant of the Aggression-Compassion Continuum: Hostility, Animosity, Antipathy.

As another example, consider Apathy and each of the LF2 elements. Is the reason an individual does not care, does not express any emotions, and does not take any actions because of character (e.g., personality, perception of hopelessness, physical illness, mental illness, picking their battle), competence (e.g., lacks the KSAs to take any action relevant to the situation at hand, overwhelmed with other things on their plate), context (e.g., lack of necessary resources to act, exhaustion, overwhelming odds or opposition), or communication (e.g., lacking any way to communicate, not receiving any communication that the issue or situation is worth addressing)? Is the lack of caring directed at oneself, one other, a team, an organization? Also, is the reason that an individual does not care because of personal (e.g., lack of self-esteem,

lack of self-confidence), interpersonal (e.g., perception that no concern or action will affect the other person, that the other person will do what they want anyway, or that the other person does not matter), team (e.g., lack of respect from or connection with the team, belief that nothing can be done to affect the team), or organizational (e.g., experience or belief that there is no way to alter the organization, culture, or system) reasons? A similar analysis can be applied to the other three constructs in the Support Quadrant of the Aggression-Compassion Continuum: Pity, Sympathy, Empathy.

In addition, consider Compassion and each of the LF2 elements. Is an individual acting compassionately because of character (e.g., personality, understanding their own and others values and beliefs), competence (e.g., having the KSAs to act and perform compassionate acts), context (e.g., the needs of the recipient(s) of the compassionate acts are overwhelmingly heart-breaking, understanding of the stress with the individual, team, or organization), or communication (e.g., the recipient(s) of the compassionate acts effectively expressed need for help, the provider(s) of the compassionate acts can effectively understand and communicate with others to understand what they are saying and discuss what is needed)? Is the individual acting compassionately towards oneself (personal), one other (interpersonal), a team, or an organization/culture system? Also, is the individual acting compassionately because of personal (e.g., acting in accordance with one's own values), interpersonal (e.g., concern for that particular person), team (e.g., commitment to the team), or organizational (e.g., commitment to the particular organization) reasons?

To understand and enhance relationships, we suggest that it is useful to consider which of the LF2 elements contribute to the particular psychological state and which of these elements may be key to modulate (either to increase or to decrease) the given psychological construct. With regard to the nine constructs along the Aggression-Compassion continuum, it is important to consider that there likely is a tendency to think of each construct as relevant especially to relationships and interactions with one other person (interpersonal) or a group of people. But each construct also can be applied to oneself and to organizations. We need to act with compassion and not with aggression towards ourselves as well as consider to whom and in what context we should allow ourselves to experience and exercise each of the nine constructs. In other words, we need to maximize our emotional and social intelligence so that we are aware of motivations and emotions that accompany and underlie our own thoughts and actions as well as the motivations and emotions that accompany and underlie the thoughts and actions of others [50–53].

6. Support and oppose are positive and negative, respectively; but positive and negative do not equal good and bad

Another important point to consider is that although "Support" and "Oppose" can be considered as corresponding to "good" and "bad" poles of the Aggression-Compassion continuum, that type of identity simply is not true. Most if not all publications about pity, sympathy, empathy, compassion imply or state explicitly that these concepts and corresponding actions (in the case of compassion) are, indeed, "good." Conversely, it is implied or explicitly stated that antipathy, animosity, hostility, and aggression are "bad." Neither of these generalizations is correct.

Providing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral support— as is done when exercising the four constructs depicted in the upper right—for kindness, generosity, altruism, open-mindedness, liberty, freedom, democracy, and so on certainly would be

considered as "good." But consider, for example, what it means when one is "support-ing" in thoughts, emotions, and actions bigotry, robbery, hatred, dishonesty, cruelty, slavery, authoritarianism; then, exercising and expressing pity, sympathy, empathy, and compassion for these particular thoughts and actions would be considered as "bad."

The same dichotomy of good and bad applies to the "opposing" poles of the Aggression-Compassion Continuum dimensions. Aggression, hostility, and the other constructs on the "oppose" cognitive, emotional, and behavioral poles certainly would be considered "bad" when the opposition is to kindness, generosity, altruism, open-mindedness, liberty, freedom, democracy. Conversely, opposing in thoughts, emotions, and actions bigotry, robbery, hatred, dishonesty, cruelty, slavery, authori-tarianism, and so on, would be considered as "good."

So, it is important to recognize that supporting others can be good or bad. And opposing others can be for good or bad. Aggression and Compassion involve actions of opposition or support, respectfully, and, thereby, set the poles of a psychologi-cal continuum with regard to self and others, but who and what we are opposing or supporting determines what is good and bad from each of our perspectives and based on each of our values. Generalizations such as "both sides are to blame" and "there are good people on both sides," are not always true.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that the value and accompanying good or bad of each construct along the Aggression-Compassion Continuum also depends on the situation and people involved. For example, empathy can be so powerful that feel-ing the pain or suffering of another can be damaging to the well-intentioned empath. Also, empathy can be so absorbing that it freezes or prevents the empath from taking action to help others. Compassion, despite providing well-intentioned support, can be counter-productive if provided to someone(s) who does not want the actions of support or who needs to learn to act for themselves. A common dilemma confronts parents who act to help their children with every challenge, even when their children are not in danger and need to learn to handle their own challenges and to accept and to be resilient after experiencing their own disappointments or failures. Conversely, aggression, even when opposing dangers, can be bad if the individuals being helped want to handle the situation themselves or need to learn to handle the situation themselves.

7. Conclusion

The Aggression-Compassion Continuum includes nine psychological constructs that involve different amounts of cognitive and emotional support or opposition and different amounts of action. It is important to understand where you are along this continuum to optimize relationships with others as well as your own well-being. We believe that applying the eight elements of the Leader-Follower Framework when considering relevant points on the Aggression-Compassion Continuum also will help to enhance emotional and social intelligence.

Acknowledgements

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Disclaimer

The opinions and assertions contained herein are the sole ones of the authors and are not to be construed as reflecting the views of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences or the Department of Defense.

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