

## **Compassion Tempered by Justice**

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### ***Introduction***

Compassion has been the subject of much debate recently. Martha Nussbaum (2001) argued for the intelligence of compassion and sought to differentiate this emotional state from other related emotions such as pity or sympathy. The criteria she uses to establish the intelligence of compassion, especially the judgement that the object of compassion does not deserve the pain they are suffering, draw attention both to the complexity of this emotion and to the limitations of Nussbaum's perspective. To base compassion on the perception that the suffering is undeserved rather than the result of bad choices, does not allow for the complex reality that most vulnerable people find themselves in. In contrast, Whitebrook (2002) argues that people sometimes have to make terrible choices and that the virtue of compassion may lie in its refusal of retribution or blame. Berlant (2004) has drawn attention to the paradox that in a modern society with a sensationalist media, awareness of suffering is now worldwide but despite this, the refusal of compassion is also widespread. Compassion is central to politics and requires a sense of solidarity with the sufferer according to Hoggett (2006). One does not necessarily 'choose' to be compassionate and it should form the basis for discretion in policy and the realization of justice for vulnerable people.

In this paper, I explore the nature of compassion as it was talked about by volunteers at a charity called One25. I want to achieve a greater depth of understanding by comparing perspectives on this emotion. I chose volunteers as my subjects for the study of this emotion due to the belief that compassion, unlike pity, is manifest in action (Hoggett, 2006; Berlant, 2004). Also, by choosing volunteers who worked with street based sex-workers, I hoped to illuminate the complexity of compassion and differentiate it from other emotions. To do this, I tried to ascertain how the volunteers perceived the women they worked with and how they managed their own emotional reactions to the vulnerability of the women. I argue that an intelligent compassion is evident within the volunteer's emotional stance, one where they feel the pain of the

women yet are aware of the injustice of their situation (Hoggett, 2006). I will criticise Nussbaum's more limited notion of compassion and demonstrate that with these volunteers a compassion rooted in solidarity and equality is in operation (Hoggett, 2006) that is equivalent to a 'compassion tempered by justice' (Whitebrook, 2002, p.541).

The compassion that I am exploring in this paper is intelligent in two ways. The first is that it is not an 'unthinking' emotional state but an emotion within which people can reach a greater understanding of what is needed for peoples' wellbeing, including their own. Secondly, it is intelligent because accepting complexity in the world and in people is inherent to this emotion- where in the end we are all in greater need of compassion not retribution. The concept of intelligence I am utilizing has no emphasis on being 'rational' and is not a separate 'emotional intelligence', but one where thought and emotion are working in harmony. There are many aspects of compassion which I have not covered in this paper or been able to go into enough detail about. By only talking to the volunteers and not the vulnerable women they work with at the charity, I have not been able to explore the idea of how compassion can help people overcome personal suffering and become resilient. I have also not explored the idea that it is an essentially human characteristic that shows how we mutually belong to one another – and that it is the source of our greatest pleasure (Phillips & Taylor, 2009). All of the people at One25 are women so I could not address how compassion has come to be seen as a female virtue, not a human one. Compassion has not been recognized as an intelligent emotion in many areas and I hope this paper will add to a growing understanding that it can form the basis for creating a just society.

### **The Charity**

The charity One25 was established in 1995 by four dedicated women who wanted to do something about the needs of street sex-workers in Bristol, which were not being met by public services (interview B). The mission of the charity is to '...enable women marginalised through involvement in street-based sex work to access appropriate services and become aware of alternative possibilities for their lives...' (One25, 2009). In seeking to serve as a voice for these vulnerable women, I believe that the charity is engaged in a progressive political struggle, where compassion is the

goal as well as the means (Jasper, 2006). The women they work with are vulnerable because of the inherent risks of their work, 99% of them are also addicted to drugs or alcohol and they usually come from abusive backgrounds (One25, 2009). There are currently over one hundred volunteers working for the charity and it is through interviewing some of them that I have been able to explore the nature of compassion.

### **Methodology**

This data was obtained through qualitative research, since I was trying to achieve depth rather than breadth. To obtain this, I conducted ‘unstandardised’, informal interviews. It was important to situate compassion within the volunteer’s emotional lives and the qualitative descriptions obtained in the interviews allowed for this (Kvale, 1996). I interviewed volunteers in whichever setting they felt most comfortable with, including my own home and cafes. I used an interview ‘aide-memoire’ with the topics I wished to cover to allow for flexibility and a greater exploration of meaning (Harrison, 2001). I was explicit about the purposes of my research before the interviews and guaranteed anonymity. All interviews were digitally recorded. I provided a context for the interviews with this initial briefing and then a de-briefing that allowed the volunteers to comment on the interview or add anything they believed I might have missed (Kvale, 1996).

In what follows I draw extensively on three of the interviews which offer interesting similarities and differences.

### **Interview A**

Interviewee A had been volunteering for three years with the charity when I met her. When I asked her how she perceived her ‘clients’, while acknowledging that the women may have been in difficulty or coerced, she also recognized that they had made a choice ‘...to do whatever they’re doing...’. She continued to say that ‘...I recognise these are vulnerable women but they are also voluntary sex-workers...’ reaffirming that despite being vulnerable, they have chosen freely to enter into this industry. In outlining the cognitive criteria necessary for compassion, Nussbaum has stressed the necessity of ‘the judgment of non-desert’, which is that to feel this emotion for a person, there must be a belief that the person does not deserve this

suffering and is a ‘victim of circumstance’ (Nussbaum, 2001, p.306). But perhaps this fails to recognize how divorced compassion can be from the attribution of blame (Whitebrook, 2002). Volunteers such as A appear to offer little blame in recognizing the dilemmas these women have to negotiate or where fault lies, Nussbaum’s perspective does not allow for any seemingly ‘bad’ choices (Whitebrook, 2002). A is clearly not holding to any notion that these women are ‘victims of circumstance’ and describes them more aptly as ‘vulnerable’. This description denotes that they occupy a position where they can be taken advantage of, but it does not portray the women as victims, where they are separated by painful connotations (Whitebrook, 2002). Later on in the interview, A says ‘...you know they’re not heroes but you know they’re not all victims either, they’re just women trying to get by...’ which shows that this vulnerability for her is neither heroic or tragic (Whitebrook, 2002). Compassion for A is beyond blame, can acknowledge perceived bad choices and is focussed on people who are vulnerable.

When I asked interviewee A about the reasons as to why she became involved with the charity, she gave an answer that indicated she perceived injustice in the women’s situation.

*‘...I felt that I kind of wanted to show that I was standing with these women and like defending their rights to do whatever they’re doing, however difficult or coerced they may have been. I just wanted to defend them against kind of moral judgement...they don’t know I’m doing that but for me, it’s about putting down a marker and saying I stand with these women against any kind of moral attacks and it’s important they’re supported...’*

In saying how she wishes to ‘...stand with these women...’, a strong sense of solidarity with the women appears to be guiding her reasoning. The charity is viewed as a vehicle for this principle to manifest itself reminding us of Arendt’s assertion that it is out of solidarity that ‘...people establish dispassionately a community of interest with the oppressed...’(Arendt, 1963, p.88). This conception of solidarity would seem to be appropriate, especially when A elucidates on ‘...the horrible contradictory stuff about this fake concept of what communities are...’. She feels that ‘...these women

are part of the community...not a separate bit...'. For A this relation to the oppressed street sex workers is not a particularly asymmetrical relationship (Arendt, 1963). The persons involved are equals and not at fault in any way, so the relationship is more about attending to their vulnerability by supporting them (Whitebrook, 2002). This solidarity is not dispassionate in any way either, as A has demonstrated a capacity for an intelligent compassion and in defending the women from moral attacks, there is no sense of retribution. There is no doubt that in focussing on the women's 'rights', A is concerned with justice for these women and this negates Nussbaum's assertion that compassion is not 'sufficient' in itself to deliver justice (Nussbaum cited in Whitebrook, 2002). When I asked A if her experience of volunteering had effected her life, she said '...I don't think it's changed my opinion, I just think it's even more so made me determined to sort of fight any policies that are negative...'. This demonstrates that compassion can form an 'essential bridge' to justice and a strong sense of justice is clearly evident in A's life (Whitebrook, 2002, p.541). For A, compassion is not just a bridge but a basis for action, in her experience '...I just see the women as being the central issue and that is paramount and all the other stuff is sort of secondary...'. (Whitebrook, 2002). The nature of compassion for A is rooted in solidarity and tempered by considerations of justice for the women.

### **Interview B**

Interviewee B had been involved with the charity since its inception and had a long history of volunteering. I quickly ascertained that B had been one of the founders of the charity and here she describes one of her first encounters with one of the women which led her to set it up.

*'...I'd just gone into Herbert's bakery to buy a loaf of bread in lunchtime, and a car screeched to a halt alongside me on Ashley road, and a bundle was pushed from the car into the road, and I saw that the bundle was moving and went across to investigate and it was one of the women who I knew to be one of the sex-workers and she had just been raped, she'd been stabbed and well she asked me to take her to the BRI, she felt really, she was in a lot of pain, quite a lot of blood everywhere, I took her into the BRI, into casualty and waited, and eventually the doctor came out and told me with the lady's*

*permission that she was pregnant and very pregnant, though it hardly showed because she was so emaciated and he said probably the best thing would be if I could take her straight up to the maternity hospital, so we went and she had her baby the following day and that was really my first, I've got to do something, I've GOT to do something, that really struck me and it came at a time when I was also, you know in the process of burning out so my compassion was absolutely frazzled, I'd lost in the five years I'd been working in The Candle Project<sup>1</sup>, so many people I'd grown to know and love, mostly on the street from overdose or from alcohol-related illnesses and my heart was breaking...'*

For compassionate action to be embarked upon, the emotion itself is still dependent on the initial reaction to the suffering and the perceived vulnerability (Whitebrook, 2002). The initial reaction B had to this woman was to perceive she was in pain and that this required action, trumping any recourse to blame, which seemed notably absent from her response. The reaction to the suffering had a corporeal dimension as well, in how it 'struck' B and she also adds that '...there was a burden on my heart for these women...'. This affective reaction is an essential element in the feeling of compassion (Hoggett, 2006). This whole episode seems indicative of a compassion that was built not solely on empathy, but on the way in which B was affected by the impression made on her by this event (Hoggett, 2006). It is not that empathy is necessarily absent but this concept '...questions the self's assumption that compassion is something one can choose, rather than be forced into by the other...' (Hoggett, 2006, p.150). B was not so much choosing to feel compassion but the pain of this woman was forcing a way through to her. After describing what had happened to this woman, B describes how she was feeling at the time of the incident. Experiencing this in her 'frazzled' state, B went on a Sabbatical leave and then returned to set up One25. Even though B stated her compassion was diminished at the time, she was still capable of adopting a kind of receptivity, termed by Jessica Benjamin "surrender", allowing this other woman's experience to affect her (Benjamin cited in Hoggett, 2006). It is as if B tells us she felt forced into compassionate action and this seems to

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<sup>1</sup> The Candle Project was launched in 1991 by the Salvation Army in Bristol and offered support to homeless people.

describe B's experience. An intelligent compassion is in operation here, which arose from this initial disturbance and is felt corporeally. I now want to show that this compassion is fused with an ethic of justice.

According to Maureen Whitebrook, compassionate action arises from the initial gut feeling, followed by reflective judgement - including reflection on how to best deal with the vulnerability witnessed (Whitebrook, 2002). This judgement is less about weighing up circumstances in a methodical manner and rooted more in understanding and identification (ibid.). When talking about how B perceives the women she does voluntary work with, she seeks to make me understand their situation.

*'...It's horrendous, the majority of women in prostitution in this country and I think certainly in the developed world have been abused in childhood, not necessarily sexually abused, although many, many of them have, but abused through negligence, through mental cruelty, physical cruelty, so they have absolutely no concept of self-worth, no concept of loving themselves or valuing themselves in any way at all because they've been told they're rubbish and they believe that what has happened to them, has happened because they deserved it, so when they get, what they call, a good slapping from their partner, they well, they deserved it, it was all my fault and you know it's absolutely appalling and you know it shows that at the base of all this is the fact that you know they've been abused and that they have no value for themselves and the world sees them as that and they see them as valueless, they see them as prostitutes standing on the corner and so they are totally marginalised really from our society...'*

B understands that there is a lack of recognition from society for the abuse that these women have undergone, which has led these women to become marginalised and re-enforced their low self-worth. A just society would be one where all individuals are shown due recognition, because only through this process can a person's capacity '...to freely determine and realize his own desires and intentions...' be achieved (Honneth cited in Thompson, 2006, p.124). What is also apparent is that the women are too traumatized to struggle against this injustice, a fact that has been noted in

relation to victims of aggression (Jurist cited in Thompson, 2006). B recognizes that the hurt feelings of the women are a result of injustice and no more clearly is this demonstrated than in the story of 'Sue', where one individual fell through all the safety nets that supposedly guard us against misfortune.

*'...Can I sort of tell you a short story, I mean this is just something that comes to mind, I'd taken one of the young women, she was 19 at the time, I'd taken her to the sexual health clinic, I'd seen her on the van and seen that things were going wrong so I took her to the sexual health clinic and we had a very long wait, she had to have lots of tests and in fact I think she had three sexually transmitted infections but whilst we were waiting...um...I...I'd never done it before and she was getting really agitated, she was you know needing her drugs, she was clucking and she was getting into a state and I was trying to keep her occupied and keep her there so that we could get the treatment and you know we'd been there at least three hours and eventually you know she was saying I've gotta go now and I don't know why I said it, I said to her, so have you got any, have you got any dreams or anything, you know, you'd really love to do and I said for instance, for me, I'd love to ride across the states on a Harley, and you know it is something I'd like to do but I was just kind of sharing that with her and she gave me a long look, and as though completely not being able to comprehend what I was saying at all, and she said 'I gave up dreaming a long time ago' and she told me some of her story...her mother had been a prostitute who worked on the squares but she met a punter and she married the punter, the punter turned out to be a really good guy and in fact the punter was this young woman's father, the punter had a heart attack and the mother was an alcoholic, she didn't use drugs, alcohol was her drug and so the father looked after his wife and made sure that she was as well as possible, she still had her alcohol problem, this young woman was born and when she was 8 years old her father died, he had a heart attack and died and so this young woman, I'll call her Sue, Sue became the carer of her alcoholic mother and so at 8 years of age, she started going to school less and less, and by the time she was thirteen she said she was hardly going to school so her literacy and numeracy I discovered were very poor indeed but*



*she wasn't picked up, this wasn't picked up at school, I mean it should have been picked up so this is the safety net bit, so by the time Sue was 15 and nearly 16, her mother had had a stroke and died, leaving her an orphan and leaving her living in a council house, and she was too young to take over the tenancy, she told me that she was very proud that she organised the funeral and just before the funeral, her mother's long lost brother turned up and offered to look after her, so she couldn't take over the tenancy because she was only 15 and she moved in with a long lost uncle who turned out to be not such a nice uncle, who demanded sexual favours for a roof over her head, so at 16 and a half she said she decided she would go out onto those same squares in St. Pauls where her mother had worked and sell for money what she'd had to provide for free at home, now that girl fell through all the safety nets, everything, so here she was at 19 years of age, she was now living with her partner as she called him who was 60 years old, who had a crack habit so she was having to provide for his crack habit, her own heroin and crack habits, she was 19 and as she said time and again, she'd given up dreaming a long time ago....now that broke my heart, when most youngsters you know are thinking of going to uni, are thinking of travelling, you know doing some exciting things...it's almost unbelievable but you know it was true and you know at 19, having three STI's and you just think yeah, that breaks my heart to hear....'*

What is apparent from this story is how B feels compassion for 'Sue' but also interprets her situation in terms of the injustices that have befallen her (Whitebrook, 2002). She recognizes the injustices that this woman has undergone, leaving her unable to contemplate having any dreams (unlike B) and nobody picks this young woman's situation up. B personally identifies with 'Sue' who has been wronged by society, and uses this injustice frame (Gamson, 1992) to place responsibility on a welfare system with its non-existent safety nets. An intelligent compassion is present in B, similar to A, which is tempered by considerations of social justice. Volunteers like A and B fuse an ethic of care with an ethic of justice through their volunteering (Hoggett, 2006).

### **Interview C**

Interviewee C has been involved with the charity for eleven years and she volunteers predominantly in the out-reach van. In the interview, she expanded upon how the women initially reacted to the van.

*'...they used to be very rude about the food and drink you know, they used to not like butter or too much butter or mayonnaise and they used to be a bit rude and in fact my children used to say, you know, I don't know why you make all those sandwiches for the women if they're going to be rude about them but they didn't, I mean I think that's just the way they treated everybody in those days and they didn't know enough about us to respect us...'*

She then describes what other early experiences with the women were like, this time in the drop-in centre.

*'...at the time when I was doing it, there was quite a lot of, the women were being quite abusive and not respecting our boundaries and so they were thieving from each other and from us, and you were never quite sure where this was going on and I felt I had to be here, there and everywhere and so it used to make me feel very tired...'*

What is clear is that C does not portray the women as innocent victims. As Paul Hoggett notes, compassion does not require innocence, unlike pity (Hoggett, 2006). C demonstrates the ethical capacity for the 'depressive position', where we can love the other despite sometimes being failed by them (Klein cited in Hoggett, 2006). She recognizes that these women often adopt survival strategies like stealing but '...it doesn't in any way make me feel differently about them...' (ibid.). The nature of identification in this depressive state of mind allows the other to be culpable, flawed and even bloody-minded because we have accepted such destructive elements in ourselves as well (Hoggett, 2006). C shows this capacity to accept what she believes are her own destructive elements, when she describes how she feels her character has evolved since she began volunteering.

*‘...I think it’s about being non-judgemental and you know I think I was quite a judgemental person, I think I am to a certain extent now but I’m less judgmental than I used to be and you know I have to pull myself up on that sometimes because it’s made me see both sides of the picture ...’*

This admittance to a perceived personal flaw shows that C has an integrated view of herself, which allows her to recognize and accept the different characters of the women. When C talked about her early involvement she said that ‘...for the first two years I didn’t tell anyone I was doing it...I think the reason was that I didn’t want it trivialised...’. One of the distinguishing features of compassion is that it is embodied in action, whereas pity is manifest in rhetoric (Arendt, 1963). In not desiring to trivialise the suffering of the women, C expressed her compassion through the demanding commitment which comes with this kind of volunteering. Compassion I have argued is a dual process, with the other having the capacity to disturb us or leave an impression. Our response to this can form the basis for an ethic of justice (Hoggett, 2006).

The Christian perspective of compassion stresses the ways in which this emotion can help overcome the separation between human beings; permeating the boundary between self and other (White, 2008). Overcoming this separation, almost paradoxically, can lead us to greater self-knowledge where we can ‘find ourselves’ in the lives and feelings of other people (Dent cited in White, 2008). When I asked C about how volunteering effected her life, she alluded to the greater self-knowledge she has obtained through her voluntary work, including the greater confidence she feels.

*‘... I guess the things it’s brought out, were always there, but it’s developed a side of my life that needed developing, as well as being just amazed at the privilege of getting to know women in the sex industry, it’s been very good for me and I’m much more confrontational with my friends and family, I suppose because I’m much more confident in what I think, I’m not afraid to stand up for what I think and what I feel about people...’*

This self-knowledge has been reached through her experience of the lives and feelings of the women, where she sees ‘...both sides to the picture...’, enabling her to look at ‘...life in a much broader way...’. She feels privileged to know these women, which shows this is a relationship between equals, which is pivotal to gaining ‘...real human recognition...’(Dent cited in White, p.40). This re-enforces the idea that a truly just society is one where everyone is shown due recognition and that this is rooted in equality. She also displays anger at any injustice towards the women.

*‘...I find social conversation about prostitutes and drugs and sex and things, I find it very flippant and quite offensive sometimes actually, I kind of, you know if people go off and say ‘they want to look more tarty’ and things, I get quite angry actually...you know, ‘do you know what a prostitute looks like?’...’*

C recognizes the injustice that results from people with-holding true recognition for these women and is duly angered by this. In locating a compassion tempered by justice, I believe C perfectly encapsulates this concept. This is evident when she refers to the problems that arise from the uniformity of treatment that government offers these women, which does not pay attention to their particular needs.

*‘...governments move so slowly, that’s the trouble and they need to look ahead more and see what’s coming and be ready to deal with this, I mean when we first started I think it took three months to get someone on a detox course or something, and you know they need action now, you know if they decide that one weekend they’ve had enough, you need to be able to find them something on Monday, so there was practically no success, it wasn’t about success and getting people off the streets, that wasn’t our aim because it was unachievable...’*

This government intervention, framed in terms of the greatest good for the greatest number, despite being based on a principle of justice, ignores the needs of particular individuals and therefore ultimately fails. This prescribed way of doing things inevitably leaves no room for care and attention to the particular features of each situation (Banks, 2007). Compassion spurns such wearisome political processes and

lends voice to the suffering itself, demanding swift and direct action (Arendt, 1963). C shows that justice must be tempered with considerations of compassion if policy outcomes are to stand a chance of success (Whitebrook, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

The nature of compassion for the volunteers at One25 is tempered with considerations of justice for the women. This compassion offered is free of blame and can allow for bad choices or destructive behaviour in the other. It is directed towards vulnerable people rather than ‘innocent victims’. Solidarity informs the compassionate relationships the volunteers have with the women and this equality is important to realizing justice. Compassion appeared to have a strong corporeal dimension, with the volunteers’ initial affective reaction to the sex workers’ vulnerability being important and not necessarily something that the volunteers could control. The capacity for reflective judgement allows this emotion to be fused with an ethic of justice for the volunteers. Compassion has been beneficial for the volunteers and the women, leading to greater self-knowledge and strengthened values.

I believe that compassion can form a strong basis for justice in people’s lives. This has implications for community development workers and those engaged in similar progressive political projects. This charity arose out of the void left in local services and standardised policies. The needs of this group of women were not being met and B recognised this, gave herself time to reflect on this problem and set up the charity. From the beginning it was clear that the charity was not about success in terms of traditional social policy, that is, it was not concerned to deliver successful outcomes in terms of reduced numbers of street workers, etc. For One25 the lives of the vulnerable women involved are of paramount importance, to talk of successful outcomes seems callous when people’s lives are so ultimately complex. Very often social policies construe justice extrinsically, in terms of problems to be solved, and it forgets that solutions should have meaning in themselves, that the exercise of compassion may be the best form of justice. Compassion as the basis, goal and means of social justice would be a radical move, in conflict with today’s ‘outcome culture’, but desirable for those involved. The balance between a receptive attitude and the establishment of boundaries that encourage mutual respect has often been difficult for

the volunteers, particularly in the early stages of the project. There is no blueprint for achieving this balance and it has manifested itself differently in different volunteers. It is based essentially on understanding and recognition, which should be seen as more important goals than successful outcomes. Compassion tempered by justice informs this balance and I believe a greater understanding of this emotion could be beneficial for anyone seeking to take a stand with marginalised and vulnerable people, including policy-makers and government.

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