

# Action learning as a practice: A case study of compassion in action

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## Abstract

The need for compassion – broadly defined as noticing suffering, feeling empathetic concern, and taking action – is emerging as a crucial issue for 21st-century workplaces and organizations (Seppälä et al., 2017). This paper presents a case study of an action learning initiative that was designed to put compassion into action in a UK higher education organization. Action learning involves a small group working on real problems from practice, taking action, and learning as individuals, team/group and organization. This way of working has been part of the work and organizational psychology practitioner toolkit since its inception by Reg Revans in the 1940s (Pedler, 2021). This case study demonstrates Revans' (2011) practical approach to integrating action learning into every-day situations and enhancing the practical and professional skills of the workforce, which in this instance focuses upon compassion in action. The paper also illustrates the role of work and organizational psychologists as 'third

space' practitioners (Whitchurch, 2013) in the professional field of organizational development. It demonstrates how collaborative academic-practitioner relationships and learning enabled the practice of compassion in action through creation of shared stories of self-compassion (Nowlan, 2021). It also emphasises critical action learning to illustrate practical application and use of systems-psychodynamics thinking, and the unconscious processes that play out within and between groups and individuals at work (Obholzer & Roberts, 2019). The paper highlights the importance of reflective supervision in action learning, which in this case study used the innovative concept of social dreaming (Archer, 2021).

**Keywords:** action learning, compassion, academic-practitioner collaboration, unconscious processes, social dreaming

## Introduction

This case study of action learning as a practice focuses on the development of compassion in action in a higher education organization in the UK. Its aims are to: a) describe our experience as members of an action learning group using a framework for academic-practitioner research and practice; b) illustrate critical action learning and reflective supervision from a systems-psychodynamic thinking and social dreaming methodology; and c) present a novel academic-practitioner approach based on working in the 'third space/s' as areas where two or more professional/practice cultures intersect and draw on the qualities of each. The case study is an example of Revans' (2011) practical approach to integrating action learning into every-day situations and enhancing the practical and professional skills of the workforce. The paper adopts a 'practice-to-theory' approach, which: '*Starts by walking the terrain of compassion – then moves to studying the map – theory*' (Haroun, 2021, p. 113, original emphasis).

The paper is structured as follows. First, we introduce the neoliberal context of the case study, and the organizational/strategic context and institutional values in which is located. Next, there is an account of the process and practice of critical action learning, which includes stories of compassion and self-compassion. Then we discuss how theoretical lenses of compassion and psychodynamic thinking can provide insight into action learning as a practice. This incorporates the process of reflective supervision using the innovative concept of social dreaming. The paper concludes with our critical reflections on working in 'third space/s' as areas where two (or more) cultures intersect and draw on the qualities of each other. This includes consideration of what working in third space/s means for work and organizational psychology.

## The neoliberal context of the case study

This case study is about academic-practitioner action learning in a UK higher education organization at a time of considerable global disruption and dissatisfaction in the neoliberal ‘measured university’ (Caddell & Wilder, 2018, p. 14; Morales Vazquez & Levin, 2018; Smyth, 2017). Fleming (2020), a business school academic refers to the consequences of neoliberalism as ‘dark academia’ (p. 1305). Students have been re-cast as consumers who pay a high price for their education – sometimes in more ways than financially. Student and staff mental health is a global concern in universities (e.g., Auerbach et al., 2018; Hughes & Spanner, 2019; Morrish & Priaulx, 2020), and compassion is now seen as an antidote to damaging neoliberal policies, and a crucial element of higher education practice (Gibbs, 2017; Pedersen, 2021).

However, the harmful effects of neoliberalism are pernicious and widespread, affecting workplaces and experiences of work beyond higher education. For an example of the impact of neoliberalism on automotive trade unions and the shop floor in Poland, the UK, the USA and Canada see Stewart, Pulignano and Mrozowicki (2019). While Stewart et al. address the material changes to work and labour processes, they also recommend a social audit that involves a ‘health tracker ... indicating where people get injured, when they become stressed and how they become unwell’ (p. 29). Put more simply and starkly, ‘neoliberalism is bad for your mental health’ (Bell, 2019, p. 79), and concerns relating to mental health cut across all organizations. Lost productivity due to mental ill health in the World Health Organization (WHO) European Region accounts for costs equivalent to US\$ 140 billion per year (WHO, 2017). The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in a decline in mental well-being in the EU as measured using the WHO-5 mental well-being scale (Eurofound, 2021). In the UK, work-related stress, depression or anxiety – defined as a harmful reaction people have to undue pressures and demands placed on them at work – has increased. The total number of cases of work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2019/20 was 828,000, a prevalence rate of 2,440 per 100,000 workers. This was statistically significantly higher than the previous period (Health and Safety Executive, HSE, 2020). Neoliberal ideology and global workplace mental health crisis have highlighted the need for compassionate practice at multiple levels – individual, group, team, organizational and societal.

## The need for compassion

The need for rigorous compassion science as an academic field is now one of equal significance for academics and practitioners in all contemporary organizations and

workplace settings (Seppälä et al., 2017). Psychological research shows a positive relationship between self-compassion and mental health. Individuals who learn to be present with their distress are better able to manage difficult emotions and have greater psychological health and well-being (Bluth & Neff, 2018; Inwood & Ferrari, 2019). A neoliberal market-based paradigm influences how every part of an organizational system is defined and valued. Therefore, this case study begins with a brief outline of the strategic context in which it was located, and definition of compassion as a core institutional value.

### **The strategic context of the case study**

The organizational context of this case study was one of organizational change. Through a process of consultation with staff, being compassionate was identified as a core strategic value, defined as follows:

We are thoughtful and sensitive, supportive, and encouraging, making time to talk, especially when the pressure is on. As a university community we are inclusive and united, careful to consider what enables each and every one of us to play our part (University of Westminster, 2018, p. 9).

Making time to talk involves dialogue, and this case study illustrates the strategic importance of listening to different stakeholder views, while also remaining alert to the possibility that the ‘compassion turn’ in 21st-century universities – and indeed other organizations – might simply become nothing more than a trendy ‘buzz word’. Or a ‘flavour of the month’ solution that ‘fails to address the underlying discontents and root causes of the need for compassion’ (Waddington, 2021a, p. 12). An emphasis on critical action learning and systems-psychodynamic thinking enabled exploration of underlying issues behind the need for compassion in this case study.

### **Critical action learning and systems-psychodynamic thinking**

Action learning characteristically involves a small group working on real problems or issues from practice, identifying options, taking action, and learning as individuals, as a team or group, and as an organization (Revans, 2011). Action learning can be both powerful and frightening; it necessitates the crafting of a trusted and safe space where vulnerabilities can be revealed and explored (Corlett, Ruane & Mavin, 2021). This requires challenge, openness, honesty, and confidentiality to engage in relational processes of learning; while *critical action learning* emphasises the role of unconscious processes of learning in groups.

Critical action learning draws on the application of systems–psychodynamic thinking, and the value of this approach lies in its ability to ‘lift the lid’ on organizational life (Huffington, Armstrong, Halton, Hoyle & Pooley, 2004; Obholzer & Roberts, 2019). This helps us see and hear what lies beneath the surface in organizations, to gain a better understanding of – and new ways of thinking about – power and vulnerability. Systems–psychodynamic thinking also highlights individual and collective unconscious defences (e.g., avoiding conflict, denial) against shared anxieties, group dynamics and organizational culture (Armstrong & Rustin, 2015). For more information see also Brissett, Sher and Smith (2019); Gould, Stapley and Stein (2006); and Sadler (2011).

Importantly from a practitioner point of view, Sadler (2011) argues that it is a myth that only those trained in psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and counselling can make appropriate use of psychodynamic ideas and theoretical perspectives. Sadler argues psychodynamic concepts can also be applied in coaching and consultancy, for example, to help create conditions that change the dynamics of a work system in a more effective and sustainable way. These ideas match well with one of the goals of this case study, namely the development of compassion in an open system. But first we need to introduce the action learning group.

### **The action learning group**

We came together after an internal university event where Kathryn presented a workshop: *Seeing intersectionality through the lens of compassion*, which concluded with the questions: *What next? Action research? Action learning?* The latter question resonated with colleagues in the workshop, and resulted in a self–selecting action learning group comprised of seven participants: five academics (from social sciences; life sciences; the business school) and two members of the interfaith advisory team (from professional services). We all shared a commitment to putting compassion into practice in the context of the university’s strategic value of ‘being compassionate’ (see above). We met ‘formally’ (i.e., as a facilitated group) from January to July 2018, and then continued to work together as writers and chapter authors. Kathryn and Yusuf co–facilitated the process of action learning (Waddington & Kaplan, 2021); Jenni brought insights from her doctoral research into mindfulness and facilitated creation of stories of self–compassion (Nowlan, 2021). Other members of the group brought perspectives on compassion from business psychology (Matthewman, 2021); resilience (Haroun, 2021); higher education policy in England (Pedersen, 2021); and Buddhism (Morris, in Waddington, 2021b). As a group we co–created shared stories from practice about

self-compassion, organizational compassion, and action learning in times of turbulence and change.

### Stories from practice

Storytelling helps listeners understand the essence of complex concepts and ideas in meaningful and often personal ways. Because of this, scientists are beginning to embrace storytelling to understand how the brain processes this powerful form of communication (Suzuki, Feliú-Mojér, Hasson, Yehuda & Zarate 2018). Stories help people make sense of their experience in organizations and are a way of being, communicating, relating to and with each other in the spirit of shared humanity (Maclean, Harvey & Chia, 2012). Shared humanity is a core component of self-compassion, which is defined as: *Self-kindness versus self-judgment, feelings of common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification* (Neff, 2011, p. 4, emphasis added).

## Action learning as a practice

First, a note on terminology; we use the terms action learning set and action learning group interchangeably, as this reflects terminology used in the literature (e.g., Vince, 2008; Wood, 2020). We also note that when the abbreviated term for an action learning set (ALS) is used in the literature, it more often describes the skills and practice of action learning. The term action learning group, on the other hand, is more often used to describe the underlying group processes, emotions, and dynamics. Therefore, *action learning as a practice* involves: a) development of skills of questioning, listening, feedback, respectful challenge, self-awareness, and critical reflection; and b) attention to group processes, dynamics, and underlying emotions. However, we have avoided using acronyms such as ALS because we want to take a more inclusive approach to the both the process and practice of action learning. Furthermore, acronyms minimise the complexity and richness of emotions associated with compassion. While acronyms cannot be completely avoided in scientific writing, mindful writers ‘will notice that most abbreviations are unnecessary and will choose to replace them with the meaningful words that underlie them’ (Hales, Williams & Rector, 2017, p. 3).

The principles of action learning (see Brook, Pedler & Burgoyne, 2012; Pedler, 2021) used to guide co-facilitation of the action learning group are summarised in Box 1. Co-facilitation was deemed necessary to share the emotion work involved in creating a safe space where vulnerabilities could be revealed and explored (Corlett et al., 2021).

**Box 1**  
**Principles of action learning**

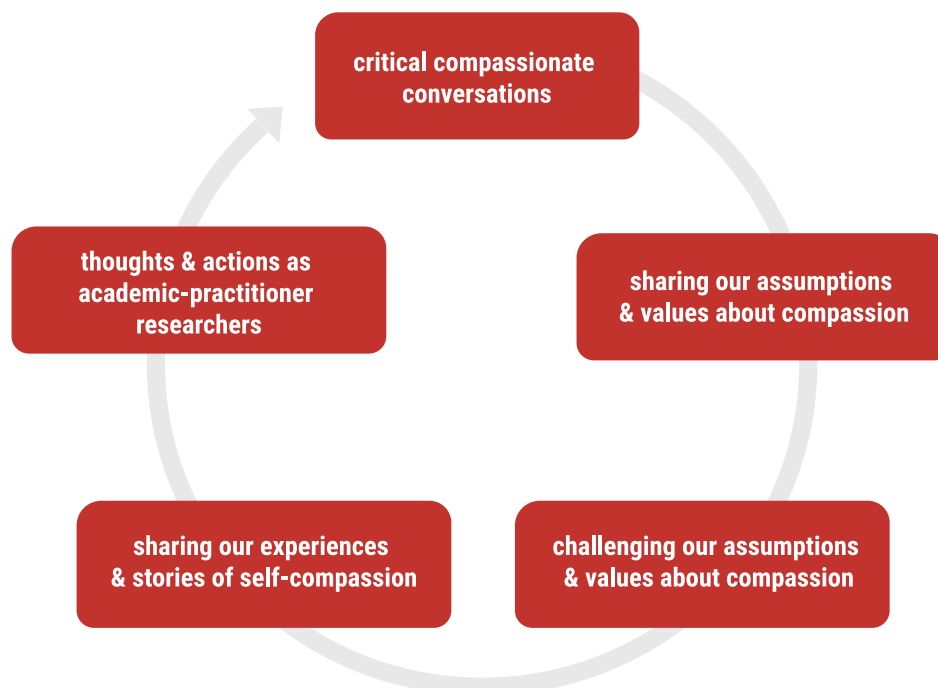
**Effective action learning is characterised by:**

- profound personal and professional development resulting from reflection upon action;
- working with problems/issues, but acknowledging there no right answers;
- problems/issues focus organizational as well as personal development;
- action learners working in sets of peers ('comrades in adversity') who both support and challenge each other.

In addition to the principles outlined in Box 1, we also approached action learning as a form of inquiry. The framework guiding co-facilitation and learning in the group (see Figure 1) drew upon Waddington and Lister's (2013) academic-practitioner research into universities' human resource management strategies and academic engagement.

Figure 1

Framework for compassionate academic-practitioner inquiry (adapted from Waddington and Lister, 2013, p.14)



## A snapshot of the action learning process

Figure 1 represents an ongoing process of critical reflection and action, rather than a single cycle or iteration. We engaged in many critical compassionate conversations, explained below as a 'snapshot' of the action learning process. Photographs are also included to illustrate and highlight key concepts.



The group shared ideas and activities for the ‘mindful minute’ exercises outlined in Table 1. For example, Jenni shared meditations from her mindfulness practice, and Yusuf created a one-minute timer from two small, recycled water bottles, filled with sand (see Figure 2).

Table 1  
Action learning structure

Structure of a 2-hour action learning session
1. <b>Check in:</b> where participants talked briefly about any immediate issues they had at the start of the meeting
2. <b>A mindful minute exercise:</b> for example, focused breathing, to enable participants to pay full attention to the action learning task and process
3. <b>Bids for airtime:</b> where individuals indicated whether they had any issues/problems they would like to explore
4. <b>Feedback:</b> from participant/s who had explored issues in the previous meeting’s ‘airtime’ slot (see below)
5. <b>Negotiated airtime slots:</b> where up to two participants presented their issue/problem and the rest of the group helped them think through the issues, reflect, create options, and identify potential action/s
6. <b>Group reflection:</b> on process, for example exploring the dynamics in the group
7. <b>A mindful minute exercise:</b> to mark the ending of the meeting.

Figure 2  
A ‘mindful minute’ timer (photograph taken by Yusuf Kaplan, with permission)



Mindfully attending to the grains of sand was a very powerful way to experience ‘a minute’ in a hectic day. At times, as ‘comrades in adversity’ (a term originally coined by Reg Revans) the group found it challenging/difficult to leave the ‘adverse conditions’ outside of the action learning space. For example, Kathryn sometimes physically turned around 360 degrees to ‘shake off’ and leave the hostile weather conditions (as I sometimes saw it) behind! We all needed to leave metaphorical ‘wet clothes’ and other such hindrances, like workloads and marking, outside to focus on compassion in action in the group. This involved noticing and reinforcing/amplifying positive experiences, such as ‘compassionate communication’ reflected in the care with which content was written, and a warm tone used in emails.

Noticing and reinforcing/amplifying positive experiences and examples of compassion extended beyond the ‘formal’ lifespan of the action learning group. An example of how compassion was infused and embedded into emails is illustrated in Box 2; an extract of an email sent from a senior academic leader to doctoral (PhD) researchers at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 (reproduced with permission).

**Box 2**  
**Compassionate communication during COVID-19**

**Date:** 15/03/2020 10:49  
**To:** PhD Researchers  
**Cc:** Kathryn Waddington

Dear PhD researchers

You will have received various communications regarding the crisis from the Graduate School. Our intention is not to overwhelm you. [Practical information follows regarding the transition to online working and working from home]

Please remember this – since it is an unprecedented crisis, we don’t have all the answers. But we do know this – panic never helps. We should be cautious; we should be concerned and the best way to handle this is by being concerned not just about ourselves but also those around us. Empathy and compassion will help immensely.

Best wishes to you all  
Sam\*

*Email extract from a senior leader \* pseudonym*

Email is an inevitable and time-consuming aspect of work, which other researchers have described as ‘work about the work’:

I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s just work; email is just work; it’s where your work gets done, so before, you’d go and sit in a room and you’d talk about something or people would phone each other . . . but really now, what takes time with email is not often writing the email, it’s thinking. So, if someone emails me about a research project . . . it’s not writing the email that takes the time, *it’s thinking about the question they’ve asked* (Zukas & Malcolm, 2017, p. 516, emphasis added).

Thinking about how emails are composed and answered is also important, but not all emails reflect the care and compassion communicated in the extract in Box 2. Negative examples and experience of failures of compassion can be framed as ‘compassion gaps’, which reflect the objectification and measurement of students and staff, where people are reduced to faceless resources to be manipulated and managed (Waddington, 2016). The idea of negative compassion gaps interspersed with positive examples of compassion led the group to reflect upon the idea and image of ‘*islands of compassion in stormy seas*’, and the importance of self-compassion. We now share some of our stories of self-compassion – presented in accordance with American Association of Psychology (APA, 2020) guidance for maintaining confidentiality. Therefore, some of the action learning material and examples from practice have been changed slightly or presented differently, but without fundamentally altering meaning.

## Stories of self-compassion

The UK sculptor Antony Gormley’s statue *Another Time* (on Margate beach England, see Figure 3) facilitated further reflection upon the development of ‘self-compassion in stormy seas’. The statue is made of cast iron, and explores the experience of being human, and of inhabiting a human body:

The history of western sculpture has been concerned with movement. I wish to celebrate the still and silent nature of the sculpture. The work is designed to be placed within the flow of lived time. (Gormley, n.d., p. 2)

Figure 3

Self-compassion in stormy seas (photograph taken by Kathryn Waddington, with permission)



The statue is visible at low tide, but is unharmed by stormy seas because it is made of cast iron. It becomes completely submerged and invisible at high tide. As the tide goes out the statue re-emerges, resilient and unscathed, which for us reflected the cyclical nature of academic work and university life. For example, there are high tides and 'bottlenecks' of marking; and high workloads associated with the beginning and end of the academic year. But just as the tide subsides, a more even pace of working returns. Figure 3 helped to put heavier workloads into perspective and highlighted the need for heightened self-compassion during busy times.

One example of an action of self-kindness was to resist student requests that entailed additional weekend working, and simply allowing Sunday evenings off without guilt. Another was acknowledgment that it was time to take some leave to process recent personal events, and that colleagues were supportive and could cover. Other changes experienced were to stop a 'survivor syndrome' feeling associated with organizational change (e.g., Bui, Chau & Cox, 2019) by taking time to practice meditation, yoga practice, and positive psychology. Another example was acceptance of suffering and feelings of anxiety, which then allowed strategies to be formulated to release the self-imposed guilt of not being 'good enough'. Another feeling explored within the group was of 'self-bullying' – expressed as negative and disparaging internal dialogue – which led to a realisation that it was time to practice and model self-compassion. Not just for oneself, but for others, as role models for students and colleagues.

There are two underlying themes in these selected extracts of our shared stories: a) being too harsh towards ourselves; and b) expecting too much from ourselves. There were times when we had pushed ourselves too far and had overlooked the need for self-compassion and self-kindness (Neff, 2011). But we were beginning to recognise this, acknowledging feelings that we could not continue on our current paths for much longer; something had to change. Action learning gave us space to open up to each other, explore our feelings, vulnerabilities, and make necessary adjustments to our ways of being. These stories of self-compassion have named – and challenged – aspects of neoliberal higher education where overwork and 'always on' ways of working prevail (Zukas & Malcolm, 2017). They show how resistance, resilience, and change are possible, particularly when seen from a wider systemic, rather than purely personal perspective. This is addressed in the next section, which explores co-facilitation and supervision of action learning through the lenses of systems-psychodynamic thinking and social dreaming.

## Co-facilitation and supervision of action learning

We approached action learning as a form of inquiry, which has been likened to continually weaving between inner and outer arcs of attention and maintaining curiosity about the part we play in ‘creating and sustaining patterns of action, interaction and non-action’ (Marshall, 2016, p. xvii). Kathryn and Yusuf as co-facilitators both have experience and understanding of the application of systems-psychodynamic thinking and the importance of attending to both the primary task *and* group processes. The primary task of action learning is to enable learning whilst simultaneously implementing action/s. Without careful facilitation, action learning groups can quickly slip from a position of ‘learning in action’ to one of ‘learning inaction’ (Vince, 2008, p. 93). Facilitation therefore required what Svalgaard (2017, p. 29) refers to as ‘double awareness’. Their case study of an intensive five-day ‘action learning lab’ in Denmark is a good example of how attending to real world business challenges – the *task* – whilst also being mindful of *group processes* can be achieved in practice.

In this case study the primary task of the action learning group was to spread the presence of compassion in a university system within participants’ areas of practice and influence. Facilitation required alertness to anti-task behaviours, such as avoiding conflict over competing priorities or failing to adapt/relate to a changing environment. These behaviours arise as defences against anxiety in social systems, and are unconscious processes that arise in all groups, not just action learning groups:

‘Defences’ are constructed as a means of coping with such anxieties, and they become embedded and enforced within the structure, rules and cultures of institutions as routine assumptions and practices that become taken for granted (Armstrong & Rustin, 2015, p. 15).

Reflective supervision was an important way of attending to unconscious processes, and to ensure that any difficult emotions that emerged were addressed. Supervision took place usually the day after the action learning set meeting, or as soon as possible afterwards. This allowed us to ‘sleep’ on the experience, and for the formation of overnight thoughts, and night-time dreams. This known as ‘social dreaming’, which provides access to the unconscious as a ‘picture’ representing the relationship between ourselves and the world (Lawrence, 2010). It is important for readers to note that the concept of social dreaming enables sensemaking, *not directly in relation to the individual*, but in relation to the *context/environment* in which the dream is shared (Archer, 2021).

## Social dreaming methodology

Social dreaming methodology offered a unique approach to supervision in this action learning case study. W. Gordon Lawrence (1934–2013), a social scientist at the Tavistock Institute in London, initiated the field of social dreaming in the early 1980s. It is most often used as a method of sharing night-time dreams in a group to create shared – as opposed to personal/individual – meanings in a ‘social dreaming matrix’. More recently social dreaming has been advanced as different and creative way of re/thinking about contemporary dilemmas and issues such as global warming (Manley, 2020).

Lawrence believed that everyone dreams whilst a member of an organization, and that dreams offer a different perspective on the organization, tapping into the unconscious life of its members in their roles. In essence, social dreaming:

Celebrates the discovery of the unconscious, the *inner voice of humanity* present in dream thoughts—surprising epiphanies—and attempts to find their truth, no matter where it will lead (Lawrence, 2010, p.8, emphasis added).

Listening to the inner voice of shared humanity is key to developing self-compassion and understanding the concept of compassion in organizations. Reflective supervision that uses social dreaming requires skilful facilitation and knowledge of psychodynamic theory and practice. In this case study social dreaming methodology was used in conjunction with action learning to gain understanding of the dream offered in relation to the wider higher education context. Therefore, the task of Coreene, our supervisor, was not to interpret the dream, but rather to offer associations, explore meanings and relationship to compassion. Shared dreams were seen as data, which provided us with an alternative entry point to aid understanding about the formation and development of the action learning group. Two dreams – one from Kathryn and one from Yusuf – are now given as illustrative examples. We each experienced these ‘dreams as data’ after different action learning meetings. They are reproduced here with permission, with the aim of illustrating how social dreaming helped us to make sense of our experience of co-facilitation from a critical action learning perspective. Further discussion of how ‘dreaming of compassion’ was facilitated and used in reflective supervision can be found in Archer (2021).

*Kathryn's dream:*

*I was with a group of people that I knew on a train that was in a station. As we were sitting on the train looking around and chatting, I realised that we were on the wrong train and that we need to*

*cross over the bridge and change trains to be in the right place. I turned to my companions and told them that we were in the wrong place and that we needed to change platforms. I was surprised by their lack of concern about the fact that we had made this mistake and continued to talk to each other in a relaxed way. After trying to get them to understand the urgency of the situation, I decided that if I didn't move that I would miss the train. So, I got all my stuff, got off the train, changed platforms and got onto the right train. I remember sitting looking out of the window as the train began to move and the others were left behind.*

This dream was shared halfway through the lifespan of the group, when commitment to the group had diminished and membership had fallen from ten to seven. This was associated in the above dream as: a) a strong shift in the momentum of the core group; and b) ongoing exploration of the impact of spreading compassion into our areas of practice and influence. Yusuf shared the following dream towards the end of the 'formal' action learning set.

*Yusuf's dream:*

*I remember being in a van, that I needed to use to clear a space. The van was old and a bit shaky, it was also really big and felt too large for the task ahead, but it was the only option that I had. As I was driving along, I remember being worried whether the van was good enough ... next thing I remember was being at the side of the road, waiting for someone (I think roadside assistance) to help me as the tyre had burst and the engine had over-heated. The thing I remember the most from the dream was the feeling of sadness and despair. It was a very heavy feeling.*

The strongest association with this dream was a theme of loss, as action learning, which had provided a clear space for compassion and care, was coming to an end. Compassion and compassionate leadership require both courage and vulnerability to admit to not knowing, uncertainty, ambiguity and frailty (Aram, 2014). These were all part of the lived experience of the action learning group, its co-facilitators, and the stories of self-compassion that were shared, which are now seen and discussed through the theoretical lens of compassion.

## **Critical lenses of compassion: From practice to theory**

There are various ways that compassion can be defined. A scientific approach views compassion as an emotional state, a motivation, a dispositional trait, or a cultivated attitude (Goetz & Simon-Thomas, 2017). When looking at compassion at an organizational level of analysis, the concept takes on further attributes as a dynamic and relational process involving: a) noticing that suffering is present in an organization;

b) feeling empathic concern for the people suffering; and c) taking action to alleviate suffering in some manner (Worline & Dutton, 2017). Compassion in organizations can also be understood through three theoretical lenses of: narrative; interpersonal work; and organising (Frost et al., 2006), summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Critical lenses of compassion (adapted from Frost et al., 2006, p. 845)

Critical lenses of compassion
<p><b>Compassion as narrative:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Compassion is carried in language and stories</li><li>■ Compassion narratives reflect hidden pain, suffering and distress</li><li>■ Narratives are powerful windows into individual and collective identities</li><li>■ Narratives reveal emotional aspects of groups and shared values and beliefs at the heart of organizations</li><li>■ Reflects multiple voices and perspectives revealing diversity and difference.</li></ul>
<p><b>Compassion as interpersonal work:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Compassion as everyday interaction that requires skill and competence</li><li>■ Interpersonal work is seen as important, productive work</li><li>■ Can take place via a range of media (e.g., online and face-to-face)</li><li>■ Involves expenditure of cognitive and emotional energy</li><li>■ May be gendered/less visible than other forms of interpersonal interaction</li><li>■ Small acts of compassion can have large benefits and consequences.</li></ul>
<p><b>Compassion as organising:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Compassion as a collective accomplishment</li><li>■ Different processes enable people to notice, feel and respond to pain</li><li>■ Aspects of the organizational context enable or impede noticing, feeling and responding</li><li>■ Compassion occurs when individual behaviours are valued, and systems are in place to enable diffusion of compassion across all levels</li><li>■ Compassion as organising is non-linear and dynamic.</li></ul>

Although the three lenses in Table 2 are markedly different from each other, all have some relevance to this case study of compassion in action. For example, through the diffusion of compassion across all levels (*organising*); and compassion as everyday interaction (*interpersonal work*). However, the lens of *compassion as narrative* resonates more strongly with the stories from practice shared in this paper and underpinned how we made sense of our compassionate conversations and critical reflections.



## Compassion as narrative

There was very little ethnic diversity in the action learning group, which was striking, and the narrative in this case study is limited to the extent that it reveals diversity and difference. In supervision we reflected further on the possibility that compassion may have felt less relevant or accessible to Black, Asian and minority ethnic colleagues. The notion of suffering is core to all definitions and approaches to compassion, arising from the Latin *compati*, which means to ‘suffer with’, and may be associated with sentimental and patronising discourses of pity. It was clear however that the underlying need for compassion was carried in the language and issues brought to the group during ‘air time’. For example, a very heavy workload was described in one session as the feeling of being overwhelmed by a Tsunami. The Antony Gormley statue in Figure 3 (which represented ‘self-compassion in stormy seas’) was a helpful image with which to ‘reinterpret’ this ‘Tsunami story’. The trust and safety that developed in the action learning group allowed for vulnerabilities to be surfaced and shared and reflected in the stories of self compassion.

These stories and reflective conversations revealed our assumptions, values and beliefs about what being compassionate meant to us, individually and collectively. The core values of compassion shared by the action learning group related primarily to: *authenticity, courage, understanding, empathy, caring, helping, fostering human connection, and practice*. The lens of compassion as narrative also offered powerful windows into individual and collective identities (Frost et al., 2006). To recap, the action learning group involved academics and practitioners from the interfaith team learning together in a ‘third space’, and this was an important and powerful feature of this case study. The paper now draws to a close with consideration of third space working, and what this means for work and organizational psychology.

## Working in the third space/s

Third space/s represents areas where two (or more) cultures intersect and draw on the qualities of each other (Bhaba, 1994). In a higher education organizational context, Whitchurch (2008) uses the term ‘third space professionals’ to define and describe individuals who reject the notion of a gap, or separation, between academic and professional services roles and functions. Professional services roles typically relate to areas that support core functions of a university, such as human resources, staff and organizational development, student and academic services. Third space professionals

tend to perform ‘blended’ or ‘hybrid’ roles, working in spaces ‘of resistance to conventional understandings, norms, and binaries’ (Whitchurch, 2013, p. 23). Working in a third space also offers a useful framework for understanding and exploring the experience and practice of individuals who work and operate across traditional boundaries. For instance, ‘boundary spanners’, such as marketing executives and sales representatives, who proactively employ activities that cut across organizational boundaries to generate and mediate knowledge flows (e.g., Keszey, 2018; van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018). However, there is little to be found in the work and organizational psychology literature about third space working as conceptualised by Bhaba (1994), and Whitchurch (2008; 2013). Therefore, we now reflect on working in third space/s, what this means for us as work and organizational psychologists and practitioners.

### **Reflections on working in third space/s**

Early drafts of this paper were written during periods of Covid-19 working restrictions, which have had a longer-term impact on work beyond academia. A recent survey by Eurofound (2020) shows that the majority of workers in the EU have a preference for working from home at least occasionally, even if there were no Covid-19 restrictions. The most popular preference (32%) was for a flexible, hybrid way of working: that is, being in the office/workplace for some of the week, and teleworking remotely at home/elsewhere for the remainder. We hope that our reflections here may also inform thinking about what third space working means for flexible and hybrid ways of working in a post Covid-19 world.

As co-authors we engaged in critical reflective conversations in the times and ‘spaces’ that were available to us. For Kathryn and Jenni as academics and practitioners working in a (then) predominantly online environment, this was more often in the relative warmth and comfort of our ‘internal’ working spaces at home. For Yusuf, because of the nature of his role as interfaith advisor and practitioner providing support across a number of university sites, this sometimes involved a variety of ‘external’ spaces. A particularly memorable reflective online conversation took place with Jenni and Kathryn with their laptops at home, and Yusuf with his mobile phone on a cold, sunny, but windy bench in Regents Park, London. Technically, it involved Yusuf muting his microphone to minimise wind and traffic noise when not speaking. This led us to reflect further on the openings for ‘deep listening’ that unexpectedly arose in Covid-19 inflicted spaces and places. We had to listen hard to what each other was saying about what working in third space/s meant to us in terms of our assumptions and values, which we share below.

*Jenni:* There is a certain hybridity within our academic practice as work and organizational psychologists that requires us to act as unbounded professionals in the sense that we are expected to work in different areas, and with varying tasks, with ease. In a previous role as a course leader third space working included keeping up to date with research around specialist recruitment, benchmarking against competitor institutions, and student funding. I did this by attending conferences, workshops and networking with others in similar roles at other universities, many of whom held roles that were outside of an academic role. My third space working has now extended to include my professional doctoral research: *Developing mindfulness in higher education*. Being a practitioner-researcher is an integral aspect of undertaking a professional doctorate and is about being: 'A professional whose actions and decision-making processes are not bound by the traditional way of doing things, who has critical curiosity about their professional world' (Fulton, Kuit, Sanders & Smith, 2013, p. 25). In undertaking the professional doctorate, I have considered in some depth what has led to my personal values of equity, freedom and compassion, and how I can action them in the workplace.

*Kathryn:* For me, working in the third space resonates with Marshall's (2016) image of weaving between internal and external arcs of attention. My 'internal space' relates to my identity as a practice-based academic working in the field of work and organizational psychology, with a professional background in nursing and healthcare. Thinking about my identity as an academic was triggered by a seemingly simple question over thirty years ago by a senior psychologist. On completion of a part-time degree and ready to move into my first academic role they asked me a critical question: *So, Kathryn, what will you be now? An academic-nurse? or nurse-academic? Think about it!* The question troubled me at first: *What sort of academic am I?* Then I reflected further and realised at that point in my career I was both a nurse and an academic, and that this was a strength because it helped me see the world through different lenses. My values now as a work and organizational psychologist are still strongly linked to care, compassion and practice. In my 'external space' as a researcher, I value academic-practitioner collaboration, and scholarship that matters and makes a difference in practice.

*Yusuf:* Being a third space practitioner to me means weaving different traditions together to inform my approach in the present moment of applied action. I feel I'm an eclectic by nature, happy to keep an open mind trying out new ideas to discover their meaning and learn from experience. As Interfaith Adviser, the role I inhabit is very much between and among all kinds of identities, so naming it as third space helps create that space, setting the task in role apart or even beyond pairs and opposites. My practice in the third space

is remarkably anchored in the solid ground of reality, and my core values are creativity and patience, which my father ‘gave’ me. I often use meditative practice to inform my work, and I generally call that ‘*everyday awareness*’, from an expansive spaciousness to the fine focus of single-pointed attention, and the broad range of modes between. For me, the Sufi mystic and poet Rumi (n.d. trans. Coleman Barks) captures the spiritual dimension of this practitioner stance: *Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

In summary, this case study is based around academic-practitioner collaboration and action learning as inquiry (Marshall, 2016). It has illustrated the role of academic work and organizational psychologists as ‘third space’ practitioners in a compassionate organizational development initiative using academic-practitioner co-facilitation of critical action learning. Academic-practitioner relationships built on trust and shared vulnerabilities were crucial components in this case study. The metaphor of *interface* has been used to define and describe academic-practitioner relationships as:

A means or place of interaction between two *systems*, organizations, etc; a meeting-point or *common ground* between two parties, systems, or *disciplines*; also, *interaction, liaison, dialogue* (Bartunek & McKenzie, 2018, p. 2. emphasis added).

We conclude now with some final reflections on the nature of academic-practitioner relationship using the metaphor of *weaving a narrative* (rather than interface), which we consider to be a more accurate representation of third space ways of working.

### **Weaving a narrative**

The art of weaving is the creation of fabric using intersecting threads and materials. The idea of weaving a narrative brings a combinatory view, where academic and practitioner perspectives can be synthesised into a coherent body of research and practice that adopts/ includes multiple stakeholder viewpoints (Burgelman et al., 2018; Carter, 2018). Third space ways of working and weaving academic-practitioner narratives challenge narrow neoliberal agendas beyond instrumentality and individualism. They also offer new pathways that can broaden the scope and boundaries of future work and organizational psychology practice and research.

## **Conclusion**

Research that comes from an academic-practitioner perspective will lead to useful, new, and practical theories and theorising in work and organizational psychology. We agree with Dewe and Cooper (2021, p. 83) who argue that our responsibilities now rest on

‘beginning a process of challenging and refining accepted pathways’. But what might this look like? The final photograph (Figure 4) was taken in the Yorkshire Wolds in the UK; it illustrates the intersections that can be found in our weaving a narrative approach.

Figure 4

Weaving a narrative of intersections (photograph taken by Geoff Sawyer, with permission)



Starting at the top, Figure 4 can be seen to represent the intersection and merging of practitioner and academic paths, meeting to become a broader shared way in common. One goes around the hill while the other comes straight down; there may also be a fourth ‘sidetrack’ obscured from view, or a less used path along the upper edge of the left-hand field. The landscape here, as defined by its contours, shows that their meeting point is in a lower, more sheltered spot, which (metaphorically) reflects ‘what lies beneath’. In other words the unconscious processes and defences revealed by insights from a systems–psychodynamic approach, and social dreaming methodology that have underpinned the case study.

We hope this paper about action learning as a practice and example of compassion in action in a university has stimulated readers to think in new or different ways. There are clearly other ways to consider action learning beyond the approach described here, such as business driven action learning, and virtual action learning (Brook et al., 2012; Cho, 2013). However, at the heart of action learning is the notion that people learn most effectively when working on issues in their own work settings. Working compassionately with comrades in adversity is a key underpinning principle, drawn from Revans’ (2011) original premise that those best able to help in developing the self are those who also struggle to understand themselves. This implies a relationship with trusted others – *comrades* – who can help each other to free themselves from the suffering – *adversity* – that is part of day-to-day organizational experience in contemporary organizations and workplaces.

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