9 compassion abstracts october/december '12

Currently the Compassion SIG covers four overlapping areas - Self Compassion, General Compassion, Compassion in Close Relationships and Compassion in the Therapeutic Relationship. Here are four recent relevant research abstracts:

(Bihari and Mullan 2012; Chang, Lin et al. 2012; Mauss, Savino et al. 2012; Mogilner, Chance et al. 2012; Pierrehumbert, Torrisi et al. 2012; Rudd, Vohs et al. 2012; Sze, Gyurak et al. 2012; Zaki and Ochsner 2012; Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer et al. 2012)

Bihari, J. N. and E. Mullan (2012). ***"Relating mindfully: A qualitative exploration of changes in relationships through mindfulness-based cognitive therapy."*** Mindfulness (N Y): 1-14. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12671-012-0146-x

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) was developed to reduce the risk of relapse for people suffering with chronic depression. The change processes identified to date focus on the individual level, e.g. "de-centering" or identifying less with thoughts. However, substantial research indicates that interpersonal processes play a major role in chronic depression and suggest that mindfulness practice is associated with more fulfilling interpersonal relationships. This study analyzed participants' experiences of MBCT and their relationships with others in-depth, through the use of qualitative methodology, specifically theoretical sampling of participants' interview data using grounded theory. The core construct that emerged from participants' accounts was "relating mindfully". Findings show the interconnectedness of individual and interpersonal changes through MBCT, and are summarized in diagrammatic form. Participants described "relating mindfully" to their own experiences with consequential profound changes in their relationships with others. Specifically, participants were more aware of their tendency to react automatically to internal and external triggers (distressing interpersonal situations). This awareness allowed them space to mindfully respond to others rather than react in habitual (and often painful) ways. Relationships were enriched through profound and varied changes: Some participants were more able to "be with" others in distress rather than jumping to "fix" or avoid them. At other times, they were more able to enjoy and appreciate being with others due to their increased tendency to live in the present moment. Participants described improvements in communication, such as increased empathy and ability to see others' perspectives, arguments being more constructive as opposed to just frustrated, habitual rowing. These findings suggest the need for an expanded conceptualization of mindfulness, which acknowledges and encompasses these important relational change processes in addition to the individual psychological changes.

Chang, Y.-P., Y.-C. Lin, et al. (2012). ***"Pay it forward: Gratitude in social networks."*** Journal of Happiness Studies 13(5): 761-781. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10902-011-9289-z

Based on the framework of the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson in Philos Trans R Soc B Biol Sci 359(1449):1367, 2004a, b), we proposed that the emotion of gratitude generates upstream reciprocity (UR, which is helping an unrelated third party after being helped) by broadening the beneficiary's perspective toward others and thus making the beneficiary represent the benefactor and newly encountered strangers in the same social category. Furthermore, by inducing one UR after another, gratitude may lead to a chain/network of UR and strengthen the structure of organization. We named the effect the integration function of gratitude and demonstrated it by applying the social network analysis technique to eighteen small groups. Implications of the integration function are discussed in terms of self-identity, social exchange theory, and quality of life.

Mauss, I. B., N. S. Savino, et al. (2012). ***"The pursuit of happiness can be lonely."*** Emotion 12(5): 908-912. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21910542

Few things seem more natural and functional than wanting to be happy. We suggest that, counter to this intuition, valuing happiness may have some surprising negative consequences. Specifically, because striving for personal gains can damage connections with others and because happiness is usually defined in terms of personal positive feelings (a personal gain) in western contexts, striving for happiness might damage people's connections with others and make them lonely. In 2 studies, we provide support for this hypothesis. Study 1 suggests that the more people value happiness, the lonelier they feel on a daily basis (assessed over 2 weeks with diaries). Study 2 provides an experimental manipulation of valuing happiness and demonstrates that inducing people to value happiness leads to relatively greater loneliness, as measured by self-reports and a hormonal index (progesterone). In each study, key potential confounds, such as positive and negative affect, were ruled out. These findings suggest that wanting to be happy can make people lonely.

Mogilner, C., Z. Chance, et al. (2012). ***"Giving time gives you time."*** Psychological Science 23(10): 1233-1238. http://pss.sagepub.com/content/23/10/1233.abstract

Results of four experiments reveal a counterintuitive solution to the common problem of feeling that one does not have enough time: Give some of it away. Although the objective amount of time people have cannot be increased (there are only 24 hours in a day), this research demonstrates that people's subjective sense of time affluence can be increased. We compared spending time on other people with wasting time, spending time on oneself, and even gaining a windfall of "free" time, and we found that spending time on others increases one's feeling of time affluence. The impact of giving time on feelings of time affluence is driven by a boosted sense of self-efficacy. Consequently, giving time makes people more willing to commit to future engagements despite their busy schedules.

Pierrehumbert, B., R. Torrisi, et al. (2012). ***"Adult attachment representations predict cortisol and oxytocin responses to stress."*** Attachment & Human Development 14(5): 453-476. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2012.706394

There are many factors contributing to individual variations in the response to stressful experiences. The present study evaluated the patterns of stress responses according to attachment representations in 28 adults from a community sample, plus 46 subjects expected to be particularly sensitive to stress, having been exposed during childhood and/or adolescence to traumatizing events such as abuse or potentially lethal illnesses. Subjects were given the Adult Attachment Interview, which provides attachment classifications, and the Trier Social Stress Test (TSST), involving an experimental psychosocial challenge. Subjective responses to the TSST, as well as saliva samples (assayed for cortisol) and blood plasma samples (assayed for ACTH and oxytocin) were collected before, during and after the stress procedure. The stress responses presented specific patterns according to attachment classifications. Subjects with an autonomous attachment classification reported relatively low subjective stress, they presented a moderate response of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis (ACTH and cortisol), and a high level of oxytocin. Subjects with a dismissing classification reported a moderate subjective stress, they presented an elevated response of the HPA axis, and moderate levels of oxytocin. Subjects with a preoccupied classification presented moderate levels

of subjective stress, and of HPA response, and a relatively low level of oxytocin. Finally, subjects with an unresolved classification reported elevated subjective stress; they presented a suppressed HPA response, and moderate levels of oxytocin. These data support the notion that attachment representations may affect stress responses, and suggest a specific role of oxytocin in both the attachment system and the stress system.

Rudd, M., K. D. Vohs, et al. (2012). ***"Awe expands people's perception of time, alters decision making, and enhances well-being."*** Psychol Sci 23(10): 1130-1136. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22886132

When do people feel as if they are rich in time? Not often, research and daily experience suggest. However, three experiments showed that participants who felt awe, relative to other emotions, felt they had more time available (Experiments 1 and 3) and were less impatient (Experiment 2). Participants who experienced awe also were more willing to volunteer their time to help other people (Experiment 2), more strongly preferred experiences over material products (Experiment 3), and experienced greater life satisfaction (Experiment 3). Mediation analyses revealed that these changes in decision making and well-being were due to awe's ability to alter the subjective experience of time. Experiences of awe bring people into the present moment, and being in the present moment underlies awe's capacity to adjust time perception, influence decisions, and make life feel more satisfying than it would otherwise.

Sze, J. A., A. Gyurak, et al. (2012). ***"Greater emotional empathy and prosocial behavior in late life."*** Emotion 12(5): 1129-1140. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21859198

Emotional empathy and prosocial behavior were assessed in older, middle-aged, and young adults. Participants watched two films depicting individuals in need, one uplifting and the other distressing. Physiological responses were monitored during the films, and participants rated their levels of emotional empathy following each film. As a measure of prosocial behavior, participants were given an additional payment they could contribute to charities supporting the individuals in the films. Age-related linear increases were found for both emotional empathy (self-reported empathic concern and cardiac and electrodermal responding) and prosocial behavior (size of contribution) across both films and in self-reported personal distress to the distressing film. Empathic concern and cardiac reactivity to both films, along with personal distress to the distressing film only, were associated with greater prosocial behavior. Empathic concern partially mediated the age-related differences in prosocial behavior. Results are discussed in terms of our understanding both of adult development and of the nature of these vital aspects of human emotion.

Zaki, J. and K. Ochsner (2012). ***"The neuroscience of empathy: Progress, pitfalls and promise."*** Nat Neurosci 15(5): 675-680. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22504346

The last decade has witnessed enormous growth in the neuroscience of empathy. Here, we survey research in this domain with an eye toward evaluating its strengths and weaknesses. First, we take stock of the notable progress made by early research in characterizing the neural systems supporting two empathic sub-processes: sharing others' internal states and explicitly considering those states. Second, we describe methodological and conceptual pitfalls into which this work has sometimes fallen, which can limit its validity. These include the use of relatively artificial stimuli that differ qualitatively from the social cues people typically encounter and a lack of focus on the relationship between brain activity and social behavior. Finally, we describe current research trends that are overcoming these pitfalls through simple but important adjustments in focus, and the future promise of empathy research if these trends continue and expand.

Zilcha-Mano, S., M. Mikulincer, et al. (2012). ***"Pets as safe havens and secure bases: The moderating role of pet attachment orientations."*** Journal of Research in Personality 46(5): 571-580. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0092656612001079

We examined the extent to which a pet functions as an attachment figure. In Study 1, 165 pet owners performed a goal exploration task, assessing the number of life goals generated and confidence in goal attainment. In Study 2, 120 pet owners performed a distress-eliciting task while assessing blood pressure. In both studies, participants were divided into three conditions: pet physical presence, pet cognitive presence, and no pet presence. As compared to no pet presence, physical or cognitive pet presence increased the number of life goals generated and self-confidence in goal attainment and reduced blood pressure during the distress-eliciting task. The findings confirm the ability of a pet to provide a safe-haven and a secure-base and the moderating role of attachment insecurities.