

The Influence of Continuous Traumatic Stress (CTS) on the Experience of Compassion

Liza du Plessis, PsyD; Ann C-E. Smith, PsyD

Michigan School of Psychology



ABSTRACT & PURPOSE

Continuous traumatic stress can be described as a constant threat of danger that is real, ever-present, and everywhere. Individuals living in these circumstances describe an absence of safe spaces, including danger in neighborhoods, schools, transport sites and homes. As a result, there is no respite from the threat of violence anywhere. This study examined the influence of continuous traumatic stress on the experience of compassion, and included 14 participants, twelve female and two male. From the findings a mid-range grounded theory emerged that highlighted a dialectic between individuals showing a hard exterior or “grim”, for survival, to the world; a softer inner self in their private lives. The results of this study suggest that individuals living under continuous traumatic stress experience compassion in a way that promotes growth for others and has an evolutionary dynamic. Many individuals living in these difficult circumstances are trying to overcome their predicament by focusing on the children and protecting them from the threat of danger or being recruited by gangs. Consequently, they strive to advance the potential future of their community. Even though many declared feelings of helplessness, they still felt hopeful for a better future. This strong motivation to help others, sometimes put them in harm’s way, but was viewed as “the right or Christian thing to do”. Many made peace with their surroundings, acknowledging that this was all they knew. They did however want a better life for the children and therefore felt compelled to make their community a safer and better place to live.

Keywords: continuous traumatic stress, compassion, Cape Flats, South Africa, violence.

INTRODUCTION

Given that the construct of continuous traumatic stress has relatively been under researched in the field of traumatic stress, this study aimed to capture the influence of heightened threats of violence, narrowing in on the experience of how it influences an individual’s compassion. Understanding what effect this has on individuals’ compassion, either good or bad, can inform and guide possible interventions that promote compassion in the future.

METHODS & PROCEDURES

This grounded theory research study focused on individuals living in the Cape Flats region, on the fringes of Cape Town, South Africa. The number of research participants for this study included 14 individuals. Their ages ranged between 26 - 72 years old, twelve females and two males, living in the Cape Flats area, South Africa .

Data collection occurred through open-ended interviews, using predetermined questions for guidance. Participants were encouraged to add to their answers if desired.

Interviews took place in a confidential setting, at a time that suited the participants. A post-interview debriefing session was given by the researcher

Open coding was the first step in the process of data analysis of this study.

METHODS & PROCEDURES CONT.

Initial codes helped the researcher to separate data into groupings and to see processes

- After the initial coding process of the data analysis, focused coding was used to form a more conceptual understanding of the data. These codes are more directed, selective, and conceptual than the initial codes.
- Focused coding was complimented by memos written by the researcher and constant comparisons were made between categories that emerged from the open coding.
- During the coding process, constant comparison of themes and codes helped the researcher to further refine the categories of the developing theory. Theoretical sampling helped the researcher to develop and refine the researcher’s emerging theoretical categories and led to theoretical saturation.
- Diagrams and maps was used to help explain what has been discovered and where the research was going.
- Having a more open-ended way of exploring the experience of compassion influenced by continuous traumatic stress, in the form of a grounded theory method, assisted in understanding this multifaceted, complex phenomenon.

RESULTS

• Six primary codes were derived from the fourteen participants’ interviews. Each primary code had various subcodes, describing the data.

1. Continuous threat of danger. Subcodes included: threat is real; fearing for others’ safety; physically unsafe informal settlement; unpredictable violence; distrusting others; gangs rule the land; and ineffective law enforcement.

2. Facing the consequences of violence. This primary code was lifted from all of the participants’ interviews. Many participants described how the consequences of the high crime and daily, unpredictable violence influenced their lives. Subcodes included: Getting to work and outsiders lack understanding.

3. Living cautiously and taking precaution. The primary code living cautiously and taking precaution, was lifted from several participants’ dialogues. There is a heightened sense of needing security, which make people take extra precautions to stay safe. This central code stemmed from participants describing taking precautions to be safe. Subcodes included: Escape or avoidance; hypervigilance; physical defenses; Grim or second face; supervision of vulnerable.

4. Making peace or meaning. This central code was derived from several participants. Making peace with their circumstances and constructing meaning out of experiences helps them cope. Subcodes include: Religion and spirituality; violence as a norm; and humanizing others.

5. Cultivating social connection. All participants gave voice to fostering social connectedness with others. Several subcodes were lifted from this central code: Helping others; looking out for each other; examples of others’ compassion; suffering is a human condition; common humanity; and receiving help.

RESULTS CONT.

6. Coloured Culture. This primary code was woven throughout all of the participants’ discussions. Many participants described their view of the different aspects of how they saw their culture and their people. Subcodes included: Standing apart; value of religion; and generation gap.

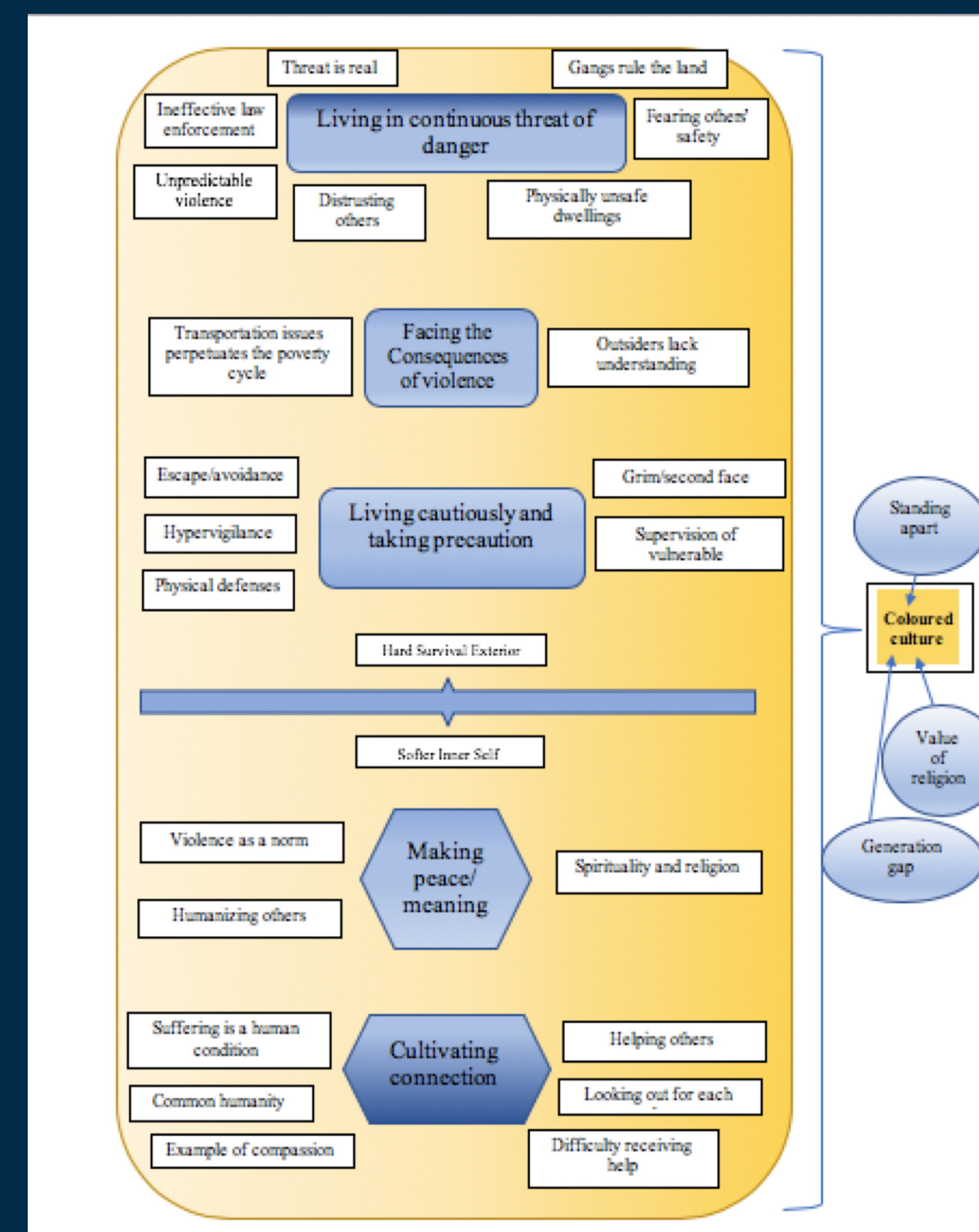


Figure 1. The Influence of CTS on the Experience of Compassion



Figure 2. Components of Participants’ Compassion

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

For this particular sample, individuals living in continuous traumatic stress conditions balance a **constant divide between being “grim”, avoidant, or distrustful, in order to keep themselves safe, and on the other side, opening themselves to cultivating connections.** Figure 1 shows this interesting dialectic between the hard survival exterior (living in continuous threat of danger; facing the consequences of violence; living cautiously and taking precaution) and the soft inner self (making peace or meaning; cultivating connection). Further exploration of the participants experiences of compassion determined several conditions that emerged. There was found to be an **evolutionary aspect** to these connections being formed, which includes looking out for the children who may be able to survive the future; children carrying the legacy of people left behind; as well as a sense of “if I help you, you might help me in the future if I’m in need”.

The themes of compassion of this research study’s participants were: Common humanity; kindness; survival; saving the children; leaving a legacy; having a purpose; and providing an example.

Most of these themes point to the **need to live on through the next, more vulnerable generation, as well as making meaning of one’s life.** The thought of being able to **impact others through an example** or teaching is important for individuals facing constant threat of danger, because it leaves a part of themselves, e.g. **leaving a legacy**, and it **teaches survival skills to the children of the future, e.g. saving the children.**

The representation of compassion, in Figure 2, is shown in the form of a lotus flower. The lotus flower is generally found growing in muddy, murky waters. It rises above its circumstances, somewhat like the individuals living in constant threat of danger and violence.

Numerous individuals and communities throughout the world are confronted with violence and fear being harmed on a daily basis. Traumatic events can shatter a sense of connection between individuals and their communities, creating a crisis of faith in humanity. Continuous traumatic stress is a condition that adversely affects individuals in various ways, making them more aware and hyper-vigilant of danger in their surroundings. However, as seen in this study **some can rise above their circumstances and cultivate a connection with others, especially children.**