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ARTICLE

Benefactors across person, time, and place: The environments that help prime wellbeing and compassion

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Abstract: Situational variables influence behavior across domains of health, decision-making, and morality. A key situational factor that influences compassion includes the presence of benefactors within one's internal emotional processing of the environment. Benefactors refer to people, moments, and places that elicit experiences of care, wellbeing, and safety. In this article, I draw on literature from attachment theory, contemplative psychology, and concept formation to develop a theoretical framework to inform 1) how benefactor experiences help prime and shape compassionate states and prosocial action, and 2) how people can attune to situations that evoke care and safety so as to construct care more readily across settings and environments. This provides a framework for understanding how compassion is transmitted across groups and populations.

Keywords: attachment theory, meditation, prosocial, emotion, situated conceptualization

1. Introduction

Many of the most successful attempts to change human behavior and increase wellbeing stem from interventions that modify features of the environment. People are better able, for example, to maintain an exercise routine when supported by others (Darlow & Xu, 2011). Similarly, attempts to reduce bias and foster inclusion (Cheryan et al., 2009; Dasgupta, 2025), resist emotional urges and temptations (Hofmann et al., 2012), and optimize decision-making for future investments all benefit from modifications to the environment (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Importantly, environmental modifications outperform many approaches that emphasize attempts to change intentions and attitudes with information (for a review, see Petty & Briñol, 2010) or to cultivate will power to resist the emotional forces that compel goal-conflicting behavior (Hofmann et al., 2012). An epidemiological approach to compassion extends this social psychological tradition to ask what environmental factors across person, time, and place contribute to wellbeing and the spread of caring states and behaviors (Addiss et al., 2022).

One particular perspective that has great potential to illuminate the environmental influences on compassion stems from attachment theory and experimental methods to prime states of attachment security. Within attachment priming paradigms, people can momentarily enhance a sense of love, comfort, and safety by simply recalling a supportive figure, visualizing a moment of care, or through mere exposure to words related to feeling love, warmth, and so forth (Gillath et al., 2022; Gillath & Karantzas, 2019; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). This technique has been found to enhance several processes related to compassion, including increased positive emotions and

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decreased negative emotions (Gillath et al., 2022), patience when listening to another's emotional disclosure (Mikulincer et al., 2013), offering help to another in need (Mikulincer et al., 2005), and engaging empathic processes to understanding another's suffering (Cassidy et al., 2018). Importantly, feelings of security and corresponding emotional benefits can be primed from various sources across the epidemiological spectrum–including persons, time, and place. Dialogue between social psychology and epidemiology therefore offers a productive context for understanding how compassion is transmitted across groups and populations. In this article, I provide a theoretical account that integrates attachment priming, contemplative theory, and theories of concept formation to illustrate how situations that include persons, time, and place can prime and shape compassionate states and wellbeing. This account provides important insights for how people and social communities can attune to situations that evoke care and safety so as to construct wellbeing and compassion more readily and effortlessly.

2. Priming security

Attachment theory asserts that emotional bonds and the experience of *receiving care* are fundamental human needs throughout the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969; Cassidy, 2016; Karen, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). This perspective, rooted in principles of evolution, suggests that human infants are endowed with a behavioral attachment system that motivates proximity to a caregiver, especially in moments of distress. From infancy onward, when a caregiver provides emotional nurturance, warmth, and empathic responsiveness to a child's needs, those qualities help establish a feeling of *security* within the child. Over time, internalized feelings of security manifest in the child's trust that care and support are available in the environment when needed. This experience of a *secure base* establishes confidence to explore the environment, navigate between independence and connectedness, take calculated risks and accept challenges, tolerate uncertainty (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), and eventually, extend empathy and care for others in adolescence and adulthood (Shaver et al., 2016; Stern et al., 2024; Stern & Cassidy, 2018). On the other hand, inconsistent or non-responsive care that is insensitive to the child's needs fosters different internalized forms of *insecure attachment,* which manifests in a sense that care is not trustworthy, or that care is only available under specific circumstances, that relationships can be unsafe, and that oneself is incapable or undeserving of care. Over time, a child internalizes these attachment experiences into their sense of self, others, relationships, and the world, which carry forward as expectations throughout the lifespan (Bretherton & Munholland, 2016).

Research in cognitive science has built on attachment theory to illustrate that a person can have multiple attachment-based representations across persons, time, and place (Collins & Read, 1994; Shaver et al., 2019). Although people tend to have one dominant attachment style (e.g., secure, avoidance, anxious), they also accrue diverse attachment patterns based on different experiences across relationships or social contexts. For example, a child might develop a secure attachment with one parent and an insecure attachment with another. Or a child who has insecure attachment within familial relationships might later experience care and supportive bonds with other figures, including teachers, peers, coaches, therapists, and so on (Collins & Read, 1994). People can also experience qualities of secure attachment within an organizational setting when they experience a sense of support and recognition from leaders and peers (Ronen & Mikulincer, 2012). Over time, diverse attachment experiences are stored in long-term memory and later activated across different relational and situational contexts.

Experimental research on attachment priming has shown that regardless of one's dominant attachment pattern, feelings of security can be activated momentarily through various methods (Gilath & Karantzas, 2019; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Priming methods include exposure to

words related to love, safety, and comfort; calling to mind or reading the names of supportive individuals; seeing pictures of supportive others; or visualizing experiences of care and safety (Gillath et al., 2022). These priming techniques can promote several emotional and behavioral benefits conducive to wellbeing and compassion. Brief moments of security through priming techniques help people to feel a sense of safety and more resilience to threat (Norman et al., 2015); reduced fear (Li et al., 2024); decreased reliance on defensive strategies (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000); adequate mental resources for care, exploration, and affiliation (Mikulincer et al., 2013); and a broadened perspective that supports the pursuit of self-actualization (Mikulincer et al., 2003; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2020). In epidemiological terms, priming security is a *risk factor* for compassion that is ripe for scaling upward across settings, applications, and communities.[1]

A key assumption within attachment theory suggests that humans possess underlying natural capacities for social connection, cooperation, and wellbeing. In addition to the behavioral attachment system, humans also come endowed with a caregiving behavioral system that motivates the extension of care to others, especially one's offspring (Mikulincer et al., 2005; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). When a human's needs for care and support are met, their underlying capacity for exploration, risk-taking, and extending empathy and compassion to others will flow more readily. From this view, the attachment priming methods described above do not give rise only to a momentary, fleeting mental state, but rather can serve as a means to help draw out inner capacities that are otherwise obscured or blocked by psychological barriers that mitigate wellbeing and compassion (Condon & Makransky, 2020a; Gilbert & Mascaro, 2017).

Humans appear to have the potential to draw on sources of security from multiple aspects of the environment. Specifically, the ability to solicit care is not dependent on one relationship but rather is a basic feature of human psychology. The capacity to form a cooperative social bond built on empathy and care is an instinctive process that human infants appear to share with other species. Humans may be unique, however, in that infants come prepared to solicit care from multiple adults in their environment (Hrdy, 2009). The capacity for prosocial cooperation is a secondary (or "distal") cause of the more primary (or "proximal") aim to solicit care from multiple adults (Tomasello, 2019, p. 225). This suggests that humans are biologically prepared to notice experiences of care across environments. Through attentional training, the ability to notice and experience care may even extend to non-social or non-human sources—a possibility that will be explored in the latter portion of this article. In summary, attachment priming research reveals that humans have the potential to train attention on features of person, time, and place to prime security and make qualities of wellbeing, safety, and ease more accessible, thereby increasing compassion. The intersection of attachment priming and meditative traditions provides the ideal context for developing a theoretical account of that potential.

3. Contemplative approaches to priming security

Many of the world's contemplative and religious traditions share forms of ritual, prayer, and meditation that involve connecting with external figures or environments that are a source of protection, blessing, or a conduit to transcendent states. Within Indigenous traditions across the Americas, Africa, and Asia, for example, ceremonies, rituals, and dance are forms of practice that provide a connection to the land, ancestral communities, and spiritual entities (Arai, 2011; Avalos, 2021; Edwards et al., 2009; Lin, 2025; Shaw, 2022). People from Asian Buddhist

[1] The term *risk factor* comes from epidemiology to describe the variables across persons, time, and place that increase the risk of contracting a virus or disease. Here, I follow Addiss et al's (2022) use of risk factors to highlight that different features across persons, time, and place can function to increase the spread of compassion.

communities, for example, engage in rituals and elaborate visualizations of enlightened figures or a lineage of teachers that serve as protection from causes of suffering (i.e., *refuge*) and help evoke the enlightened potential in the practitioner (Makransky, 2012). Similarly, in Christianity and other theistic traditions, various forms of prayer and contemplative practice offer a means to commune and merge with a divine source (e.g., Dreitcer, 2017, 2023; Robinette, 2017). From an attachment theory perspective, these forms of practice all help to prime security by establishing a sense of protection, connectedness, and the experience of one's world as held within the loving, compassionate, and wise embrace of the external figures or environments.

In line with evolutionary and attachment theory perspectives, some contemplative traditions assert that security-priming practices and visualizations are helping to evoke an underlying capacity for wellbeing, compassion, and wisdom that is naturally available to humans. In other words, the practice of visualizing a spiritual entity and receiving their blessings is one approach to help activate and strengthen the person's own potential for transcendent qualities that support wellbeing and compassion. Within Tibetan Buddhism, for example, these rituals and visualizations help to remove the cognitive and emotional habits that obstruct the underlying enlightened dimensions of non-dual awareness that is spontaneously compassionate and liberated from suffering (which Buddhists refer to as "buddha nature", Makransky, 2012; Mathes & Kemp, 2022). In theistic traditions, prayer and contemplative practices serve as a means to unify with divine nature, i.e., God, which is the ground of human nature (for a perspective on contemplative practice and non-dual awareness within Christian theology, see Robinette, 2016). On this contemplative view, rituals and contemplative practices are helping practitioners to tap into an *infinitely secure base* that is inexhaustible and unconditioned (Condon & Makransky, 2020a). Taken together, contemplative and evolutionary-developmental perspectives suggest these spiritual rituals and practices are helping to prime a sense of security that is unconditioned by barriers to compassion and wellbeing, thereby allowing natural inclinations toward cooperation and care to come forward with more reliability and inclusivity.

The prospect of an infinitely secure base suggests that contemplative-based attachment can help people to establish an internal holding environment for all experience. A *holding environment* describes how parents ideally provide a supportive context for children who cannot yet regulate their emotions (originally coined by Winnicott, 1960; see also Hoffman, 2015). Contemplative practices can help generate an internal holding environment—a compassionate embodied presence characterized by stillness, curiosity, warmth, and acceptance for all physical and mental patterns—supporting awareness of one's own emotions and layers of suffering, which supports empathy and compassion for others.

With the aim to adopt contemplative rituals and enhance meditation for a wide audience, my colleagues and I have developed a framework for compassion training in which the starting point for meditation practice involves identifying *benefactors* that help to activate one's underlying potential for care and wellbeing (Condon & Makransky, 2020a, 2020b, 2023; Lavelle, 2017; Lavelle, Vigna, Walsh, & Porter, 2021; Makransky, 2007; Makransky & Condon, 2025; Roeser, Colaianne, & Greenberg, 2018). Within the *benefactor practice*,[2] people are offered diverse options for populating the contents of the meditation based on their life experience or world view, such as a simple caring moment, a spiritual benefactor, or a welcoming place (see Table 1). Prior to the practice, people are guided to identify sources of security from within their worldview or cultural tradition. Upon identifying a benefactor or caring memory from any time in their life, the

[2] The *benefactor practice* has also been referred to as a *field of care* practice (Condon & Makransky, 2020b; Makransky & Condon, 2025).

practitioner then engages in a simulation that involves calling to mind the benefactor as present to them in the current moment, and settling their attention on the embodied qualities of care or warmth that are experienced within that moment.

Table 1. *Benefactor options*

	Diverse options for populating the contents of the benefactor practice
1	**Caring moments** A simple memory in which another person provided support, care, joy, connection, humor, solidarity, etc. Variations on this theme are commonly used in attachment priming studies (Gillath & Karantzas, 2019). A memory of a moment expressing care or joy toward other(s) (Williams et al., 2025).
2	**Benefactors** A person who has had a positive effect on one's life, such as a family member, coach, mentor, teacher, therapist, etc. A benefactor can also include a person whose writing, art, music, or activity in the world has served as a source of inspiration and comfort. The artwork or music itself can also serve this purpose (Colaianne, 2025).
3	**Spiritual benefactors** A spiritual being from any tradition who serves as a source of inspiration or a feeling of being blessed by their presence. This option can also take the form of a lineage of spiritual teachers or ancestors, or objects or images that provide a reminder of connection with a spiritual or cultural tradition (e.g., Wiech et al., 2008). Diverse forms of ritual, including ceremony and dance, are traditional activities that also serve as benefactor experiences (Arai, 2011; Avalos, 2021; Edwards et al., 2009; Lin, 2025; Shaw, 2022).
4	**Place** The natural environment or a memory of being in a welcome, caring place. A place that elicits a feeling of awe or expansiveness (Goldy & Piff, 2020).
5	**Pet or animal** A moment with a pet or animal (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2012).
6	**Hobby or activity** A moment engaging in a favorite hobby or activity that provides a sense of joy, relaxation, or ease.
7	**Fictional characters** A character from a fictional story, novel, or movie that is inspiring or serves as a model for working through a particular dilemma or situation (Jarjoura & Krumholz, 1998; Mar & Oatley, 2008).
8	**Witnessing others experience care** Observing another person engage in an altruistic or inspiring action, which can promote a sense of moral elevation (Fagan et al., 2025; Schnall et al., 2010).

Informed by the synthesis of contemplative theory and evolutionary-developmental perspectives, we hypothesize that people can train their attention on benefactors to increase momentary experiences of security and eventually develop a heightened experience of internalized security (Condon & Makransky, 2020a). As people continue with the practice and identify different forms of benefactors that help to access states of wellbeing and compassion, we also predict that their ability to experience a secure base is no longer dependent on a particular relationship or memory but becomes increasingly part of the person's own internalized identity. This trajectory of contemplative practice mirrors the development of a secure attachment style.

Through contemplative attachment priming, the potential for an *infinitely secure base* emerges in which people can repeatedly reconnect with and stabilize within qualities of safety, wellbeing, compassion, and discernment. This infinitely secure base can then help recurrently support efforts to engage in work or activities that serve others, with more sustainability and inclusivity. Some empirical evidence on advanced meditative practitioners, from within Tibetan Nyingma and Kagyu traditions, who regularly engage in relational forms of ritual and meditation suggests that they are less reactive to habitual patterns of perception (Antonova et al., 2015; Fucci et al., 2018), able to tolerate discomfort (Perlman et al., 2010), and more likely to extend forgiveness and compassion regardless of another person's responsibility for their own suffering (Fucci et al., 2024). Research also suggests that novice practitioners, including children, can experience emotional and interpersonal benefits from the benefactor practice, resulting in greater readiness to interact with members of an outgroup (Berger et al., 2018). Further research examining the impacts of the benefactor practice on sustainable empathy and moral concern is currently underway. For a summary of key definitions and this trajectory of practice toward an infinitely secure base, see Box 1 (below).

Several additional possibilities from the preceding analysis emerge that can inform an epidemiology of wellbeing and compassion. First, the social context or space in which one is engaging in the benefactor practice can itself serve as the benefactor. There are several empirical findings that point to the importance of the social and relational context in which meditation unfolds. Several studies show that engaging in meditation with a group in person, rather than online, yields higher participant retention (Gál et al., 2021) and greater trust in the meditation teacher and confidence in oneself (Rice & Schroeder, 2021). Within digital deliveries, studies have shown that social elements such as contact with a researcher or a peer can enhance adherence to a meditation program (Gál et al., 2021). In one notable example, patients undergoing chemotherapy treatment experienced greater improvement in quality of life and reductions in anxiety and depression when using a mobile mindfulness app together with a caregiver, in contrast with using the app alone (Kubo et al., 2018). Inspired by these findings, the social setting of the meditation practice itself can be an option for the benefactor practice. Practitioners can notice the support and care that comes from their immediate social environment (i.e., other practitioners) engaging in a mediation practice within a supportive social setting, and use that itself as the benefactor experience. This perspective aligns with evolutionary perspectives on care, which suggest that a supportive social context is the natural environment in which the human brain most optimally functions (Beckes & Coan, 2011; Coan & Sbarra, 2015; Narvaez, 2021). Similarly, in line with developmental perspectives on the holding environment, the social context and communal dialogue for processing meditative experience helps scaffold the necessary processes for a compassionate holding environment of one's own difficult experiences that arise in meditation (Canby et al., 2024). This view demonstrates that compassion and wellbeing can be transmitted through the environment in two complementary ways: 1) by training attention on

benefactor experiences and 2) by participating in supportive social contexts that reinforce that training.

Box 1. *A contemplative practice trajectory from benefactors to an infinitely secure base*

1. **Benefactors:** People, moments, and places that elicit an experience of care, wellbeing, and safety. With training, benefactors can include anything that 1) interrupts habitual patterns of perception that block experiences of ease, care, and safety, and 2) evokes underlying capacities for love, compassion, and wisdom.
2. **Internal holding environment:** An embodied compassionate presence characterized by stillness, curiosity, gentleness, and warmth, which allows for space, acceptance, and safety for all physical and mental patterns.
3. **Awareness:** The non-dual state of consciousness—the unity of space, cognizance, and unlimited capacity—in which subject-object structures of experience release. As a person becomes less rigidly fixated on the mental content that forms narratives about self and others, natural capacities of ease, wellbeing, and compassion emerge more fully and effortlessly. This is the infinitely secure base of unconditioned compassion and wisdom through which efforts to extend care to others can be grounded in greater stability, presence, and patience. From the non-dual perspective, these three categories of practice in this box are ultimately not separate.

A second important possibility for contemplative-based attachment priming emerges with the ability to tolerate and embrace uncertainty. A key feature of secure attachment includes the ability to take calculated risks and approach experiences of uncertainty with emotional stability and confidence (for a review, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, p. 27-46). These skills are increasingly important as a child ages into adolescence and adulthood (Stern & Cassidy, 2018). Within contemplative practice and compassion training, comfort with uncertainty takes on additional significance. Advanced meditative practices within Tibetan Buddhist traditions, for example, instruct practitioners to release effort and all conceptual frameworks through phrases such as "letting everything be" or "dropping all effort" or "don't meditate". These require the practitioner to release any goal that would support any attempt to conceptually understand or make sense of the meditation practice (Condon & Makransky, 2023; for a similar account on releasing into the unknown in Christian contemplative traditions, see Robinette, 2016). By releasing conceptual structures, the meditator can also become less rigidly fixed on mental patterns and conceptual predictions that form narratives and stories about self and others, thereby allowing natural capacities of ease, wellbeing, and compassion to emerge with less restriction that typically occurs through the lens of perceptual habits. Efforts to extend compassion can then be grounded in greater stability, wisdom, and patience, rather than chaotic attempts to alleviate another's suffering because of the distress it causes in oneself (Feeney & Collins, 2019; Shaver et al., 2019).

Meditative experiences can evoke challenges, including fear of dissolution of self, clinging to familiar mental frameworks, or experiences of novelty or uncertainty. These challenges can then trigger discomfort, strategies to seek safety, or other dissociative strategies that involve imaginations, mental time travel, and habitual desires (Lindahl et al., 2017; Treleaven, 2018). From a Buddhist point of view, releasing attachment to patterns of thought—such as stories about the self, others, or internalized narratives of insecurity—might evoke resistance or other challenges. The experience of social support and guidance is an important factor to establish the holding environment to scaffold those experiences. When a meditation teacher or supportive others are available and able to provide appropriate guidance, practitioners are better able to

navigate difficult experiences (Canby et al., 2024). In general, then, feelings of safety and support from the external environment and from within one's embodied experience appear to be necessary components to navigate meditation-related challenges. Indeed, the experience of security can promote psychological resilience to tolerate discomfort and uncertainty (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, 27-46) and enhance several capacities needed for compassion. Ironically, attachment in the security priming sense can help people become less attached in the Buddhist sense, thereby increasing capacities for openness, novel perspectives, greater ease, and compassion that are not impeded by rigid conceptual interpretations of self and others.

4. Applying theories of concept formation to "benefactors"

The benefactor practice helps to elucidate how possibilities for attachment priming are available within many different settings and environments. Anything that helps to prime a sense of love, security, and comfort can take on the role of a benefactor. Importantly, meta-analyses suggest that attachment priming benefits cognition, emotion, and behavior beyond merely increasing positive affect or boosting self-esteem (Gillath et al., 2022). Likewise, the benefactor practice extends beyond positive affect by introducing a novel interpretive framework that imbues new conceptual meaning to experiences that evoke love, security, comfort, and joy. In light of contemplative theory, those experiences become anchors that help activate or initiate a person's underlying potential for compassion and wisdom (Condon & Makransky, 2020b; Makransky & Condon, 2025). A benefactor, then, is anything that helps interrupt habitual patterns of perception that block experiences of ease, care, and safety, and evoke one's potential for compassion, wellbeing, wisdom, and liberation from suffering beyond the confines of habitual perception. One means through which different experiences across settings can take on the role of a benefactor is through the conceptual development that occurs as a result of experience and deliberate practice. To understand how this process unfolds, I will explore cognitive science perspectives on concept formation and apply them to the concept of a *benefactor*.

Models of concept formation and emotional experience have been advanced through a *situated conceptualization* account of the mind and brain (Barsalou, 2003, 2005, 2008). Situated conceptualization means that concepts are rooted in an environmental context and typically include a setting, agents, objects, behaviors, events, and internal states, each represented by relevant concepts. Representations of concepts are flexible across situations and varying sets of background concepts that contextualize them in each situation. The representation of *desk,* for example, exists within a network of background concepts representing elements of the entire situation. A given representation of *desk* includes concepts for a setting (e.g., living room, office, furniture store), concepts for internal features of the body and mind (e.g., sitting, standing, feeling comfortable, space for a coffee mug), and events (e.g., reading, working, typing at a computer). This model also applies to abstract categories, including those for emotional states or particular situations (Lebois et al., 2020; Wilson-Mendenhall et al., 2011, 2013).

Consider the experience of *shopping for groceries*. A person's experiences across multiple instances and diverse situations are integrated into a category for those experiences (Barsalou, 2003, 2005, 2016). As a person interacts with their environment, they perceive, cognize, and act in a particular situation. While shopping in a grocery store, for example, multiple neural systems simulate different situational elements simultaneously, including an experience of the current setting, of objects, of other agents, and of self-concepts, physical action, attributions and inferences about others, affective states, and interoceptive responses to the situation. These streams of information are integrated into a coherent situated conceptualization–a gestalt of the perceptual experience of walking through a store along with the conceptual interpretation of

shopping for groceries (Barsalou, 2003, 2005, 2016). The conceptualization includes inferences or predictions about the experience prior to entering it and what is likely to happen once it occurs: *it will be crowded, I might run into someone I don't like, this store might not have what I need, I hope they have a good watermelon.* As a situated conceptualization is constructed, a trace of it is stored in long-term memory. When features of that experience occur again in the future, the conceptual knowledge in long-term memory is recruited to fill in aspects of the situation to enable efficient and effective action (i.e., *pattern completion inference*, Barsalou, 2016). Over time, a person accrues a population of diverse experiences that are held within the broad concept *shopping for groceries* that share similar situated features. Those experiences are recurrently incorporated into one's conceptual knowledge, such that one's concept for *shopping for groceries* can be constantly updated with experience.

The situated conceptualization perspective has been particularly influential in furthering an understanding of how people develop concepts for abstract emotional experiences, such as *anger, fear, sadness,* and so forth (Lebois et al., 2020; Wilson-Mendenhall et al., 2011). In this view, emotions are represented as situated conceptualizations that function to give meaning to affective changes in the body and brain, guide behavior, and allow communication (Barrett, 2012). An emotion concept like *joy* or *anger* is represented across a number of modality-specific systems and includes a subjective phenomenological feeling, a representation of the events that led up to the emotion, features in the environment attended to, a relationship to an event or person, any probabilistic behaviors that follow, and any other objects or dimensions of experience in the environment. Within any moment, people automatically and effortlessly categorize their state using conceptual knowledge about emotion (Barrett, 2006).

Similar to emotion categories, a *benefactor* is a concept that integrates diverse instances, much like *chair* or *shopping for groceries* or *fear*, each of which encapsulates populations of various experiences. When first introduced to the benefactor practice, people are learning a new conceptual framework about the contemplative significance of a benefactor and then offered diverse possibilities for filling in the contents of the meditation (see Table 1). Within the meditation, participants are guided to construct a vivid simulation of the benefactor experience that occurred earlier in their life as if it is happening now (Condon & Makransky, 2020b; Makransky & Condon, 2025). Although not explicitly named within meditation, each experience of a benefactor moment includes background knowledge that integrates setting, action, affective states, a sense of self, and interpretations about others and the world. In line with attachment theory, these benefactor experiences will include mental state attributions and predictions about what is likely to occur: *this person is supporting me, care is available, this emotional experience can be safe*, and so on. Indeed, attachment theorists have suggested that such internalized narrative or models are a form of "implicit relational knowing" that is not consciously verbalized but shapes how people attune and interact in close relationships (Lyons-Ruth et al., 1998). Each time a person engages the meditation, then, they are developing a population of experiences that shape their evolving concept of *benefactors*.

Some instances of a benefactor experience are likely more representative or more typical than others. A caring moment that involves a memory of receiving support may be more typical for some people, compared with connecting with a fictional character or a hobby. Based on the perspectives outlined in this article, I predict that most people, at first, are more easily able to engage with experiences of care that are vividly available in memory. As deliberate practice continues, with attention increasingly placed on experiences of care, people's threshold for identifying benefactor experiences will lower, such that other kinds of experiences, such as hobbies, fictional characters, and so on, can take on the benefactor role. Alternatively, for people

with difficulty identifying clear, vivid accounts of receiving care, drawing on other possibilities may be more vivid and aligned with experiences of comfort, safety, and love (such as vividly recalling a welcoming space in the natural environment, or a happy moment with a pet, or a proud moment accomplishing something in a meaningful activity). (For a similar perspective on episodic simulation as a support for compassion training and its roots in Tibetan Buddhism, see Wilson-Mendenhall et al., 2023).

The situated conceptualization account also suggests that features of conceptualization operate in a bidirectional manner, such that different elements of a situated experience can become activated and initiate the other elements (Barsalou, 2016). This view can be first illustrated with an example from conceptualizations of emotion. Changes in physical and affective states prompt people to automatically and effortlessly categorize their feeling states using conceptual knowledge about emotion (Barrett, 2006). In a heightened state of unpleasant affect, conceptual knowledge related to situational or memory cues activate the concept for *fear*, which determines when an affective state will be experienced as fear rather than anger or excitement. On the other hand, the conceptualization itself can also set off a cascade of affective reactions if other aspects of the situation trigger the conceptualization first. For example, ruminating on conceptual information and simulating an experience of *fear* in one's mind, absent of changes in the body or the environment, can cause shifts in affective states (Condon et al., 2014). This bidirectional influence between concepts and affective states can also occur with benefactor experiences, such that experiences of compassion and wellbeing mutually reinforce each other.

With the benefactor conceptualization as a background for interpreting experience, anything that evokes aspects of a benefactor conceptualization might then trigger further elements of situated contemplative practice, including compassion and wellbeing. For example, if a practitioner regularly uses a bell or a deep breathing process to begin or end a benefactor meditation session, eventually, the sound of the bell or the quality of the breath itself becomes part of the background concept for the benefactor experience. In this way, non-human features of the environment, such as the bell or breath itself may be sufficient to serve as a benefactor by interrupting habitual mental patterns and drawing out underlying capacities of compassion, ease, and so on. Similarly, the physical posture or the space that one uses to engage a practice can serve as the benefactor. Thus, anything that activates an embodied state of wellbeing, calm, or ease can help access qualities necessary for compassion.

Likewise, experiences of care and compassion can feedback into the benefactor practice, serving as further benefactor memories that can inform the practice. As a person engages in contemplative practice with benefactor experiences, they may then use the practice to establish a holding environment for any difficult emotion, learning to allow emotional experiences to rest within the embodied qualities of love, comfort, and safety evoked by benefactor moments. With repetition, those embodied qualities can become part of the background concept for the difficult emotion, similar to how the concept for *desk* includes various background concepts in the example above. In subsequent episodes of the difficult emotional state, then, the benefactor qualities themselves might be triggered by the difficult emotional experience–such that the difficult emotion itself functions as a benefactor. This trajectory can also become a basis for extending the quality of a holding environment to others who may be experiencing similar difficult emotions. In this way, the compassion practice supported by benefactors can extend simultaneously to self and others (Quaglia et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion: Constructing the environment to provide greater opportunities to prime and enact compassion

At the outset of this article, I noted that attachment priming coincides with related areas of research that examine the situational forces that shape moral emotion and behavior. For example, research within health psychology has evolved beyond traditional behavior change models to look at more sustainable methods for adopting healthy habits (Marks et al., 2018). Surrounding oneself with supportive peers, for example, is one such method to support a sustainable exercise routine (Darlow & Xu, 2011). Within research on reducing prejudice and discrimination, explicit anti-bias training can be less effective than more subtle efforts to construct one's environment with more diverse representations (Dasgupta, 2025). Likewise, the attentional capacities that are trained within the benefactor practice could help people to more consciously notice the aspects of their environment that help to evoke wellbeing and care.

One major implication of the theoretical account outlined here suggests that people can train compassion by attending to benefactor experiences–the people, moments, and places from throughout their life that evoke a sense of love, comfort, and safety. Moreover, people can find opportunities for engaging with benefactors in increasingly subtle and nuanced ways by noticing different experiences that provide a sense of nourishment and ease across varied situations, such as opening the blinds and noticing the vast openness of the sky, experiencing an ease in physical pain or growth in physical strength that comes with exercise, moments of simple connection with a stranger, observing simple moments of care and connection that occur between others, and so forth. Informed by a benefactor conceptualization approach, people can intentionally seek out and prioritize the experiences that help evoke this quality of experience. The conceptual knowledge and experience that people consume become part of the available storehouse of knowledge that will then inform how subsequent experiences are constructed (Barrett, 2017, 175-198; Hoemann et al., 2021; Lebois et al., 2020).

Efforts to increase compassion and wellbeing at a population or group level also may benefit from adopting a *choice architecture* approach (cf., Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) that looks for ways to build benefactor moments into an organizational or social structure. Following Dasgupta's (2025) framework, there may be ways to enhance compassion by building the metaphorical wallpaper of an organization or group to incorporate more benefactor experiences into spaces. Cues that remind people of a benefactor experience could take the form of images, signs, posters, and so on (McGuire et al., 2018). Importantly, from a situated, grounded cognition perspective, it is important that benefactor experiences are those that build on people's prior experiences. It may also be the case that subliminal (subconscious) priming may be more effective than supraliminal (conscious) priming because it could promote less resistance. Environmental modifications appear most effective when people are not consciously aware of their intended purpose, including within attachment priming literature (Gillath et al., 2022) and within efforts to foster a sense of inclusion and belonging that challenges stereotypes (Cheryan et al., 2009).

Organizations and groups can also foster opportunities for attachment priming and benefactor experiences by helping people to form positive social connections. Connections with employees and peers help foster resilience to burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Moreover, a single connection with a peer mentor with a shared identity can be sufficient to promote a sense of belonging and long-term accomplishment (Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017). Likewise, a single moment of positive support can be sufficient to momentarily activate a sense of security and begin learning the benefactor practice.

The potential to understand the spread of compassion within groups also requires an understanding of the influences that particular individuals play as leaders or transmitters of

compassion (Addiss et al., 2022). There are many such examples across different settings: leaders within an organization can help foster connection and a sense of security (Ronen & Mikulincer, 2012); teachers and schools can help foster a sense of care and belonging in students, which translates to extending care to peers (Colaianne et al., 2023); and therapists can function as benefactors that support clients regardless of the clinical orientation or specific framework with which they approach therapy (Slade, 2016). Meditation teachers who embody qualities of care while teaching, regardless of the specific content they deliver, also appear to be key to transmitting qualities of wellbeing (Canby et al., n.d., 2024). Further theoretical and empirical attention to understand how particular people serve as nodes of compassion (i.e., benefactors) within a system is clearly a next step to advance the science of compassion.

Finally, in addition to situational modifications that are built into the environment (by means of choice architecture), individuals may also intentionally seek out benefactor experiences as a way to shape their experience and enhance qualities of compassion and well-being, and as a means to bolster counter-situational resilience (Spencer, 2024). A contemplative account of virtue ethics suggests that, through contemplative practices, people may be able to become more attuned to qualities of experience that are desirable and morally good (Davis, 2017). Similarly, through benefactor practice, I predict that people will become more attuned to the experiences that evoke their wellbeing and capacity for compassion, and can prioritize their attention and time so as to seek out such experiences more frequently (Condon, 2024). Although some people may find it futile to focus on benefactor experiences in the context of many societal challenges, the ability to rest in qualities of care can establish the holding environment needed to address those challenges with more compassion, energy, discernment, and openness to possibility.

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