

[Identity Withheld*]
Social Psychology
July, 2022



Fighting Xenophobia with Free CV Help



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I think of compassion as risking your life or getting out of your comfort zone to make others feel wanted and visible, and to bridge the emotional distance among people. Accordingly, I decided to spend my Day of Compassion doing something quite risky for people like me in South Africa. I'm a refugee from Uganda who has lived in South Africa for a year now, and I've learned that foreign Black men are treated as a single group in South Africa. We are routinely accused of committing all sorts of crimes, the most common of which are selling drugs, committing fraud, and stealing South African women to become our girlfriends and wives.

Possibly the most serious accusation is that we're stealing jobs from South Africans and leaving residents unemployed. This is why I decided to fight xenophobia by offering free help creating an attractive curriculum vitae (CV) for anyone who responds to messages I posted on Facebook or pinned in public libraries around the province of Durban.

The recipients of my efforts were mostly young people struggling to create a CV attractive enough to get them hired. What I did was to display a color photo of the job candidate toward the top of the CV—similar to the passport photo at the top of this essay—to humanize the CV holder and foster an emotional connection between the employer and applicant. During my Day of Compassion, I provided CV assistance to more than 50 young recipients, several of whom said they were amazed at the way their new CVs looked. Some of these young people seemed to grow in self-esteem, a few reported applying for jobs outside their previous area of experience, and one called to thank me after being given a job without an interview, based solely on the quality of her CV.

* Professor Plous has blurred certain images and text to protect this class member's identity.



Writing Prompts on the Day of Compassion Assignment

If your behavior was different than normal, which person did you like more: the "Day of Compassion you" or the "normal you"?

I liked the "Day of Compassion me" more. After witnessing one of the worst xenophobic attacks on Black foreigners—who were burnt to death in Johannesburg and Durban, South Africa—I have internalized some of the prejudice and become a biased person. For example, I sometimes see my group as inferior and incapable (though also superior in wit). I would rather not have these biases and stereotypes.

In my area of South Africa, "kwere kwere" is a derogatory term used to describe foreigners. The meaning is a man who comes out of nowhere and steals local women, money, and jobs from the community, leaving only diseases behind. When I told the recipients of my Day of Compassion that I was a Black foreigner, most recipients said that I didn't fit the stereotype of this group, which suggests that I was reducing xenophobia. For that reason, I've continued offering free CV help to local youth as way to bridge this emotional distance among us.

What are the psychological costs and benefits of behaving compassionately? In your view, do the benefits outweigh the costs?

Yes, the benefits of compassion outweigh the costs. After suffering from PTSD for a long time, the CV help I gave others during the Day of Compassion has helped me feel happier and more comfortable telling people that I'm a foreigner. When I first arrived in South Africa, I devised a way of using sign language to communicate to people because I didn't know the local language, which is actually a serious crime here. Now, I'm better able to engage others without feeling fear. In fact, someone even responded to my community service by giving me a free place to stay (I had been living on the streets, because most landlords don't like foreigners on their premises). So, free CVs and résumés for all!

How did others respond to your compassion? Do you think they noticed a difference in your behavior?

Before the Day of Compassion, I was a victim of the fundamental attribution error, which had led people to define me and other refugees as lazy, uneducated, and uncivilized without taking into account situational factors such as unemployment, displacement from war, language challenges, and social disadvantages. On the Day of Compassion, people noticed a difference in my behavior and started calling me "the CV guy" rather than using the derogatory term "kwere-kwere." This change has boosted my self-esteem and status in the community—now, I'm more visible to people and less likely to be negatively stereotyped.

If you wanted to encourage others to behave as you did during the Day of Compassion, what psychological techniques would you use?

Just as self-serving bias, group-serving bias, and the fundamental attribution error have worked against me as foreigner, they led me to see South Africans as angry and inconsiderate people, rather than attributing people's actions to situational factors such as the legacy of South African apartheid. To increase compassion, I would therefore make people aware of these biases and errors in judgment. I would also encourage people who are going through difficult times to become more aware of social psychology research findings, which can be very helpful in fostering change and improving relationships.

How can social psychology be used to foster a more compassionate society?

I believe that social psychology can heighten our awareness of the situational factors affecting other people and help us think before we act or make character judgments. It can also promote bystander intervention in emergencies, increase empathy and happiness, and even solve some conflicts before they start.

If you were to predict your behavior one month from now, do you think it will be changed as a result of participating in the Day of Compassion? If so, how? If not, why not?

My future behavior will definitely be changed as result of participating in the Day of Compassion. On that day, I managed to bridge the emotional distance between me (the foreigner) and South Africans (the locals). This transformation has helped me become more accepted in the community and to share my story with others. As God is my witness, I will continue my Day of Compassion till I die!