Compassion in the views of non-expert people: Consensual Qualitative Research on Focus groups

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Theoretical background

Differences in defining compassion as:

- a form of love (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005)
- a discrete emotional state (e.g. Haidt, 2003)
- a sensitivity allied to motivation and helping behaviour (Gilbert, 2017)
Multidimensional construct

• "... cognitive, affective, and behavioural process consisting of the following five elements that refer to both self- and other-compassion:

  1. Recognizing suffering
  2. Understanding the universality of suffering in human experience
  3. Feeling empathy for the person suffering and connecting with the distress (emotional resonance)
  4. Tolerating uncomfortable feelings aroused in response to the suffering person (e.g. distress, anger, fear)
  5. Motivation to act/acting to alleviate suffering."

(Strauss et al., 2016, p. 19)
Little confusion

Compassion is often confused with another constructs as:

• Sadness
• Pity/remorse
• Empathy

Differences between these constructs (e. g. Chamley & Parsons, 2016; Singer & Klimecki, 2014; Stellar et al., 2017)
Aim of the study

• to investigate what are the personal definitions of compassion from non-expert people
• how they discriminate compassion from similar constructs
• what are their attitudes towards compassion
• how is compassion specifically displayed and expressed
Sample

• 56 participants of the focus groups
• Slovak and Czech men (48%) and women (52%) - 12 were Czechs
• in age from 18 to 75 years old (M = 38.69, SD = 18.01)
• lay participants – non-experts in helping professions
• **10 focus groups:**
  • three male groups (per 5 members),
  • three female (6 or 5 members)
  • Four mixed focus groups (men and women together-per 6 members)
Materials

• Semi-structured interview areas:

1. Personal meaning of compassion
2. Attitudes towards compassion
3. Differentiating compassion from other similar constructs
4. Displays of compassion
Procedure

• Informations about conducting focus groups were published
• Potential participants could complete informed consent form, socio-demographical questionnaire and filled in their preferred time for a focus group discussion
• Group discussion were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis
Data analysis

- *Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR)* (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997):
  1. Core team = 2 assessors – matched separately statements with categorization (Halamová, Baránková, Strnádeľová, & Koróniová, 2018)
  2. Discussion of assessors – consensus
  3. Feedback from auditor
  4. Implementation of feedback and final categorization
Results

• 1947 coded statements from 10 focus groups
• 377 (16,2%) excluded at the beginning

Statements were categorized in:
• 5 domains
• 11 subdomains
• 28 categories
• 42 subcategories
• 11 characteristics
• 11 subcharacteristics
Results – main domains

- Emotional aspect: 32%
- Behavioral aspect: 30%
- Biological aspect: 20%
- Evaluative aspect: 16%
- Cognitive aspect: 2%
Emotional aspect

• Most of the participants described compassion as an emotion (e. g. “For me it is emotion.”)
• Great portion of participants saw compassion as the same as empathy (compare Kneafsey et al., 2016)/empathy as a part of compassion
• Compassion is not sadness (“Person can be sad but don´t have to feel compassion in that situation”)
• Remorse vs. Not the same as remorse
• Remorse signalizes superiority (“Remorse is only for poor you....”) (e. g. Frazer, 2006; Schantz, 2007)
Behavioural aspect

3 subdomains:

1) *Display of expression* – facial expressions, verbal expressions, posture, gestures, mirroring...

2) *Display of help* – **Help** (1. searching for help, 2. desire to help, 3. concrete act of help, 4. help should be provided) & **Support** (1. general support, 2. behavioural support, 3. mental support)

3) *Display of favour* – Behavioural closeness, Mental closeness and Display of motivation
3 subdomains:

1) *People* – a) **types of compassionate relationships** (vulnerability and closeness); b) **types of compassionate situations** (loss, physical suffering, homelessness, general suffering)

2) *Animals*

3) *Plants*
Evaluative aspect

• Evaluation of importance ("compassion is the necessary thing in society; if there’s no compassion, there will be great chaos")

• Evaluation of compassion – evaluation of adequate situation ("It depends on what caused the situation and why it happened"); evaluation of deservedness ("I don't feel compassion if someone is doing bad things and something terrible happens to him/her")

• Compassion limits ("If you had to be compassionate with everyone, you would go mad")

• Misuse of compassion ("it is very often exploited or artificially created")

• Reciprocity ("I want to reciprocate to someone who helped me in bad situation")

• Innate with further development
Cognitive aspect

the least frequent domain

• **General understanding** ("...a person starts thinking about it, to process it")

• **Understanding towards others** ("To understand the another")

• **Understanding of situation** ("I try to figure out what happened and why is he/she suffering")
Limitations and further research

**Limitations**
- Social expectations
- Desirability

**Further research**
- Focus groups with experts
- In-depth interviews
- Cross-cultural comparison
Take home message

• 5 domains seems to be consistent with various datasets (Baránková & Halamová, 2018; Halamová, Baránková, Strnádelová, & Koróniová, 2018)

• agreement with multidimensional definition of compassion (Strauss et al., 2016)
References

Thank you for your attention!