

# **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, Strnádelová, & Koróniová, 2018)
  2. Discussion of assessors – consensus
  3. Feedback from **auditor**
  4. Implementation of feedback and final categorization

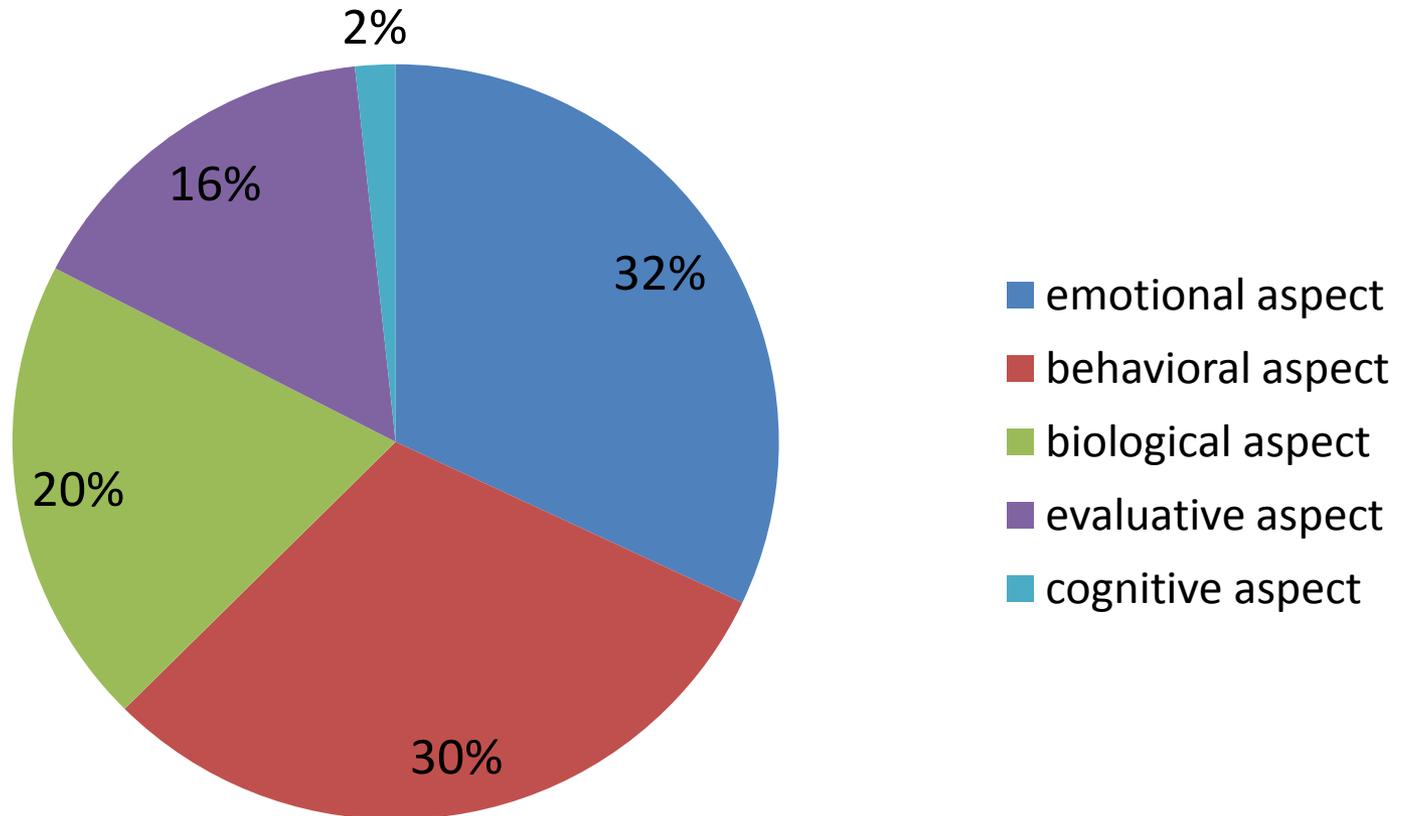
# Results

- 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

- 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 signals 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

# Biological aspect

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

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Thank you for your attention!