



COMPASSION AS A CORE VALUE IN NURSING PRACTICE: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Background:

Compassion is a foundational and historical value in nursing, essential for holistic, patient-centered care. Despite its recognized benefits for patient outcomes (such as improved satisfaction, compliance, and therapeutic relationships) and healthcare professionals (such as reduced stress, professional growth), modern healthcare systems often report a deficit in compassionate practice. Barriers such as heavy workloads, institutional protocols, and misconceptions about professionalism hinder its consistent delivery.

Objectives:

This literature review aims to synthesize the theoretical perspectives and conceptual understanding of compassion in nursing

Methods: A comprehensive literature review was conducted. The analysis involved a conceptual examination of compassion, identifying its antecedents, attributes, and consequences. Key nursing and psychological theories—including Watson’s Theory of Human Caring, Swanson’s Theory of Caring, Roach’s Six Cs, and the Compassionomics framework—were synthesized to build a theoretical foundation.

Results: Compassion is conceptualized as an emotional response to suffering, characterized by core attributes including empathy, kindness, holistic care, respect for dignity, effective communication, cultural sensitivity, and a patient-centered approach. Multiple theoretical models affirm compassion not as a mere soft skill but as a clinical imperative with measurable benefits. A conceptual framework was developed, outlining the antecedents such as empathy, values, the core concept of compassion itself, its consequences, and moderating factors, culture, personality inclusive. The review also identifies significant strengths of compassion theory, such as its holistic and interdisciplinary nature, alongside weaknesses, including a lack of definitional clarity and measurement challenges.

Conclusion: Compassion is an indispensable, multi-faceted core of nursing that significantly influences care quality and outcomes. Strengthening the theoretical foundation of compassion through clear definitions, robust measurement tools, and longitudinal research is crucial.

Keywords: Compassionate care, patient-centered care, holistic nursing, therapeutic relationship, Jean Watson’s Theory of Human Caring.

INTRODUCTION

Compassion is as old as nursing practice and profession, traced back to historical figures in nursing like Florence Nightingale who is considered the founder of modern nursing and a pioneer in the concept of compassionate care (Selander et al 2020). Nightingale emphasized the importance of compassion and a holistic approach to patient care, believing nurses should not only treat physical ailments but also attend to the emotional and spiritual needs of patients. Compassion is a healthcare approach that combines emotional support with medical treatment. It focuses on addressing the whole person and considers their physical, emotional, social, and mental well-being. Compassion is a person-centered approach to delivering healthcare. It emphasizes empathy, respect, and support, which can help improve health outcomes (Alana 2024).

Compassion refers to an inner feeling of another person's suffering and the action of helping (Malenfant et al 2022). Evidence suggests providing compassionate care not only benefits patients but also has reciprocal benefits for healthcare professionals. Compassion is associated with improved patient compliance, enhanced therapeutic relationships, increased satisfaction with care, and positive patient outcomes (Zhou et al 2023). In providing compassionate care, healthcare professionals also report feeling accepted and appreciated by patients and colleagues, expressing reduced stress level, and having a higher sense of social safeness, and experiencing professional growth. Compassion is a core ethical principle of care among healthcare professionals in providing quality patient-centered care, which is highlighted in codes of ethics [Sinclair et al 2016], practice guidelines, and health policies [Francis 2013]. Compassion is a deep feeling of connecting to human-being's suffering, a moral response to suffering, and can lead to patient care with comfort (Sinclair et al 2016). It helps a person feel more comfortable, respected and help reduce feelings of fear, isolation, and anxiety in people with long-term physical conditions. This, in turn, encourages openness and trust. Such caring is skillful and worthy, which respects the dignity of a person, and is intertwined with the competencies of the nursing profession (Frampton et al 2013). Evidence suggests the positive consequences of compassionate care (Ombudsman 2011) such as increasing patient hope for recovery, increasing sense of responsibility, control over health (Blomberg et al 2016), and increasing patient satisfaction (Lloyd et al 2011). It also can preserve the patient's independence and dignity. Compassionate care leads to safer care, saves time and cost, and increases happiness and resilience, nursing satisfaction (Papadopoulos et al 2016), professional development, and moral empowerment (Sinclair et al 2016) .

Compassion extends beyond the boundaries of routine medical procedures. It comprise of

empathy, understanding, kindness, and cultural sensitivity. It entails the ability to recognize and respond to patients' unique needs while fostering an environment of emotional support and human connection. Compassionate nursing care is not confined to a singular interaction; rather, it is a continuous thread woven through the fabric of a patient's healthcare journey. The dimensions of compassionate nursing care are diverse and multifaceted. It encompasses active listening, effective communication, and pain management, alleviation of anxiety, emotional support, and ethical decision-making. The nurse's ability to convey empathy, show genuine concern, and demonstrate a willingness to alleviate suffering plays a pivotal role in shaping patients' perceptions of care (Sharat et al, 2023).

Despite all the benefits of compassion, the results of studies indicate a lack of compassion in modern healthcare nursing and the lack of its continuity in practice (Circenis et al 2011). While compassion is recognized as the most valuable nursing asset, it has not been highlighted in studies on the humanitarian aspects of nursing. The lack of compassion leads to poor standards of care (Dewar et al 2013). In a study of non-compassionate and inhuman care, a lack of compassion in older people has been reported (Francis 2013). Another study showed that lack of value for compassionate care was barriers to providing such care (Crowther et al 2013,). Compassion is often lacking in personal and professional settings, leading to negative consequences for individuals, communities, and society as a whole. Many individuals struggle to understand and share the feelings of others, leading to a lack of compassion and connection. The demands of care-giving and the lack of self-care can lead to compassion fatigue, causing caregivers to become emotionally exhausted and less compassionate. Cultural and societal norms can create barriers to compassion, such as stigma, bias, and discrimination. The lack of compassion can lead to negative consequences, including poor health outcomes, decreased well-being, and social isolation (Dewar et al 2014). Another study showed that lack of value for compassionate care was barriers to providing such care (Crowther et al 2013,). Working conditions such as insufficient personnel, insufficient time and workload affect compassionate care negatively (Davison et al 2009). Institutional oppressions such as hard protocols, procedures that turn nursing care into a control list, and all these things reduce the time a nurse allocated to patients and relatives affect nurses' readiness to provide compassionate care (Papadopoulos et al. 2017). Compassion requires emotional communication with people. One of the barriers to compassionate care is the worry that establishing such relationships will erode professionalism, or objectivity, which leads healthcare professionals to distance themselves emotionally from patients and families (Dewar et al 2013).

This literature review has showed clearly that compassionate nursing care not only addresses

patients' emotional and psychological needs but also profoundly influences their physical healing process. The models for compassionate care often focus on the core elements like empathy, respect, patient-centered communication cultural sensitivity, active listening, support and a genuine desire to understand and address the patient's suffering (Mansour et al 2022). A growing body of research underscores the impact of compassion on patient outcomes, patient satisfaction, and overall healthcare experiences. As healthcare systems continue to evolve and become more patient centered, understanding the nuanced aspects of compassionate nursing care becomes imperative (Su et al 2020).

Theoretical Foundations of Compassion: Compassion is a fundamental value in nursing, shaping the nurse–patient relationship and influencing patient outcomes. Several nursing theories and conceptual models have framed compassion not only as a moral obligation but also as a vital component of quality healthcare delivery. Below are theoretical frameworks that illuminate its significance:

1. Jean Watson's Theory of Human Caring (Watson 2008)

Jean Watson's Theory of Human Caring emphasizes the importance of caring and compassion in nursing. Her "Ten Carative Factors" (later revised to "Caritas Processes") highlight loving-kindness, authentic presence, and spiritual connection as essential to healing. Compassion, according to Watson, involves entering the life world of the patient and offering presence, not just technical intervention. This theory underscores the notion that caring is not just a task-oriented activity but a profound expression of human interaction that promotes healing. According to Jean Watson caring is the essence of nursing and the moral ideal of preserving human dignity (Watson 2008)

2. Kristen Swanson's Theory of Caring (Swanson 1991)

Swanson's five caring processes—Knowing, Being With, Doing For, Enabling, and Maintaining Belief—demonstrate how compassion is embedded in both emotional support and physical care. "Being with" particularly focuses on emotional presence and shared vulnerability, which are key expressions of compassion. (Swanson 1991).

3. Simone Roach's Six Cs of Caring (Roach 2002)

Simone Roach introduced the Six Cs of Caring: Compassion, Competence, Confidence, Conscience, Commitment, and Comportment. Among these, compassion is central. It

is defined as the awareness of another's suffering coupled with the desire to relieve it. For Roach, compassion is not just feeling; it is action rooted in respect and dignity (Roach 2002)

4. Phenomenological Perspective – Patricia Benner (Benner 1984)

Benner's From Novice to Expert theory suggests that compassion develops through experience. As nurses grow in skill and understanding, they cultivate deeper empathy and more intuitive, compassionate responses. Compassion is seen as a practiced and embodied virtue, not merely an emotional reaction. The five levels of nursing proficiency according to Patricia Benner consist of novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient and expert (Benner 1984)

5. Compassionomics Framework (Trzeciak & Mazzealli 2019)

In their book *Compassionomics*, Trzeciak and Mazzealli argue that compassion has measurable clinical value. They provide scientific evidence that compassionate care leads to better patient outcomes, lower healthcare costs, and reduced provider burnout. This shifts compassion from a "soft skill" to a clinical imperative supported by empirical data (Trzeciak & Mazzealli 2019).

6. UK NHS Compassionate Care Framework (NHS England. 2016).

In the United Kingdom, the National Health Service (NHS) outlines compassion as one of its core values. The Compassionate Care Framework emphasizes respect, dignity, empathy, and a commitment to patient-centered care. It operationalizes compassion as a standard for evaluating the quality of healthcare services (NHS England 2016).

7. Empathy-Trust Continuum (Neumann & Baron 1987).

Developed by Barbara M. Neumann and Richard J. Baron, this model presents empathy and trust as a dynamic continuum, essential for building effective provider-patient relationships. The theory elucidates how empathy-driven interactions foster trust, thereby instilling patients with a sense of confidence in the care they receive (Mercer & Reynolds 2002). It is a theoretical framework in nursing and healthcare that describes the interrelationship between empathy and trust in the development of effective therapeutic relationships between nurses and patients (Neumann & Baron 1987). The core concepts are empathy, trust and continuum. The model illustrates how

empathy, when consistently demonstrated, leads to increasing levels of trust, and this trust enhances patient openness and collaboration (Neumann & Baron 1987).

Concept Analysis:

Compassion is the emotional response to another suffering, characterized by empathy, kindness, holistic care, respect and dignity, effective communication, cultural sensitivity and patient-centered care.

Empathy: Empathy is an understanding and sharing the feelings of patients and families and recognizing the emotional and psychological impact of illness and treatment (Riess, 2020)

Kindness: Kindness is to showing concern, care, and compassion through actions and words. Kindness is also an act of providing emotional support and reassurance (Selanders et al 2020)

Holistic Care: Holistic care in nursing is a comprehensive care that addressing the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs of patients (Watson, 2020). The holistic care as an attribute of compassionate care also consider the individual's experiences, values and preferences.

Respect and Dignity: In compassionate care nurses rendered care that value and respect the autonomy and individuality of patients and maintaining confidentiality and dignity of every patient (Milton, 2020) According to Jismon (2022), compassionate care involves 'relationships based on respect and dignity'. In compassionate care, the patient is treated as a person and not as a disease (Lown et al 2015). Compassionate nurses' establish special bonds with patients think compassionately, respect patients and are sincere with them

Effective Communication: Listening actively and responding to patient's needs with empathy is a core element or attribute to compassionate care. Nurses must also provide clear, concise, and culturally sensitive information to the patients (The Joint Commission, 2020)

Cultural Sensitivity: Cultural sensitivity is an act of recognizing and respecting the cultural backgrounds and values of patients include adapting care to meet the unique needs of diverse population of the patients (Betancourt, 2020)

Patient-Centered Care: Patient-Centered Care focusing on the individual's needs, preferences, and values it also involving patients and families in care decisions

Significance of the Theory Development

Developing a comprehensive understanding of compassion theory can help address these issues by:

- **Improving empathy and compassion:** Developing effective strategies for cultivating empathy and compassion.
- **Enhancing compassion training:** Informing the development of compassion training programs for caregivers.
- **Preventing compassion fatigue:** Identifying strategies for preventing compassion fatigue and promoting self-care.
- **Addressing cultural and societal barriers:** Informing policies and practices that promote compassion and address cultural and societal barriers.

Scope

Compassion theory has a broad scope that encompasses various disciplines, fields, and applications. The scope of compassion theory includes:

Disciplines:

- **Psychology:** Compassion theory is rooted in psychology, particularly in the areas of social psychology, emotional intelligence, and positive psychology.
- **Nursing:** Compassion is a fundamental concept in nursing, and compassion theory informs nursing practice, education, and research.
- **Philosophy:** Compassion theory draws on philosophical concepts, such as empathy, kindness, and altruism.
- **Sociology:** Compassion theory is relevant to sociology, particularly in the areas of social support, social networks, and community development.

Fields:

- **Healthcare:** Compassion theory is essential in healthcare, where it informs patient-centered care, patient-provider relationships, and healthcare outcomes.
- **Education:** Compassion theory is relevant in education, where it promotes social-emotional learning, empathy, and positive relationships.
- **Social Work:** Compassion theory informs social work practice, particularly in areas such as counseling, case management, and community development.
- **Business and Leadership:** Compassion theory is increasingly recognized as essential in business and leadership, where it promotes positive relationships, employee well-being, and organizational success.

Applications:

- **Clinical Practice:** Compassion theory informs clinical practice in various healthcare settings, including hospitals, clinics, and community health organizations.
- **Education and Training:** Compassion theory is applied in education and training programs, such as nursing education, medical education, and social work education.
- **Research:** Compassion theory is used in research studies to investigate the effects of compassion on health outcomes, relationships, and organizational success.
- **Policy and Advocacy:** Compassion theory informs policy and advocacy efforts, particularly in areas such as healthcare reform, social justice, and human rights.

Assumptions:

1. **Compassion is essential for human well-being:** Compassion theory assumes that compassion is essential for human well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2008)
2. **Compassion can be developed and strengthened:** Compassion theory assumes that compassion can be developed and strengthened through practice, training, and education (Gilbert, 2014)
3. **Compassion is a multifaceted construct:** Compassion theory assumes that compassion is a multifaceted construct consisting of empathy, sympathy, kindness, and compassionate action (Gilbert, 2014)
4. **Compassion is context-dependent:** Compassion theory assumes that compassion is context-dependent, meaning that it can vary depending on the situation, culture, and relationships involved (Schwartz, 2020)
5. **Compassion is a moral imperative:** Compassion theory assumes that compassion is a moral imperative, meaning that it is a fundamental moral principle that guides human behavior (Eisenberg, 2000)
6. **Compassion is related to empathy:** Compassion theory assumes that compassion is related to empathy, meaning that the ability to understand and share the feelings of others is a critical component of compassion (Riess, 2020)

7. **Compassion can be measured:** Compassion theory assumes that compassion can be measured, either through self-report measures, observational studies, or physiological measures (Kirkpatrick, 2018)
8. **Compassion has positive outcomes:** Compassion theory assumes that compassion has positive outcomes, including improved well-being, better relationships, and reduced suffering (Trzeciak et al 2019)

Definitions of Key Concepts:

1. Compassion:

Compassion is the emotional response to another suffering, characterized by empathy, concern, and a desire to alleviate that suffering.

Synonyms: Empathy, sympathy, kindness, caring.

2. Empathy:

Definition: Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

Synonyms: Perspective-taking, emotional understanding.

3. Sympathy:

Definition: Sympathy is feeling sorry for someone else's misfortune.

Synonyms: Pity, condolence.

4. Kindness:

Definition: Kindness is acting with generosity and concern for others.

Synonyms: Generosity, altruism.

5. Compassionate Action:

Definition: Compassionate action is taking action to alleviate the suffering of others.

Synonyms: Helping behavior, altruism.

6. Self-Compassion:

Definition: Self-compassion is treating oneself with kindness, understanding, and acceptance, especially in times of suffering or failure.

Synonyms: Self-kindness, self-acceptance.

7. Empathic Concern:

Definition: Empathic concern is feeling concern or sympathy for someone else's suffering

Synonyms: Sympathetic concern.

8. Perspective-Taking:

Definition: Perspective-taking is the ability to imagine oneself in another person's position and understand their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Synonyms: Empathy, role-taking.

Development Conceptual Framework:

The conceptual framework for compassion theory consists of four main components:

1. **Antecedents:** The antecedents of compassion include the individual's values, empathy, and emotional awareness.
2. **Compassion:** Compassion is the emotional response to another's suffering, characterized by empathy, concern, and a desire to alleviate that suffering.
3. **Consequences:** The consequences of compassion include improved well-being, better relationships, and reduced suffering.
4. **Moderators:** The moderators of compassion include the individual's personality, cultural background, and social context.

Relationships:

The relationships between the components of the conceptual framework are as follows:

1. **Antecedents → Compassion:** The antecedents of compassion influence the development of compassion.
2. **Compassion → Consequences:** Compassion leads to improved well-being, better relationships, and reduced suffering.
3. **Moderators → Compassion:** The moderators of compassion influence the expression and effectiveness of compassion.

Implications:

The conceptual framework for compassion theory has implications for:

1. **Research:** The framework provides a foundation for research on compassion, including the development of measures and interventions.
2. **Practice:** The framework informs the development of compassion-based interventions and practices in fields such as healthcare, education, and social work.
3. **Education:** Curriculum Development. Integrate compassion theory into the nursing curriculum, including topic such as empathy, emotional intelligence and compassionate communication.

4. **Policy:** The framework provides a foundation for policy initiatives that promote compassion and well-being.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Compassion Theory:

Strengths:

1. **Holistic approach:** Compassion theory takes a holistic approach to understanding human behavior, incorporating emotional, social, and cognitive aspects.
2. **Empirical support:** Compassion theory has a strong empirical foundation, with numerous studies demonstrating the positive effects of compassion on well-being, relationships, and physical health.
3. **Cross-cultural relevance:** Compassion theory is relevant across cultures, as compassion is a universal human value that transcends cultural boundaries.
4. **Practical applications:** Compassion theory has practical applications in various fields, including healthcare, education, and social work.
5. **Interdisciplinary approach:** Compassion theory draws on insights from multiple disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience.

Weaknesses:

1. **Lack of clear definitions:** Compassion theory suffers from a lack of clear definitions and conceptual clarity, which can lead to confusion and inconsistent measurement.
2. **Difficulty measuring compassion:** Compassion can be challenging to measure, as it involves complex emotional and social processes.
3. **Cultural and individual differences:** Compassion theory may not fully account for cultural and individual differences in the experience and expression of compassion.
4. **Limited generalization:** Some studies on compassion theory may have limited generalization due to small sample sizes or specific population groups.
5. **Need for more longitudinal research:** Compassion theory would benefit from more longitudinal research to better understand the long-term effects of compassion on individuals and relationships.

Future Directions:

1. **Developing clear definitions and measures:** Developing clear definitions and measures of compassion to improve conceptual clarity and consistency.

2. **Addressing cultural and individual differences:** Addressing cultural and individual differences in the experience and expression of compassion to improve the theory's generalization.
3. **Conducting longitudinal research:** Conducting longitudinal research to better understand the long-term effects of compassion on individuals and relationships.
4. **Integrating compassion theory with other theories:** Integrating compassion theory with other theories, such as attachment theory or social learning theory, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of human behavior.

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