Compassion: The Perception of Common Humanity
The Sequential-Relational Model of Compassion

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BACKGROUND
Compassion is a widely held virtue. It is a core value of hospitals, schools and charities and is enshrined in the codes of practice for professions such as social work, nursing and medicine. It embodies the noble sentiments expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

Compassion holds such elevated status because it reflects the view that all humans, by virtue of their common humanity, are deserving of care, respect and kindness.

- Scientific interest in compassion has grown rapidly in the last two decades.
- Research findings suggest that compassion is a positive mental state, and leads to feelings of warmth, concern, affiliation and reward.
- On the basis of this research, several compassion training programs have been developed.

However, there is a lack of agreement regarding the core components of compassion. This needs to be resolved in order for compassion research to move forward.

AIMS
To develop a clear understanding of what compassion is and how it arises, by conducting a critical review of the literature.

METHODOLOGY
Literature on compassion published between January 1992 and May 2017 was searched using the CINAHL and PubMed databases, Google Scholar and grey literature. Search terms included ‘compassion definition,’ ‘compassion model,’ ‘compassion concept,’ ‘compassion measures’ and ‘compassion scale’.

Inclusion criteria: 1. Published in English. 2. Focused on defining compassion and its core components.

Exclusion criteria: Articles focusing on related concepts such as empathy, self-compassion, compassion fatigue and compassion focused therapy.

From the 1,125 publications identified, twenty-five articles, five books, one book chapter and one government agency report were selected for final examination on the basis of their contribution to the current understanding of compassion.

RESULTS
Five central themes emerged.

- Compassion is a concern that arises in response to the suffering of another, and a desire to alleviate that suffering. Compassion is different from:
  - pity (an emotion directed at the suffering person);
  - empathy (a resonance with the suffering person);
  - sympathy (feel sorry for the other);
  - kindness (can be directed to anyone, not just someone who is suffering).

- Of the four constructs above, the relationship between compassion and empathy is most important to clarify. Empathy has two types: Empathic concern is similar to compassion. Conversely, empathic distress, a painful self-focus reaction, occurs when one over-identifies with another’s suffering.

- Compassion is focused on the other. It does not include self-referential elements. Compassion is considered noble due to its selflessness for another.

- Compassion arises in response to an identification with common humanity and is considered virtuous because it transcends all categories of “in-group” and “out-group.”

- It acknowledges that all humans have the same needs, as expressed in the refrain “Just like me, this person wishes to be happy and does not wish to suffer.” (Hoppa, 2013).

- Compassion is a motivation. It does not inherently include action. However, it is the precursor to acts of altruism and is commonly matched with action via terms such as “compassionate action” or “compassion in action.”

- Compassion is a process of appraisal. There is a distinct set of judgments of the other, and beliefs about suffering and common humanity which one must progress through to result in compassion. These appraisals have been captured in the following Sequential-Relational Model of Compassion.

SEQUENTIAL-RELATIONAL MODEL OF COMPASSION
A Sequential-Relational Model of Compassion is proposed to capture the core appraisals of compassion and to illustrate the complex array of factors required for compassion to come into being.

1. Do I notice the other? Dependent on context, external and internal factors.

2. APPRAISAL
   - Is the other suffering?
     - No universal standard for assessing suffering.

3. APPRAISAL
   - Do I empathise with them?
     - Subjective component.

4. APPRAISAL
   - Do I recognise common humanity?
     - Subjective component.

5. BELIEF
   - Do I believe that no one wants to suffer?
     - Core belief regarding universality of suffering.

6. MOTIVATION
   - I wish for their suffering to be alleviated.

CONCLUSIONS
It is proposed that the core component of compassion is one’s capacity to perceive common humanity. That is, to acknowledge that all humans have the same basic needs and that no one wishes to suffer.

Further research is required to determine whether this is true. The results of such research will ensure that compassion training programs target the core components of compassion.

The Sequential-Relational Model of Compassion is offered as a model which outlines the key appraisals necessary for compassion to come into being.

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CONTACT DETAILS

REFERENCES