

Relating compassion to the nursing students' professional identity

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ENGLISH ABSTRACT

Background Who depends on healthcare hopes for a professional and emphasizing nurse. The professional identity is defined as the nurse's values and beliefs. Compassion is one of those values. The focus of the nurse in compassion, is the physical and emotional well-being of a patient, who is seen and treated as a whole human. Furthermore, the amount of older people who experience more complex syndromes is increasing which is a challenge for nurses. It is policy that nurses meet political and public expectations and also deliver compassionate care. Nevertheless, how nurses experience the significance of compassion developed in relation to their professional identity is unknown.

Aim To gain insight into the significance of compassion in the development of the professional identity in graduating nursing students.

Method A generic qualitative design with semi-structured interviews was conducted. Thirteen nursing students were interviewed. Data analysis consisted of the Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven.

Results Analysis resulted in five themes. Nursing students stated compassion was part of their professional identity. They were in search of a balance between professional nearness and distance. Nursing values helped nursing students to direct this balance. The importance of this balance is nursing student's holistic approach in the relation to the patient, supported with compassion. To make time for this relation, a professional nurse who acknowledges the importance of compassion is required.

Conclusion Compassion is part of the professional identity in which nursing students search for a balance between professional nearness and distance to become a compassionate nurse. Hereby, nursing students seem to meet patients' needs requiring person-centred care using their nursing values for compassion.

Implications Nursing students should be supported in their education to use their values in finding a balance between professional nearness and distance.

Key words Compassion, professional identity, value-based nursing, person-centred nursing

INTRODUCTION

People who depend on healthcare often feel vulnerable. Everyone hopes to receive care from a professional who both empathizes and acts professionally. Medical and nursing students defined compassion as one of the main categories of healthcare (1). Worldwide policymakers intend to give compassion a central place in healthcare (2).

Literature on definitions of compassion show different views on the concept: Compassion as an emotion (3), compassion related to religion (4), compassion triggered by suffering (5), or compassion as reading another without one's own interpretations (6). Finally, in 2014, compassion is defined as part of a mirroring process in response to sorrow after loss (7). In recent studies, compassion involves seven dimensions: Attention, active listening, naming sorrow, commitment, helping (support), presence, and understanding (8,9). To deliver compassionate care, nurses focus their actions on the patients' well-being (8). Patients are seen as human beings with whom the nurse forms an emotional bond (8,9). Research with patient views on person-centred care shows patients are in need of this connectedness (10). Patients' experiences also show patients feel empowered to participate in care when compassionate care is provided (11). As a result, patients have more positive attitudes toward recovery (7,11). Compassionate care, therefore, improves the quality of nursing care (7). However, healthcare professionals administer care under emotionally intense conditions with patients, in many different moments (12). In 2015, a discussion in the public domain questioned whether doctors are allowed to show tears in front of patients (13). When compassion is an emotion (5), showing tears in these emotionally intense conditions might support showing compassion. Some professionals see this as an expression of empathy (14), which is a condition for compassion (3). Meanwhile, others think showing emotions is a failure which blur the professionals' view (13,14). The debate on how to show compassion with being a professional is continued (14).

To act professionally as a nurse, many aspects are important, such as knowledge, skills, and ethical grounding (15). Even though professionals learn the same knowledge, skills, and ethical grounding, in practice this will be carried out differently due to personal values. The professional nursing identity has been defined as "the values and beliefs held by nurses that guide her¹ thinking, actions and interactions with the patient" (15). In the past decade, the emphasis on the definition of professional identity has shifted towards rules, codes, and standards of the nursing profession (16). This standardization of nursing care became government policy in order to establish high quality and transparency in care. However,

¹For readability "her" has been chosen; when 'her' is written, "his" can also be read.

nurses desire to deliver care which is not just prescribed by standards, rules and codes (16) but also wish to deliver person-centred care, which is in line with their values as a nurse. In 2003 the development of the professional identity is found as an alternating process (17). Nursing students develop their professional identity continuously (18). Proper use of values like compassion, courage, and integrity should be developed as an integral part of the nursing students professional identity (16). However, they are often not a part of the explicit and formal curriculum (16). Research shows compassion is a value that can be learned during an educational program (2). Storytelling and reflection on internship experiences contribute to the development of compassionate care (2,19,20).

Nowadays, the organization of nursing care has changed in a drastic way. The population demanding care is increasing due to an increasing number of people with chronic diseases and older people with multiple health problems (21,22). Nurses face a challenge delivering highly competent nursing care in these complex situations. The original core of nursing is seen as high quality competence and compassionate care, nurses say. However, a magazine popular among professionals and students stated, in October 2015, nursing is in danger of alienating this core (23). Furthermore, nurses need to rearrange priorities because of financial cuts, decided by the government (24). Thus, nurses have to keep up their knowledge and their competencies, as well as meet the rules, codes, and standards for transparency and quality of care (18), all the while being compassionate (8). The choice to become a nurse is based on altruistic ideals and empathy with patients (25). This changing reality of practice in the last few years has seemed to make it more difficult to hold on to this motivation. This makes the nursing students vulnerable in sharing and exploring their values and beliefs (2,26), because nursing students have a different professional idealism from the practice realism (27). In this vulnerable and changing professional position, the relationship between compassion and the development of the professional identity is unknown (7,23,26). In order to educate nursing students who are successfully in compassionate practice and to be able to measure up to the demands of 21st century nursing, gaining insight into the significance of compassion in the development of professional identity is necessary.

Aim

The aim of this study is to gain insight in the significance of compassion in the development of professional identity from graduating nursing students. With this insight, a proper curriculum or proper interpretation of the curriculum can be developed to support nursing students in becoming 21st century compassionate nurses.

METHOD

Design

A generic qualitative study was conducted to explore (28) the significance of compassion in the development of professional identity. To obtain in-depth information about the professional identity of nursing students, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with nursing students in their last year of the Bachelor's programme. Semi-structured interviews give the opportunity to tune the definitions of the concepts and gain new in-depth information (28,29).

Participants

Students in their last year experience both compassion and development of the professional identity through internships and lectures (19,20). In their last year, we supposed nursing students are aware of the development of their professional identity (18). In addition, they have had several internships in which they probably experienced situations in which compassionate care was necessary. Students were invited to participate in this study by the researcher of a lecturer during their courses. After this presentation, students received an information letter. When students applied for an interview, they received the informed consent and a date was set. Thirteen nursing students, covering three different Universities of Applied Sciences, applied to participate in this study. By purposive sampling, ten full-time participants were included. Maximum variation was sought in gender, age, and personal beliefs (4,5,17). Also, three participants with associate degrees in nursing were specifically included to reach maximum variation. It was expected that the development of the professional identity had been progressed further by more experience in internships with these three participants.

Table 1. Participants

Data collection

Data were collected through thirteen 30-to-60-minute semi-structured interviews between January and May 2016. Interviews were structured by an interview-guide based on relevant literature (3,8,9,11,15,17,26). The interview-guide was pilot tested in two interviews. Afterwards, the sequence of the interview-guide was edited in which definition and the video were shown, and questions asked. The questions were grouped around three subjects: The meaning of compassion, the meaning of the professional identity, and the significance of compassion in the development of the professional identity. The concepts of compassion and professional identity first were presented by discussing a definition. Second, an appropriate scene from a specific movie (Appendix A) in which professional and compassionate

behaviour of a nurse was shown. After several training sessions in interviewing, the interviews were conducted by the executive researcher (StH). The interviews took place in a quiet room at the University of Applied Sciences or at the location of the participant's internship. Interviews were fully audio taped. While writing the transcript, memos were added. An iterative process took place between data collection and analysis. Analysis were performed after three to five interviews before new interviews were conducted.

Data analysis

Data analysis was performed according to a modified method of the Qualitative Analysis Guide of Leuven (QUAGOL) (30). To get in touch with the data, repeatedly audio tapes were listened to and transcripts were read. In this rereading process, narrative reports were added (30). Useful segments were highlighted. Open codes were formed by naming useful segments in small sentences (29,30). The first three transcripts were independently open coded and discussed by two researchers (StH, NK). All transcripts were read and open codes were verified for face validity by a third, senior, researcher (MvdC). A consensus in codes was reached. When all useful segments in the transcript were coded, they were added in the data management system QRS Nvivo 10 for further analysing into categories (30). Defining the meaning, dimensions, and characteristics of the categories resulted in themes (29,30). After the analysis, a written member check was performed by email.

RESULTS

Thirteen participants were included in this study. They elaborated the significance of compassion in their own development of professional identity to become a nurse. In this elaboration, nursing students in maximum variation seemed to agree. Analysis of QUAGOL resulted in fifteen categories in 160 open codes. Saturation in these open codes was confirmed in two interviews. The analysis resulted in five themes: (1) Compassion as part of the professional identity, (2) nurses' values supporting compassion, (3) balance between professional nearness and distance, (4) compassion supporting a holistic nursing approach, and (5) professional nursing based on compassion requires time.

Compassion as part of the professional identity

Nursing students stated any nurse should have competences to show certain aspects of compassion. Compassion was seen as an attitude where the nurse empathized with a patient to make an emotional connection. Students strongly agreed on the dimensions of compassion, such as attention, active listening, and presence, which were given in the definition of van der Cingel. Nursing students stated they learned to show compassion from

different role models in internships. For nursing students, compassion was intertwined with becoming a professional in nursing. They stated a professional nurse is a compassionate nurse:

“I think inside your professional attitude, you just really need compassion to execute care in a professional way” [P8].

However, nursing students experienced different expressions of compassion. Nursing students explained the individual identity determines how compassion is expressed. This expression depended on certain nursing values to support compassion.

Nurses' values supporting compassion

Respect is a value that was mentioned in every interview. Nursing students stated respect is a basic value to become a compassionate nurse. When a nurse showed respect for the patient, it was expected the nurse would receive respect in return. Another value students mentioned was openness. Both the patient and the nurse should show a certain level of openness so both can be themselves. Openness also meant students could share their own emotions with the patient. Autonomy was also indicated as a nurse's value supporting the expression of compassion, especially regarding patients' health and healthcare:

“Showing compassion is something everyone does on his own way. And that has to do with your own values and norms on what kind of expression you show compassion. So I think in that matter, everyone can eh yeah, everyone can express compassion in their own individual way” [P1].

If these values are taken into account in the professional identity, expression of compassion will be unique. Nursing students stated awareness of these values was important for developing compassion. Additionally, these values were important when the student chose to become a nurse. Respect, openness, and autonomy were personal values that were strengthened while developing their professional identity:

“Because it is now more important than in everyday life to do it in your profession and to consider them [...]. Yes, I do not know if there are new values to come, I think more that strengthens older or previous values” [P3].

Some nursing students mentioned one other important value in compassionate care: expressing compassion with genuine humour to relax the patient:

“And I've found particularly by experience that the use of humour, appropriate humour of course, brings the care recipient a specific feeling of relaxation. Something else than just talk about the admission, about being sick, about the nasty things” [P9].

Balance between professional nearness and distance

Nursing students stated they wanted to show compassion by being near to the a patient, which led to a new discussion about professional nearness and distance. They struggle with how close to patients they should become and what kind of emotional bond they could form, while still having a certain professional distance:

“if I had such a relationship with a patient especially those who are here a little longer, I would take everything home, but yes, to not show all of that, to just pull up a wall for yourself that is of course not really eh an ideal situation. So that's. Suddenly it hits me, that you have to find a balance” [P13].

The nursing values respect, openness, autonomy, and genuine humour helped to students to express their compassion. These values were also important in finding a professional balance in nearness and distance. Showing emotions was acceptable to a certain level in finding this balance:

“It can't be that in a certain moment your compassion is so intense, you can't function anymore. That will be your border” [P10].

Compassion supporting a holistic nursing approach

When nursing students realised what working with human beings meant, compassion became a more important value of caring. Compassion helped the nursing students approach the whole person instead of only a patient. Compassion almost became natural in care with humans. “Natural”, for nursing students, meant they made their own expression of compassion, which made it easier to make a human connection. This made compassion essential in nursing, according to the nursing students:

“And when you realize all of that, we are just all human” [P2].

The nursing student tries to imagine herself into the patient's situation. The ability to imagine the feelings of another human, which they mentioned was empathy, was an important condition for compassion. By realizing every person has different experiences, the nurse and the patient will have a mutual understanding of each other's roles:

“Those thoughts now, I still imagine myself to another and I think what is normal for me, doesn't have to be normal to another” [P7].

Nursing students wanted to know the human who was now their patient. Only when the human is known care can be offered. Compassion helped nurses become acquainted with

patients by showing patients nurses are human too, and thereby, nursing students could create person-centred care. For them, this was related to becoming a good nurse: “You have your professional tasks [...], but this, compassion, is what makes you a really good nurse” [P3].

Professional nursing based on compassion requires time

Taking time was the most important condition to show compassion in nursing practice, according to nursing students. Taking time in nursing care requires a nurse who acknowledges the importance of compassion. Some students also stated having patience was an important condition, which was often mentioned along with taking time. When they were asked how to take time, nursing students stated courage to stand out was very important in taking time. When the importance of compassion was seen and she had the courage, a nurse could take time for compassion because of her professional identity: “I always say to my supervisors, to other interns, I think it is just so important you sit with that patient, and you take time for the patient. Especially taking time, nowadays it has become increasingly administrative tasks, score forms” [P9].

Relation of themes

After analysing the themes the students mentioned, a relationship among themes was found. Compassion was identified as a part of the professional identity; nurses need compassion in their professional identity. Compassion was needed to become a nurse, although nursing students experienced differences in expression of compassion. These differences were determined by nursing values, such as respect, openness, autonomy, and genuine humour. Those values supported the expression of compassion. Furthermore, nursing students were in search of a balance between professional nearness and distance. This balance was given direction by the same nursing values. Reaching this balance with compassion gave the nurse an opportunity for a holistic approach. Actually taking sufficient time for this process and expression required a professional nurse who acknowledged the importance of compassion.

Figure 1 Mind map of themes

DISCUSSION

This study reveals how nursing students experience the significance of compassion in the development of their professional identity. This results in a complex description of the relationship between the value compassion and the values and beliefs of the professional identity. Compassion is seen as a part of the professional identity; while delivering compassionate care students are in search of a balance between professional nearness and distance. In this balance, their professional identity values, respect, openness, autonomy, and genuine humour, are used to give a direction toward this balance. Nevertheless, the importance of compassion was mentioned by every student.

To appreciate these results, some limitations and strengths need to be reported. The chances of selection bias may have limited the results. Following the open recruitment, as described, may have meant that only participants applied who were interested in the expression of compassion. Additionally, maximum variation was not reached because no differences were found in the students' personal beliefs. Thus, specific belief-related aspects could be missed. Nonetheless, data saturation was reached. Hereby in-depth information is gathered in the significance of compassion in the development of the professional identity. Several measures were taken to ensure trustworthiness to strengthen this in-depth information (31). Credibility was enhanced during the interviews by using the criteria of Kvale (32), a reflection logbook during the process by the executive researcher, and a member check after analysis (28). Conformability was enhanced during data analysis by the use of researcher triangulation and peer review feedback during the research process.

In the literature compassion is seen as a value, in the values and beliefs that form the professional identity of nurses (15,16). In this study, nursing students mention four important values in their professional identity: Respect, openness, autonomy, and genuine humour. These values differ from the assumption compassion is a value in the professional identity, although nursing students do refer to compassion as a part of the professional identity. Nursing students see their values, respect, openness, autonomy, and genuine humour, as supporting values for compassion. Thus, this differs from findings in previous literature which states "compassion means setting aside one's own interests, values and judgements and not giving judgement on the possible guiltiness of suffering" (8). Nursing students use their nursing values to find this balance in professional nearness and distance instead of setting their values aside. This balance is crucial in compassion because compassion helps the nursing students develop a holistic approach.

Studies on patient views on compassion in person-centred care found patients have a fundamental need for connectedness (10,11). An important aspect of connectedness, according to patients, is respect and openness in the relationship with a nurse (10). In addition to respect, humour was also mentioned by patients (10). Nursing students use humour to relax the patient, which helps to show compassion in their relationship with the patient. An interesting feature of our study is nursing students seem to anticipate patients' need for connectedness, respect, openness, and humour very well. In a study with patients and nurses, the same results were found (8). The relational process in which nurses acknowledge patients' emotions in times of suffering and loss is seen as the professional process (8). In this process, nursing students of this study are in an important search for a balance between professional nearness and distance. Possibly, this process is undervalued and under resourced by education and time allocation (11,33).

In line with the results of this study certain implications can be done. First, value-based nursing should be enhanced. Second, to anticipate on patients' needs the importance of patient-nurse relation should be acknowledged. Nurses should be enabled to rearrange their own priorities in the patient-nurse relationship instead of meeting codes, rules and standards. This study has a third implication for nursing educators, who have a unique opportunity to rearrange their curriculum. Recently, a new curriculum was released in the Netherlands whereby Universities of Applied Sciences rearrange their Bachelors of nursing curriculum (18). Both knowledge of compassion and training in balancing compassion and professional distance should be essential parts of the core of the education (9) because this study shows students are searching for a balance to have a holistic approach in compassionate care. The aim of nursing education should be to support positioning compassion intertwined with the professional identity. Therefore, nursing students have to know the impact of compassion on patients and perceived quality of care (7,11). Nursing educations should explicitly make students aware of the importance of their values. These values are used to develop an emotional bond with patients by finding a balance between compassion and professional distance. Emotional bonding without proper education for a professional balance potentially leads to the risk of additional mental burden, also known as compassion fatigue (34). Proper education should, of course, prevent ultimate harms, like burn-out (34). Further research might focus on the way graduated nurses, after several years of working with patients, deal with the significance of compassion related to their professional identity. This might be different for nursing students, who have not yet experienced compassion fatigue and may have been further along in their development of the professional identity. For both groups, specific courseware for continuous education has to be developed.

Conclusion

This study provides insight into the significance of compassion in the development of the professional identity of graduating nursing students. Compassion is identified as a part of the professional identity. In the development of their professional identity, nursing students search for a balance between professional nearness and distance, while delivering compassionate care. Students own values are important because they give a direction to this balance. Nursing education should support and strengthen students in developing these values instead of setting them aside to express compassion. After all, patients expect and need compassionate professional nurses.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Participants	
Mean age	23 (range 20 - 28)
Educational level	Pre-Bachelor (8) / Associate degree (3) / Other*(2)
Field of expertise	Hospital (5) / Community care (5) / Mental care (1) / Other (2)*
Female (male)	10 (3)
Person's beliefs	No specific (13)

* Other in educational level means one year of another Bachelor programme. Other in field of expertise means a very specific field, which might indirectly lead to the nursing student.

Table 1 Participants

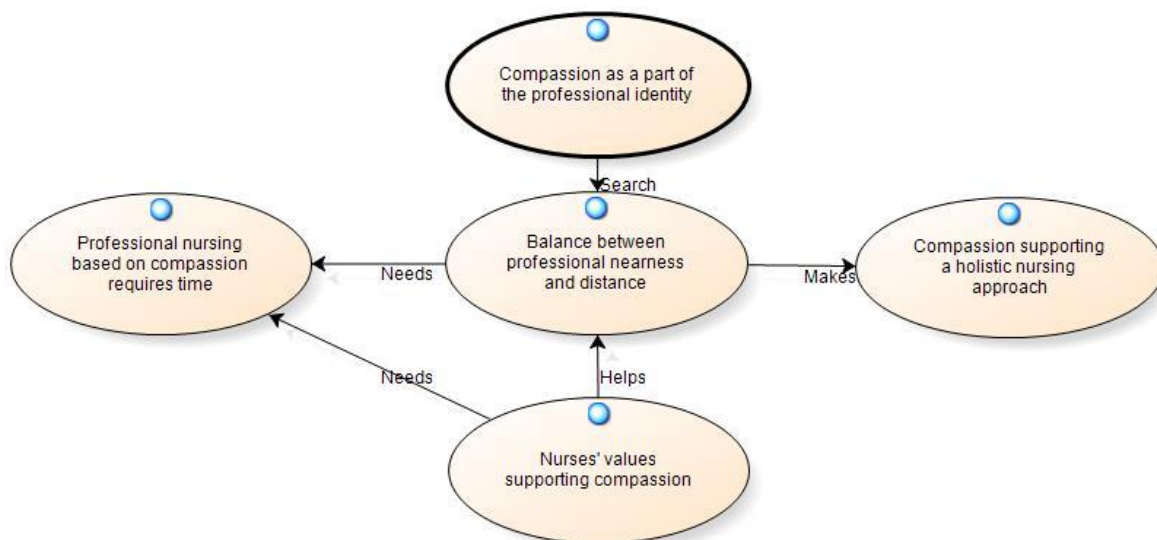


Figure 1 Mind map of themes (imported from Nvivo)

APPENDIX A Topic list (in Dutch)

Opening:

- Wat is op dit moment je beeld bij compassie?
Hoe heeft zich dat ontwikkeld?

Begrip	Definitie (1 ^e)
Compassie	Bewust en onvoorwaardelijk meeleven met de emoties van de cliënt om deze te begeleiden in hun verlies. Dimensies hierbij zijn aandacht, (actief) luisteren, leed benoemen, betrokkenheid, helpen, aanwezigheid en begrip.

- Wat vind je van de definitie?
Wat doet het met je?

Begrip	Film/Operationalisatie (2 ^e)
Compassie	Scene uit de film "Wit" waarbij de verpleegkundige een ijsje eet met de patiënt. Via: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RS8Bqgje_RA

- Wat vind je van dit voorbeeld?
Wat doet het met je?
- Wat betekent compassie voor jou als verpleegkundige zijnde?

Overstap maken bij doorvragen naar professionele identiteit

Begrip	Definitie (1 ^e)
Professionele identiteit	De waarden en overtuigingen van verpleegkundigen, dat haar denken, acties en interacties met de cliënt beïnvloedt

- Wat vind je van de definitie?
Wat doet het met je?

Begrip	Film/Operationalisatie (2 ^e)
Professionele identiteit	Scene uit de film "Wit" waarbij de arts en de verpleegkundige een catheter inbrengen bij de patiënt. 1:17:17 – 1:20:38 via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0PPvYIGqL8

- Wat vind je van dit voorbeeld?
Wat doet het met je?

Vervolg vragen

- Wat betekent verpleegkundige zijn voor jou?
- Maakt het leren voor verpleegkundige dat jij anders naar jouw eigen normen en waarden bent gaan kijken?
- Toen je begon met de Hbo-V, hoe dacht je toen over compassie(/meeleven)?
Hoe is dat nu?
Waarom/waardoor is dat veranderd?
- Wat doe je als je jouw compassie niet kwijt kan in de praktijk waar je werkt? (20)
Is dit persoonlijke ontwikkeling? Of is dit professionele ontwikkeling?
Hoe is dat dan op dat moment voor je?
- Confronteren met onderzoek: De opleiding Hbo-V zou juist compassie afleren in plaats van aanleren.. Wat vind je daarvan?