

The Science of Compassionate Love

The Science of Compassionate Love

Theory, Research, and Applications

edited by
Beverley Fehr, Susan Sprecher,
and Lynn G. Underwood

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The primary purpose of this edited volume is to present cutting-edge, outstanding scholarship on the topic of *compassionate* love. Compassionate love is the term we have chosen to refer to various forms of other-oriented cognitions, affect, and behavior. It is the kind of love that is a central feature in many religious traditions: a self-giving, caring love that values the other highly and has the intention of giving full life to the other. It is associated, but not synonymous with, concepts such as empathy, perspective-taking, altruism, social support, volunteerism, attachment, romantic love, and familial love. Although the central focus of the book is on compassionate love, many of the chapters also refer to one or more of these related other-oriented concepts.

Compassionate love can be experienced for close others such as family members, romantic partners, and friends; however, it can also be experienced for peripheral ties and unknown others, even all of humanity. In fact, it is distinguishable from other types of love, such as romantic love or maternal love, by the degree to which it is a universal type of love that can be experienced in all types of relationships and settings. A collected volume on compassionate love seems timely and important in the midst of a world filled with hate, violence, and devaluation of the person.

The goal of the present volume was to create a “state-of-the-art” compendium that would document what is presently known about compassionate love and provide a basis for future research. The book provides insight into the nature of compassionate love, how we might better understand it, and, importantly, how to encourage its appropriate expression in our intimate relationships and to strangers. The chapters were designed to create a varied, but cohesive, body of knowledge on the antecedents of compassionate love, its manifestations, and its consequences. This book takes a significant step toward covering previously uncharted territory and provides a relatively detailed analysis of the

landscape. More specifically, this volume examines conceptual frameworks for studying compassionate love, the measurement of compassionate love, compassionate love as experienced in a variety of relationship contexts, compassionate love as manifested in a variety of situations (e.g., medical, care-giving, social support), directions for future research, and finally, suggestions for interventions aimed at promoting compassionate love in today's world.

Many disciplines, with unique foci and methods, contribute to our understanding of compassionate love: psychology, sociology, communication studies, family studies, epidemiology, and medicine. This volume uses the model of compassionate love articulated by Lynn Underwood (2002, 2005, see also Chapter 1, this volume) to enable these disciplines to communicate with each other. This model also provides cohesiveness for this volume, as each chapter links its work to the model. By including a diverse group of scholars and research traditions, incorporating a common model, and having editors representing psychology, sociology, and epidemiology, this book synthesizes knowledge in a way that will be informative for both teaching and research. It also lays out a variety of methods and measures that will help this field progress. It is intended to be a practical book, grounded in solid scientific findings and methods.

The volume is organized into six major sections and a final commentary. Each chapter includes reviews of the literature, original empirical work – often previously unpublished findings – and suggestions for future research.

Part I is focused on *Definition, Theory, and Measurement*. Chapter 1, by Underwood, sets the stage for the rest of the volume. In this chapter, she presents a working definition and model of compassionate love. The model begins with the individual – affected by the environment, the situation, relationships, and his or her own internal dispositions. Individual factors, in turn, contribute to motivation and discernment in a dynamic process that ultimately results in “compassionate love fully expressed.” Underwood also presents findings using items from her Daily Spiritual Experiences scale that measure compassionate love for others. Beverly Fehr and Susan Sprecher, in Chapter 2, discuss a program of research on conceptual, measurement, and relational issues pertaining to compassionate love. This research includes an analysis of laypeople's conceptions of compassionate love, as well as a description of the development of the Compassionate Love Scale that measures, in different versions, compassionate love for a variety of targets (e.g., all of humanity, a specific partner). The chapter presents studies on correlates of compassionate love, gender differences, and relationship type differences in compassionate love. People's beliefs about the outcomes of compassionate love also are examined, including whether it is better for individual well-being to give

versus receive this kind of love. The final chapter in Part I, written by Stacy Smith, Sandi Smith, and colleagues, focuses on the measurement of acts of compassionate love on American television. The authors extracted key features of altruism from extant literature to create a coding scheme for identifying compassionate love on television. They document the extent to which each of these aspects of altruism/compassionate love is displayed in entertainment programs, making the point that conclusions about the frequency of acts are highly dependent upon how the construct is measured.

Part II of the book, on the *Sociodemographics of Compassionate Love*, consists of two chapters. Tom Smith, in Chapter 4, examines trends and correlates of empathy, altruism, and related constructs with data collected in the General Social Survey. Variations in loving and caring in the United States based on sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, marital status, urban–rural residence, and so forth, are examined. In Chapter 5, Nadine Marks and Jieun Song review life-course and sociological perspectives on social support and care-giving and present data on compassionate attitudes and acts across the adult life course, based on two US national studies: the National Survey of Midlife in the United States and the National Survey of Families and Households. The authors demonstrate that compassionate attitudes and acts (toward primary kin, secondary kin, friends, and others) vary as a function of several sociodemographic variables, including gender and stage in the adult life course.

Part III addresses *Compassionate Love in Close Relationships*. In Chapter 6, Brenda Volling, Amy Kolak, and Denise Kennedy examine the development of empathy and compassionate love in early childhood, focusing on the influences of family members. They first review the extensive literature on the development of children's moral development, compassionate behavior, empathy, and prosocial behaviors. In the latter part of the chapter, they present findings from their own multi-method research on compassionate behavior, conducted with families. Lisa Neff and Benjamin Karney, in Chapter 7, focus on compassionate love in early marriage. They define compassionate love as accurate understanding of one's partner – positively evaluating one's partner at a global level while perceiving accurately the partner's positive and negative traits. They summarize their research conducted with newlywed couples over the first four years of marriage, including how compassionate love is associated with support-giving, marital efficacy, and the likelihood of divorce.

The theme of Part IV of the book is *Compassionate Love for Non-Close Others* and contains three chapters. Chapter 8, by Mario Mikulincer, Philip Shaver, and Omri Gillath, provides an attachment theory perspective on compassion and caregiving. After reviewing research on the link between secure attachment and caregiving, the authors highlight their

research findings. Specifically, they show how dispositional attachment and experimentally-created security are associated with compassion and empathy for strangers, minority group members, and people with special needs. Allen Omoto, Anna Malsch, and Jorge Barraza, in Chapter 9, present their model of volunteerism and make the case that volunteer behavior can be construed as a behavioral manifestation of compassionate love. Correlates of, and motivations for, volunteerism were examined in several samples of older volunteers. In Chapter 10, Salena Brody, Stephen Wright, Arthur Aron, and Tracy McLaughlin-Volpe extend self-expansion theory (particularly the inclusion of other in self model) to cross-group friendships. The authors report several correlational and experimental studies in which they examine factors that increase positive intergroup attitudes (a proxy for compassionate love). They conclude that close cross-group friendships can foster compassionate love for members of other groups.

Part V of the book focuses on *Compassionate Love in Health Care and other Caregiving Contexts*. Linda Roberts, Meg Wise, and Lori DuBenske, in Chapter 11, examine compassionate caregiving in an end-of-life context. They report the results of three qualitative studies on compassionate love between family caregivers and terminally ill patients. Several themes, exemplifying compassionate love in this caregiving context, are extracted from these end-of-life accounts. Chapter 12, by David Graber and Maralynne Mitcham, is on exemplary care in hospital settings. These authors highlight findings from in-depth interviews conducted with clinicians in two US hospitals who had been nominated as particularly compassionate. The authors develop a model that elucidates characteristics of the care provider and the kinds of situational factors that promote exemplary care.

Chapter 13, by Norman Giesbrecht, examines the influence of the the sociocultural context on giving care to adults with disabilities. Two different types of health-care organizations are compared, one with an interdependent care ethic (*l'Arche* communities) and the other with an independent care ethic (the Community Living Organization). The author develops and tests a complex model of caregiving based on quantitative and qualitative data gathered from a large sample of caregivers in these two organizations. Constructs included in the model are: attachment, empathy, perspective-taking, to name a few.

In Part VI, *Compassionate Love in an Intercultural Context*, we highlight research on compassionate love in a collectivist culture. Julie Vaughan, Nancy Eisenberg, Doran French, Urip Purowano, Telie Suryanti, and Sri Pidada, in Chapter 14, examine the relations between empathy, sympathy, perspective-taking, and prosocial behavior in children and adolescents from two subcultures in Indonesia. Building on Underwood's

model, they propose a model in which empathy-related responding leads to positive behavior and compassionate love.

The final section of the book is a *Commentary*, in Chapter 15, by Daniel Perlman and Rozzana Sánchez Aragón. We asked these distinguished scholars to read the chapters and reflect on them, once again using Underwood's model as a guiding framework. The authors highlight key findings in the volume, situate them in the larger context of social science research, and discuss the contrast between compassionate love and the dark side of relationships. They end their chapter by offering several directions for future compassionate love research.

We want to express our deep gratitude to the authors for their research, expertise, tenacity, and willingness to work together with us on this volume. Their research into previously uncharted territory and their extensive work in crafting the chapters have made this volume possible. We thank the funders of the research: the Fetzer Institute, in particular, as well as the Templeton Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We thank our colleges and universities for supporting us in our research endeavors: the University of Winnipeg, Illinois State University, and Hiram College. We thank Blackwell Publishing, and editor Christine Cardone, for their belief in this project and editorial advice. Finally, we want to thank our families, who have been understanding of our need to work on this project and are supportive in so many other ways: Marvin, Genevieve, Everett; Charles, Abigail, Katherine, and Samuel; Anna, Michelle, and Zoë, Marie, and Gerald.

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Part I

Definitions, Theory, and Measurement

Compassionate Love: A Framework for Research

Lynn G. Underwood

Introduction

Compassionate love is that particular kind of love that centers on the good of the other. It's that kind of love that feels so good to be on the receiving end of – good in a lasting way, one that sticks to the ribs and doesn't give indigestion. It is a caring love which has a weight, a nourishing quality. To be loved when it is the choice of the other, and at some emotional or physical cost, can make a special impact. In giving this kind of other-centered love one tries to truly understand and accept the conditions and state of the recipient in order to enable the recipient to become more fully alive. "Altruistic love," "unconditional love," and "agape" are other terms sometimes used to describe this kind of love (Post, Underwood, Schloss, & Hurlbut, 2002; Underwood, 2005). The working definition of compassionate love presented here describes the kind of love that ultimately centers on the good of the other.

This love is *not* identical with the often hormonally driven romantic drive, the natural bonding with offspring, the tit-for-tat of the business world, or financial and emotional support given out of obligation. Nor is it captured by the platitudes of love and forgiveness trotted out by the religious and nonreligious alike.

Both scientific and nonscientific resources can help us to identify this kind of love and to illuminate its trajectory. The scientific research included in this volume is designed to help us further our understanding about the conditions, behaviors, and attitudes associated with compassionate love and to investigate what might get in the way of forming those attitudes and behaviors and what might promote them. The ultimate end is to discover ways to appropriately encourage the expression of this other-centered love in the world. This research supplements what religious thinkers, ethicists, and philosophers contribute to the understanding of these issues (Vacek, 1994).

The main purpose of this chapter is to lay out a working definition of compassionate love and a model to reveal the mechanism of this other-centered love. These are designed to provide a common reference for the chapters included in this volume and a guide for the reader.

Working Definition and Key Features

The working definition of compassionate love includes both the attitudes and actions related to giving of self for the good of the other. The term as used here is meant to identify a self-giving, caring love that values the other highly and has the intention of giving full life to the other. Compassionate love can be seen in actions, expressions, and words, but at the core of the construct are motivation and discernment, facets of free choice to stretch and to give. The “why” of the action, the reason for the behavior, the motivation behind the action – all are important to categorizing something as compassionately loving in nature. The ultimate focus is the giving of self for the good of the other. Compassionate love can be expressed in the context of other kinds of love and altruistic behaviors, but somehow reaches beyond them. Compassionate love as used in this volume is not necessarily always in response to the suffering of another, but also includes attitudes and actions centered on the flourishing of another at a cost to self. This kind of love is a central feature in many religious traditions, but is not conceived of in this volume as essentially tied to any particular religion.

Compassionate love is not synonymous with empathy, attachment, or bonding, but can relate to these. The word “compassion” alone is not a synonym, as it might imply a focus limited to those who are suffering, and it can imply detachment, whereas compassionate love implies some degree of emotional engagement as appropriate, and also emphasizes the enhancement of human flourishing.

Research on “altruism” also has relevance to this work, but “altruism” is not identical to “compassionate love.” Throughout this volume altruism is discussed in various chapters and definitions vary. For example, sociobiologists and many evolutionary biologists tend to see altruism as ultimately self-serving either for individual survival or for that of the ingroup, or genetically related group. In evolutionary theory, altruism means behavior that reduces the actor’s fitness while enhancing the fitness of others. If the total contribution of the altruist to the fitness of others is greater than the fitness lost by the altruist, altruism will increase the prospects of the group’s surviving in competition with other groups (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992). Economists, on the other hand, frequently write about bounded rationality and how altruism, or “choice

to act for the good of the other rather than for one's own perceived benefit" operates in the context of limited knowledge (Simon, 1993). Some psychological definitions describe "empathic altruism" as something done for the other that is ultimately directed at benefiting the other rather than oneself (Batson and Oleson, 1991). In a recent volume on altruism in world religions, the conclusion was that although compassionate behavior was important in many religions, the concept of altruism was not a particularly relevant one in the religious context (Neusner & Chilton, 2005).

Rather than quibble over the distinct line between altruism and compassionate love, given the multiple understandings of altruism, it is of more use to describe how compassionate love as here defined stretches beyond altruism as we often think of it. Compassionate love is more rich conceptually than altruism. An altruistic act may be done merely from habit or natural inclination or a sense of duty or to engender obligation. As seen below (the section articulating the definitional features), a true act of compassionate love involves more cognition, more freedom, more explicit *choosing* than "mere" altruism would imply (see also Post et al., 2002).

Romantic love, too, is not synonymous with the construct of compassionate love, though research on romantic love can have relevance to the topic (see Chapters 2 and 10 in this volume). "Falling in love" with someone can reflect hormonal flux and physical attraction that can actually lead to giving of self for the good of the other. But on the other hand, fulfillment of one's own needs or desires through the relationship can dominate feelings of caring for the other. Recent brain-imaging studies have suggested that the circumstances of romance may be particular to that state rather than generalizable beyond it (Bartels & Zeki, 2000). Compassionate love can exist in romantic contexts, as it can in familial affection, and in the midst of basic altruistic action, but these contexts can also lack compassionate love.

Although I start here with a central working definition of compassionate love defined by the qualities outlined below, throughout this volume each group of researchers has operationalized this construct somewhat differently, or has addressed constructs that overlap, but are not identical with, compassionate love. The key unifying principle for this volume is to inform our understanding of this other-centered love, and produce work that can have practical application. If we visualize a series of concentric circles, with scientific research on compassionate love as the bull's-eye, basic research in the outer rings can provide supports for research closer to the bull's-eye even though distant from the exact construct of interest. For example, research on "fairness" using economic theory could be on the outer edges of the concentric circles. Some of the work using animal models to investigate empathy in apes or pair bonding in prairie voles can

give us insight into basic mechanisms, even though the work does not directly address compassionate love (Insel, 1997; Preston & de Waal, 2002).

At the first scientific meeting on this topic, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1999, I was responsible for delivering opening remarks to set the stage for presentations from philosophers, theologians, economists, psychologists, sociologists, and biologists. In remembering a talk by Ian Stewart, the mathematician, on patterns in mathematics and nature, such as animal stripes and gait, I recalled that he once brought a live tiger into the room for a talk. I wanted so much to bring the tiger into the room, and say, "Here it is. Here is compassionate love, that special kind of love we are trying to capture in this meeting." To try to do this I devised the following exercise that I shared then, and suggest that you, the reader, try to do this now before reading on.

Reflect on a time in the past when you personally felt truly loved, loved for who you truly are, beyond the momentary circumstances, beyond what was expected of you. Pick a time that still holds particular importance for you. What was the relationship context and what were the circumstances? Close your eyes and try to relive it.

This is the construct that the researchers in this volume are informing us about. Although for each individual the specifics of the event remembered were different, the premise of this volume is that there is something in common at a fundamental level. After doing this exercise at the MIT meeting, Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of the hospice movement, came up to me and thanked me for that moment of connection to being loved that brought the experience vividly back to her. Some of the scientists present did the same. I have been teaching undergraduates about this topic and we use poetry, film, and visual art to flesh out the construct, in addition to scientific research. However, at the end of the course, many students return to this initial exercise as a key to defining compassionate love.

It was necessary to develop a definition of compassionate love in the context of the original meeting on the topic, so the book, then, proceeded from that meeting, and from the requests for proposals for scientific research funded by various foundations and the National Institutes of Health. To address the depth and complexity of the topic, a number of qualities were articulated as necessary to varying degrees for compassionate love to be present (Underwood, 2002). These were: free choice for the other; some degree of cognitive understanding of the situation, the other, and oneself; valuing the other at a fundamental level; openness and

receptivity; and response of the “heart.” (For more on how these were developed, see Underwood, 2002.)

Free Choice for the Other

Free choice, although constrained by biological, social, environmental, and cultural factors, is a key element for compassionate love to be present. When one reflects on being loved in this way by another, the selfless motive of the other is important, but it is often the fact that he or she made the deliberate choice to “love” rather than to “be indifferent” that touches our heart. For example, much altruistic behavior in parenting results simply from instinctual or ingrained responses to the child’s need. To cuddle a smiling baby may be instinctual; to stay up through the night with a baby with colic takes us beyond the instinctual response, to choose to give of oneself for the ultimate good of the other.

Some Degree of Accurate Cognitive Understanding of the Situation, the Other, and Oneself

This includes understanding one’s self – one’s natural inclinations and constraints. It also includes understanding something of the needs and feelings of the person to be loved, and what might be appropriate to truly enhance the other’s well-being. Again, in a parenting situation, a parent will frequently impose his or her own notion of the child’s good on the child. While this is obviously unavoidable when dealing with infants and small children, an important element of compassionate love in parenting involves allowing increasing space for the child or adolescent to choose his or her own notion of the good. And it is also important for the parent to have an accurate perception of the parent’s understanding of the child, and the parent’s own personality and tendencies.

Valuing the Other at a Fundamental Level

Some degree of respect for the other person is necessary to articulate love rather than pity in situations of suffering, and to enable one to visualize potential for enhancing human flourishing. People do not generally like to be pitied, although help in those circumstances is usually better than no help at all. To be pitied does not elevate us as human beings. But to be respected in the midst of the imperfections of being human, to be known for who we are and still valued, enables us to truly flourish (Vanier, 1998). This attitude also protects the giver from delusions of superiority, which may get in the way of love being ultimately centered on the good of the other.

Openness and Receptivity

Although specifically religious inspiration is not a necessary component of compassionate love as used in this volume, there is an “inspired” quality of this kind of love for many people. So the definition needs to leave room for this kind of divine input or open receptive quality that many feel is a central feature of this kind of love (Neusner & Chilton, 2005; Vacek, 1994). For instance, during interviews with Trappist monks that explored their experience and practice of compassionate love, “openness” was mentioned as a central feature of compassionate love (Underwood, 2005). In a religiously diverse group interviewed in the inner city of Chicago as part of a scale development study, for many it was only “grace” that enabled love to emerge in the midst of difficulties (Underwood, 2006).

Response of the “Heart”

Heart here is used as “coeur,” or the core of one’s being. Some kind of heartfelt, affective quality is usually part of this kind of attitude or action. Not that everyone will feel gushing emotion when giving compassionate love to another, but some sort of emotional engagement and understanding seem to be needed to love fully in an integrated way. The central features of motivation and decision-making rely on both cognitive and affective dimensions. Moral decision-making has been seen in empirical studies to involve affective as well as cognitive areas of the brain and body (Roskies, 2006).

Background for the Use of the Term “Compassionate Love”

As a body of scientific research was being developed we needed to find a word or phrase to provide a common language for communication. The term “compassionate love” first emerged in the context of scientific research at a meeting of the World Health Organization (WHO) when working groups were trying to develop an assessment tool for “quality of life” to be used in diverse cultures (WHOQOL SRPB Group, 2006). The goal of this particular series of meetings was to develop a module to measure spiritual, religious, and personal belief factors involved in “quality of life.” The group was composed of people from all over the world, from multiple religious and nonreligious backgrounds, particularly social scientists and health professionals. One of the “facets” identified for the module was loving-kindness, or love for others (Saxena, O’Connell, & Underwood, 2002). There was considerable discussion of the appropriate wording for this aspect. The Buddhists were not happy with the word

“love” but wanted “compassion” to be used, which for them fit the concept. The Muslims in the group (from Indonesia, India, and Turkey) were adamant that compassion was too “cold” and that “love” needed to be there as it brought in the *feeling* of love, the element of *affect*. As others weighed in from various cultural, religious, and atheist positions, “compassionate love” was the compromise phrase arrived at to portray this aspect of quality of life. “Altruistic love” was a close second. For the members of the WHO group and many others interviewed on this topic, “compassionate love” captures both aspects, addressing human suffering *and* encouraging human flourishing. “*Passio*” can mean suffering but can also express positive feelings, as in “I am passionate about my work,” or “I am passionate about my spouse.” So “*cum-passio*” means to “feel with” (Underwood, 2005). Compassionate love is not the perfect wording, but for most people it pointed in the right direction, and provided a common language with which to move forward.

Scientific research began to focus on this particular construct owing primarily to the intense interest of two philanthropists in this subject. Sir John Templeton believed that “unlimited love” is a central motivating force to be harnessed for the good of humankind, and John Fetzer felt that “unconditional love” is at the center of the universe. Both of these philanthropists were interested in pursuing scientific research as a way of exploring this powerful factor in order to better enable humans to enhance the well-being of humankind. They were willing to provide money through their respective foundations to key scientists to explore this topic with openness and rigor. The construct of “compassionate love” (also called “altruistic love”) and the model described in this chapter fit the topic of interest for both of these philanthropists, and this definition and model have provided an anchor for specific research solicitation and the selection of projects for funding.

As research continues in this area, now supported both by private foundations and federal funding agencies, various new measures and operational definitions are being established and tested, some of which appear in various chapters in this volume. New words are being included and constructs fleshed out. This process will enrich and build on this working definition to enable the sciences to contribute to a greater understanding of compassionate love, and what it means for compassionate love to be fully expressed in various relationships, across situations, and among different individuals.

Research Model

To enable various researchers’ work on this topic to fit together despite differences in focus and disciplinary starting points, I articulated a working model that appeared in *Altruism and Altruistic Love* (Underwood, 2002).

This model, as shown in Figure 1.1, has usefully provided a structural framework over the years for those from a variety of disciplines. Researchers in the present volume were encouraged to relate their work to this model, to provide a unifying framework for the work presented here. Many of them used the model initially to develop some of their research. Of course any model only provides a starting point for exploring the messiness of human interaction. The model is incomplete and there are interactions between various parts that are not drawn in. For example, feelings and emotional content cannot be entered into the model in a linear sequential manner, but exist throughout the model. The same is true of a possible interaction with the transcendent. But the model still can provide an effective tool to bring together disparate research and translate from one discipline to another, even communicating with humanities disciplines such as philosophy, theology, and the arts.

On the left-hand side of the figure is the individual person nested in the environment. The individual encounters specific situations and relationships. He or she engages in the situation or relationship with motivation and discernment, shown in the center of the diagram. And on the right-hand side is the resulting action, or attitude expressed in words.

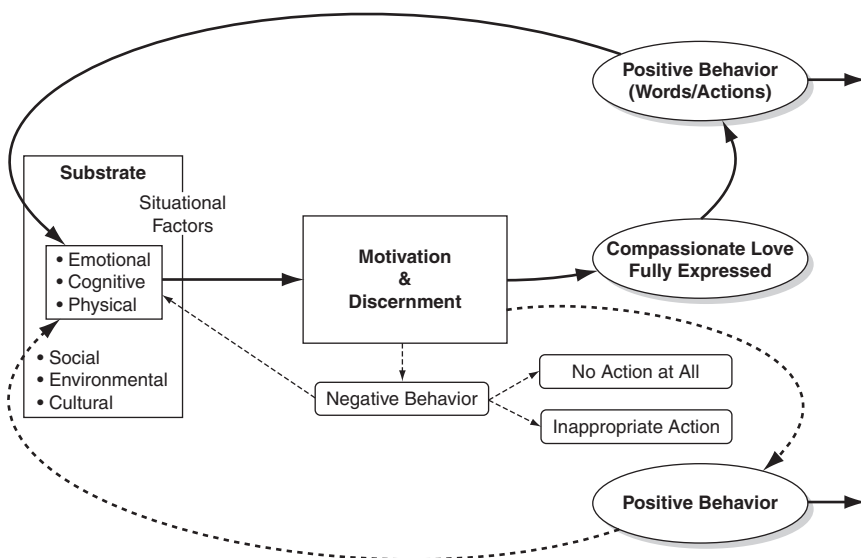


Figure 1.1 Working Model of Compassionate Love

Note. From *Altruism and altruistic love: Science, philosophy and religion in dialog*, ed. S. G. Post, G. Underwood, J. P. Schloss, and W. B. Hurlbut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). By permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

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