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Compassionate Science

Integrating Empathy and Compassion in Research

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House of Academies · Laupenstrasse 7 · P.O. Box · 3001 Bern · Switzerland
+41 31 306 92 20 · info@akademien-schweiz.ch · swiss-academies.ch

CONTACT
Karin Spycher · Head of Swiss Young Academy
Swiss Young Academy · Laupenstrasse 7 · P.O. Box · 3001 Bern · Switzerland
+41 31 306 92 35 · karin.spycher@swissyoungacademy.ch · swissyoungacademy.ch

MAIN AUTHORS
Clément Meier · David Jezdimirović

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS
Jovana V. Milić · Mélodie Derome · Marco Cavallaro · Estefania Cuero

FEATURED RESEARCHERS
Nicolas Charpentier · Louise D'Eer · Stéphane Huber · Shona Loong · Paolo Martinelli · Natalie Messerli · Cherry-Ann Morgan · Sofia Savinelli · Miriam Zemanova

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SDGs: The international sustainability goals of the UN

With this publication, the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences are contributing to SDG 4: Quality Education – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all and to SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities – Reduce inequality within and among countries.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are goals for sustainable development at the economic, social and ecological levels. In 2015, the heads of state and government of the United Nations adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. These new goals are to be implemented globally by all UN member states by 2030 and serve to ensure sustainable development.

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Foreword

This report by the Swiss Young Academy is intended to inspire a generation of early-career researchers and suggests ways to strengthen the social and relational aspects of knowledge production. It shows that compassionate science is not a break with the values of our scientific system – which is imbued with rigour and objectivity – but that it offers a unifying framework allowing the initiatives already underway by the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences to be reinforced.

Compassionate science aims to promote meaningful interaction between research and society. When research involves human or animal subjects, their interests, needs and problems should be given overriding weight. This approach is reflected in the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences' mission to understand research's social responsibility and to deepen and disseminate ethical expertise among scientists. Examples include the → Swiss Network for Research Ethics, established to strengthen the work of ethics committees in higher education institutions, the → Swiss Alliance for Global Research Partnerships, which promotes equity and sustainability in research collaborations with countries in the Global South, and the → Central Ethics Committee of the Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences, as well as the → Ethics Committee for Animal Experimentation, which foresee and discuss ethical problems in human and animal research.

Such a vision increases the social impact of research and accords particularly well with the work conducted on the subject of empathetic communication. In a context, where rapid circulation of information is sometimes accompanied by distrust or polarisation, the quality of the dialogue between science and society becomes a determining factor for trust. Communication involves acknowledging the concerns of various audiences, making knowledge accessible and developing a dialogue based on mutual listening. Such an approach promotes a mutual understanding essential to the role of science in a democratic society. It is also reflected in the development of citizen sciences that take into consideration society's questions, concerns and knowledge. The participatory approach is a value firmly embedded in the Academies' inter- and transdisciplinary working method.

Finally, compassionate science falls naturally within the scope of considerations regarding issues of equity, diversity and inclusion. A high-performance scientific community is also one that is able to recognise diversity of backgrounds, experiences and perspectives, whilst ensuring that everyone participates on fair terms. We find here the principles of trustworthiness, honesty, respect and responsibility developed in the → Code of Conduct for Scientific Integrity drawn up by Swiss scientific organisations. Compassion, understood as a disposition that fosters taking into account the realities experienced by others, helps to create more inclusive, respectful research environments that are more conducive to scientific creativity.

By uniting these different dimensions, this report highlights an important development in contemporary scientific culture. It is a reminder that the quality of research is not measured solely by its results, but also by the manner in which it is conducted, shared and placed at the service of society. Compassionate science does not propose new criteria of excellence; it is an invitation to enhance those that already exist by acknowledging that scientific excellence and the quality of human relations reinforce each other.

May the thoughts brought together in this report foster debate, inspire practice and encourage the development of a scientific culture that places excellence and care for people at the heart of the same project.

Yves Flückiger, President of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences
Marianne Bonvin, Managing Director of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences

Executive Summary

This report explores how empathy and compassion shape research practices across disciplines. Drawing on a review of existing literature and illustrative examples from early-career researchers, it shows that empathy and compassion are not abstract ideals but practical tools influencing research design, relationships, data interpretation, and knowledge translation. Across fields, integrating these dimensions strengthens trust, deepens understanding, improves collaboration, and enhances ethical reflexivity. The case examples demonstrate that compassionate research can redistribute power, amplify marginalised voices, improve data quality, and foster socially responsive knowledge production. At the same time, challenges remain. Empathy and compassion are not always clearly defined or operationalised, disciplinary norms vary, and institutional structures rarely reward relational or participatory work. Greater conceptual clarity, training, and structural support are needed. Overall, compassionate science does not weaken rigour but broadens it by integrating relational awareness and ethical responsibility into research practice.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Empathy and compassion shape all stages of research.
- Compassion strengthens trust, reflexivity, and relevance.
- Participatory approaches redistribute power in research.
- Emotional and ethical competencies matter across disciplines.
- Institutional support is needed to sustain these practices.

Zusammenfassung

Der Bericht untersucht den Einfluss von Empathie und Mitgefühl auf die Forschungspraktiken in verschiedenen Disziplinen. Anhand einer Auswertung von bestehender Literatur und Forschungsbeispielen von Nachwuchswissenschaftlern zeigt der Bericht auf, dass Empathie und Mitgefühl keine abstrakten Ideale sind, sondern nützliche Instrumente, die Forschungsdesign, zwischenmenschliche Beziehungen, die Interpretation von Daten und die Wissensvermittlung prägen. Über verschiedene Fachbereiche hinweg stärkt die Berücksichtigung dieser Aspekte das Vertrauen, vertieft das Verständnis, verbessert die Zusammenarbeit und fördert die ethische Reflexivität. Die Fallbeispiele zeigen, dass eine empathische Forschung Machtverhältnisse neu verteilen, marginalisierten Stimmen mehr Gehör verschaffen, die Datenqualität verbessern und eine sozial verantwortungsvolle Wissensproduktion fördern kann. Es bestehen jedoch weiterhin gewisse Herausforderungen. Denn Empathie und Mitgefühl sind nicht immer klar definiert oder messbar. Zudem variieren die Normen je nach Disziplin, und die Institutionen würdigen beziehungsorientierte oder partizipative Arbeit nur selten. Darum sind eine grössere konzeptionelle Klarheit, Schulungen und strukturelle Unterstützung notwendig. Compassionate Science schwächt keineswegs die wissenschaftliche Strenge, sondern erweitert sie, indem sie Beziehungsbewusstsein und ethische Verantwortung in die Forschungspraxis miteinbezieht.

ZENTRALE ERKENNTNISSE

- Empathie und Mitgefühl prägen alle Phasen der Forschung.
- Mitgefühl stärkt Vertrauen, Reflexivität und Relevanz.
- Partizipative Ansätze verändern die Machtverhältnisse in der Forschung.
- Emotionale und ethische Kompetenzen sind in allen Fachbereichen wichtig.
- Es bedarf institutioneller Unterstützung, um diese Praktiken langfristig aufrechtzuerhalten.

Résumé opérationnel

Ce rapport explore la manière dont l'empathie et la compassion structurent les pratiques de recherche au travers de toutes les disciplines. Sur la base d'une analyse de la littérature existante et d'exemples illustratifs fournis par de jeunes chercheuses et chercheurs, il montre que l'empathie et la compassion ne sont pas des idéaux abstraits mais des outils concrets qui influencent la conception de la recherche, les relations, l'interprétation des données et la transposition des connaissances. Dans tous les domaines, l'intégration de ces dimensions renforce la confiance, approfondit la compréhension, améliore la collaboration et renforce la réflexivité éthique. Les exemples présentés démontrent qu'une recherche empreinte de compassion peut redistribuer le pouvoir, amplifier les voix marginalisées, accroître la qualité des données et favoriser une production de connaissances socialement responsable. En même temps, des défis demeurent. L'empathie et la compassion ne sont pas toujours clairement définies ou opérationnalisées, les normes disciplinaires varient et les structures institutionnelles récompensent rarement le travail relationnel ou participatif. Une plus grande clarté conceptuelle, des formations et un soutien structurel accrus sont nécessaires. D'une façon générale, une science compatissante ne réduit pas la rigueur, mais l'élargit en intégrant la conscience relationnelle et la responsabilité éthique dans la pratique de la recherche.

POINTS CLÉS

- L'empathie et la compassion façonnent toutes les étapes de la recherche.
- La compassion renforce la confiance, la réflexion et la pertinence.
- Les approches participatives rééquilibrent les rapports de pouvoir dans la recherche.
- Les compétences émotionnelles et éthiques sont importantes dans toutes les disciplines.
- Un soutien institutionnel est requis pour pérenniser ces pratiques.

About Compassionate Science

This report was developed within the framework of Compassionate Science, a project by the Swiss Young Academy (SYA). This initiative seeks to promote empathy-driven and human-centered research practices by highlighting researchers who integrate compassion and empathy into their scientific work and by providing concrete examples and tools for reflection.

While scientific research is traditionally guided by objectivity, methodological rigour, and measurable outputs, there is growing recognition of the importance of addressing the social and relational dimensions of knowledge production. A lack of empathy and compassion in research processes can create distance between researchers and the communities their work aims to serve. Compassionate Science addresses this gap by encouraging reflection on how compassion can be meaningfully embedded in research practices across disciplines.

The project consists of several complementary components:

- This **report**, which combines a synthesis of existing literature on compassionate research (including benefits and challenges across disciplines) with concrete examples and perspectives from early-career researchers.
- A series of **short video interviews**, in which selected participants present their research and share in more detail how compassion and empathy shape their scientific practice.
- A dedicated project **website**, which provides an overview of the initiative and centralises all project information and materials.

Together, these elements aim to increase the visibility of compassionate research practices and to stimulate dialogue within the academic community and beyond. More information is available on the Compassionate Science website:
→ http://go.swissyoungacademy.ch/compassionate-science

1. Introduction

Empathy and compassion are increasingly seen as important values that can positively shape the way research is conducted across many fields [1]. In the past, scientific research has often emphasised objectivity, neutrality, and emotional distance as key elements of rigour and credibility. However, growing scholarship suggests that being objective does not mean researchers must ignore relationships, ethical responsibility, or the human experiences connected to their work [2,3]. Across healthcare, social sciences, environmental sciences, and even technical and laboratory-based disciplines, researchers are paying more attention to the real-world impact of their work and to the relationships they build with participants, patients, communities, and other stakeholders [4–6]. This broader awareness reflects larger movements in academia, such as Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), open science, and community-engaged research, which encourage researchers to ensure that their work is socially relevant, ethically responsible, and responsive to societal needs [7,8].

By integrating empathy, often understood as the ability to understand and see things from another person's perspective, and compassion, the motivation to respond to suffering and support well-being, researchers can strengthen not only the ethical quality of their work but also its broader social relevance and long-term impact [9–11]. In healthcare research, for example, approaches that emphasise compassion have been linked to greater patient trust, better communication, and improved uptake of recommended treatments or evidence-based practices [12]. In the social sciences, empathetic engagement can enrich qualitative research by building stronger relationships with participants, improving the depth and accuracy of interpretations, and supporting fairer collaboration with marginalised or underrepresented groups [13]. Even in natural and technical sciences, paying attention to social context and potential human consequences is increasingly recognised as essential for responsible innovation and sustainable solutions [14]. Importantly, empathy and compassion do not weaken scientific rigour. On the contrary, they can strengthen reflexivity, improve research design, enhance trust, and help reduce unintended harm.

This report explores how empathy and compassion can be used as practical tools in research across healthcare, social sciences, and natural sciences. It first reviews existing academic literature to show how these ideas are already being applied in research design, data collection, data interpretation, collaboration, and engagement with participants or stakeholders. Building on this review, the report then presents concrete examples from early-career researchers who intentionally integrate empathy and compassion into their research methods.

These examples show how empathy can shape research questions, strengthen trust with participants, improve the depth and credibility of findings, and support fairer collaboration. They also show how compassion can guide everyday research decisions, influence how researchers engage with communities, and help ensure that research responds to real human needs.

By connecting academic literature with real research practices, the report demonstrates that empathy and compassion are not just abstract values or ethical ideals. They can function as concrete methodological tools that shape how research is conducted and what it produces. The report concludes by identifying both opportunities and challenges. These include difficulties in clearly defining and measuring empathy- or compassion-based approaches, differences across disciplines, and the limited space currently given to these methods in formal research training and institutional structures. Finally, practical implications are discussed for early-career researchers, institutions, and funding bodies who want to promote research cultures that value relationships, responsibility, and responsiveness to people.

Figure 1. The set used to record the seven interviews with early-career researchers at the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences (FORS), Lausanne.
Source: MAVEN Film, 2026.

2. Empathy and compassion in healthcare research

In healthcare, empathy and compassion have long been regarded as core components of quality care, and recent research demonstrates their tangible benefits. Compassionate care is considered a fundamental pillar of medicine, linked to greater patient trust, satisfaction, and better clinical outcomes [15]. Compassion from healthcare providers has been associated with positive impacts on patients' experiences and health results, including reduced symptom burden, improved quality of life, and higher quality-of-care ratings [16]. For example, a 2022 scoping review noted that compassion correlates with lower patient distress and enhanced well-being, although patients often report compassion to be lacking in practice [16]. Likewise, empathy in clinical interactions fosters better information exchange, adherence to treatments, and psychological outcomes for patients [15]. These findings reinforce that treating patients with empathy is not only an ethical responsibility but also strengthens the overall effectiveness of research and clinical interventions, as it supports more accurate patient-reported data, greater engagement, and improved retention in clinical studies.

While empathy and compassion are well established in clinical care, their role in healthcare research is distinct. In research contexts, these principles shape study design, participant engagement, data quality, and ethical conduct, rather than direct patient care.

Healthcare research is increasingly incorporating these values through patient-centered and participatory approaches. Many institutions now involve patients as partners in research design and dissemination, reflecting an empathy-driven shift. Such engagement requires genuine respect for patients' perspectives and lived experiences. Studies show that when researchers actively listen to and co-design studies with patients, it can lead to interventions that are more adjusted to patient needs and more broadly accepted [17]. This aligns with the broader trend of treating patients not as passive subjects but as collaborators, a practice that inherently demands empathy, humility, and cultural sensitivity from investigators. In medical education, there has also been a rise in empathy and compassion training programmes, ranging from communication skills workshops to mindfulness and reflection exercises, aimed at cultivating compassionate young clinicians and early-career researchers. A systematic review of 24 interventions found that multimodal empathy/compassion curricula in medical schools consistently improved students' empathy levels, especially when those programmes combined clinical exposure, reflection, and narrative or arts-based methods [15]. These efforts illustrate a growing international acknowledgement that empathy and compassion can be taught and strengthened among healthcare researchers, leading to more ethical and effective research practices.

While healthcare research has made important progress in integrating empathy and compassion, important challenges remain. Studies examining intervention-based and clinical research have highlighted that participant agency and informed consent are not always given sufficient attention in practice [18]. In some cases, research designs may prioritise procedural efficiency or institutional goals over meaningful collaboration with participants. Scholars have therefore called for a stronger emphasis on social justice principles in applied health research, grounded in respect, empathy, humility, and genuine partnership with patients [19].

Research involving marginalised patient groups further illustrates how empathy can function as a methodological resource. When investigators create research environments that encourage patients to openly share their experiences, emotions, and perspectives, the therapeutic and research relationship is strengthened [18]. This not only enhances trust but also leads to deeper and more meaningful insights into patients' lived experiences. Such approaches improve both ethical standards and interpretive quality. These issues are closely linked to power dynamics inherent in healthcare research. Patients may depend on researchers or clinicians for treatment, institutional access, or ongoing care, which can influence how freely they express concerns or decline participation. Ensuring that empathy and attentiveness remain central throughout the research process helps protect participant agency and supports truly informed and ongoing consent.

At the same time, healthcare researchers operate within systems shaped by funding requirements, recruitment targets, time constraints, and publication pressures. These structural demands can create tensions between compassionate engagement and procedural expectations [20]. Researchers may unintentionally overlook subtle signs of distress or prioritise data completeness over participant comfort. In some cases, valuable qualitative insights may be gathered under conditions of emotional strain, raising ethical questions about participant care and the sustainability of compassionate practice.

Overall, healthcare research provides strong evidence that empathy and compassion are not optional add-ons but essential components of ethical, patient-centered research. However, making compassionate research a sustained reality requires ongoing attention to power dynamics, institutional structures, and research design practices.

3. Empathy and compassion in social science research

Empathy has deep roots in the social sciences, where understanding human experience is central. Fields such as sociology, anthropology, education, and social work have long emphasised researcher reflexivity, participant perspective-taking, and ethical engagement with communities. Compassion, closely related, is gaining attention as scholars seek to make research more responsive to social suffering and injustice. For instance, in community social work, empathy is described as both a moral and professional responsibility. Practitioners report that adopting an empathic attitude toward the individuals and families they support is essential for building trust, understanding lived realities, and providing effective assistance [21]. Social science researchers often build trust through active listening, spending extensive time in communities, and showing genuine care for participants' well-being and shared experiences. These practices lead to richer data and empower participants, but they also require emotional intelligence and self-awareness from the researcher.

One key theme in social research is participatory and inclusive methodology. Approaches such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) explicitly integrate empathy and power-sharing. In participatory projects, community members collaborate in defining research questions, collecting data, and applying findings. This shifts the researcher's role, instead of a distant observer, the researcher becomes a partner who must empathise with local perspectives and needs. Trust and respect are the currency of such collaborations, and literature stresses that authentic partnerships hinge on relationships built on trust, mutual respect, and valuing each person's contribution [17]. A guide to participatory methods notes that recognising the expertise of community stakeholders "as full partners in all phases of research" requires researchers to relinquish some control and approach the process with humility [17].

This is particularly important because research participants are not passive subjects; they actively interpret the researcher's words, tone, body language, and level of attentiveness. These subtle interpersonal cues can influence how comfortable participants feel and, consequently, what and how much they choose to share. An open, respectful, and sincere stance can encourage greater openness and more nuanced accounts of lived experience [22]. In this sense, the researcher's ability to create a safe and supportive environment is central not only to ethical conduct but also to the depth and credibility of the findings. A compassionate approach shapes every stage of the research process, from data collection to interpretation and dissemination, by fostering mutual understanding and reducing the risk of misrepresentation. Studies suggest that when relationships are built on respect and inclusion, research outcomes are more context-sensitive, culturally appropriate, and meaningful to the communities involved [23].

Social scientists are also pioneering what might be called "compassionate research methods." These are qualitative techniques designed to center kindness and understanding in the research encounter. For example, using an "object elicitation" interview method as a compassionate, culturally informed approach for working with refugees and trauma survivors. Participants bring a personal object to help share their stories, while researchers adopt a stance of "power-with" (rather than "power-over") the participants [24]. The results showed that this creative method built greater trust and emotional depth in interviews, allowing vulnerable individuals to open up more safely. Similarly, feminist and decolonial scholars advocate an "ethic of care" in fieldwork, urging researchers to engage with participants as whole persons and to be mindful of power imbalances, trauma, and context in every interaction [24]. In line with this, some scholars in contemplative studies also emphasise that compassionate-centered research can help address the harmful legacies of Western colonialism and foster inclusivity. By engaging deeply with the lived experiences and relationships of participants, researchers can create spaces for societal flourishing [25]. These perspectives push back against any lingering notion that empathy is "unscientific", instead, they present compassion as a valid and necessary tool for achieving deeper understanding in social inquiry.

Even in people-centered fields, integrating compassion into research is not without challenges. A qualitative study conducted in Spain found that while social workers unanimously value empathy, the concept of compassion itself can be unclear or even contested among professionals [21]. Some associate "compassion" with pity, a stance they consciously reject, while others report uncertainty about how to define or apply it in practice [21]. These findings highlight an important gap in terminology and training. Researchers and practitioners may benefit from clearer conceptual frameworks that distinguish empowering, respectful compassion from paternalistic or patronising attitudes. Without such clarity, well-intentioned efforts risk being misunderstood or inconsistently applied. Engaging deeply with social suffering also carries emotional costs. Sustained exposure to trauma, inequality, or distress can lead to emotional fatigue or secondary stress among researchers. Although literature on researcher reflexivity and self-care is growing, guidance on how to maintain empathic engagement while preserving professional boundaries remains underdeveloped [21].

Together, these challenges suggest that while the social sciences have long championed human-centered approaches, further work is needed to strengthen conceptual clarity and institutional support for compassionate research practice. Addressing these gaps is essential for sustainability: researchers must be able to remain empathetic and responsive without becoming overwhelmed, and compassion must be framed as a practice of empowerment rather than pity.

4. Empathy and compassion in natural sciences

Empathy and compassion might seem less intuitive in the natural sciences, which often focus on experiments, data, and non-human phenomena. However, even in fields like biology, environmental science, and STEM more broadly, there is growing recognition of the human and ethical dimensions of research. One prominent example is the rise of Compassionate Conservation in wildlife biology and ecology. Compassionate Conservation is an emerging paradigm that argues conservation decisions should be guided not only by ecological principles but also by empathy and compassion for individual animals. It promotes ethical rules like "first, do no harm" and "individuals matter," placing the welfare of sensitive creatures at the forefront of conservation practice [26]. This approach is gaining international recognition and reflects a shift away from treating animals merely as data or population units, toward recognising their intrinsic value and their capacity to experience suffering. For example, instead of immediately eliminating invasive species, a compassionate approach might explore non-lethal options that support ecosystem health while limiting harm to animals [26,27]. Although there is debate, and some conservationists fear that too much empathy might interfere with conservation goals, the movement has clearly brought compassion into scientific conversations that once focused almost exclusively on numbers and results.

Natural scientists are also increasingly aware that research does not occur in a social vacuum. Team science and large laboratories are the norm in many disciplines, and emotional intelligence has been identified as a key factor in effective collaboration and innovation [28]. Labs and research groups with empathetic leadership tend to have more open communication, stronger conflict resolution, and higher morale. In industry settings, tech and engineering leaders have famously championed empathy as a driver of creativity and inclusive design [29,30]. Within academia, a similar idea is taking root: scientists who demonstrate understanding and respect for their colleagues' perspectives can foster more productive, interdisciplinary teams. One 2023 conference at MIT on public trust in science underscored the importance of scientists empathising with their audience and collaborators. A common theme was that researchers must learn to "trade shoes" with others, seeing themselves through the public's eyes and vice-versa, in order to communicate effectively and build trust [31,32]. Even the most technical research can benefit from this approach, as it ensures the science is conveyed in relatable terms and addresses societal values.

Even in climate science, which is often viewed as a purely data-driven and objective domain, there is a growing call for more emotionally adjusted research. Compassion can be a powerful tool in addressing long-term challenges like cli-

mate change, especially as people often struggle to connect with the urgency and lived realities of this crisis. A more human-centered approach can help bridge that gap, fostering deeper understanding and more meaningful responses. Some scientists argue that understanding climate change also requires acknowledging shared human vulnerability and reflecting on one's own emotional and ethical position in the research process. Rather than observing from a distance, locating oneself alongside those most affected can help generate knowledge that is created with and for them [33]. This perspective sees compassion as a way to shift research toward a more ethical, inclusive, and responsive climate research.

It is important to acknowledge that introducing compassion into the natural sciences raises complex and sometimes difficult tensions. Researchers must navigate how to balance concern for individual organisms with broader ecosystem goals or scientific advancement, and how to maintain rigour and objectivity while also recognising the ethical dimensions of their work, whether involving animals, environments, or affected communities. These tensions remain part of an active and evolving debate.

Importantly, the compassionate turn does not call for abandoning scientific rigour. Rather, its proponents advocate for a more holistic approach to science, one that combines methodological precision with ethical reflection and social responsibility. This perspective encourages researchers to consider not only technical outcomes but also the broader human and environmental consequences of their work. Such an approach may involve extending empathy to communities affected by scientific projects, such as Indigenous groups involved in environmental research, and integrating social considerations into research agendas from the outset rather than as an afterthought. The global relevance of this discussion is reflected in sustainability-oriented initiatives and interdisciplinary frameworks such as environmental justice and One Health, which emphasise interconnected well-being across human, animal, and environmental domains.

In sum, although empathy and compassion have historically been less visible in the natural sciences, they are increasingly recognised as enriching the scientific enterprise. By fostering ethical awareness, strengthening collaboration, and aligning research more closely with societal concerns, they contribute to a science that is not only rigorous but also responsible and responsive.

5. Building a culture of compassionate research

Across healthcare, social sciences, and natural sciences, several common patterns emerge. Although the contexts differ, empathy and compassion function in similar ways: they strengthen trust, enhance interpretive depth, support ethical reflection, and improve collaboration. These cross-cutting themes show that compassion is not discipline-specific, but a transferable methodological orientation.

The table below summarises the main recurring dimensions identified in the literature and case examples.

TABLE 1. KEY CROSS-CUTTING THEMES IN COMPASSIONATE RESEARCH

THEME	WHAT IT MEANS IN PRACTICE	WHY IT MATTERS
Participatory and inclusive research	Engaging communities as partners (Participatory Action Research, co-design); sharing decision-making power; valuing lived experience	Improves relevance, validity, trust, and uptake of findings; strengthens ethical accountability
Emotional intelligence and communication	Empathic leadership; active listening; value-sensitive science communication	Enhances teamwork, interdisciplinary collaboration, public trust, and research dissemination
Ethical and reflexive practice	Trauma-informed methods; ongoing consent; awareness of positionality and power dynamics	Reduces harm, strengthens interpretive depth, and improves participant safety
Compassion in applied and environmental contexts	Integrating "do no harm" principles; considering welfare alongside outcomes (e.g., conservation, sustainability)	Expands science beyond metrics to include ethical and societal consequences
Compassionate qualitative methods	Methods designed around care, relational safety, and participant agency (e.g., object elicitation, power-with stance)	Produces richer narratives and more context-sensitive findings
Empathy and compassion training	Structured programmes (communication training, reflection, mindfulness)	Improves researcher well-being, reduces burnout, and strengthens humane engagement

Taken together, these themes suggest that building a culture of compassionate research requires more than individual willingness. It involves intentional choices in research design, collaboration, communication, and training. Compassionate research is not about lowering standards or prioritising emotion over evidence; rather, it is about integrating ethical awareness and relational attentiveness into rigorous scientific practice. By embedding these principles across disciplines, institutions can foster research environments that are not only methodologically sound but also socially responsive, inclusive, and sustainable.

EXPLORE COMPASSIONATE PRACTICES ACROSS RESEARCH

How can compassion and empathy be integrated into research practice? Our video series brings together early-career researchers from diverse disciplines who share concrete examples of how these principles inform their research approaches, relationships with participants and communities, and broader scientific practice.
→ Visit our YouTube channel to explore their perspectives and learn more about compassionate research!

6. Illustrative examples of empathy and compassion in research practice

The literature reviewed in this report shows that empathy and compassion can function as methodological resources across disciplines. However, these ideas become most meaningful when translated into lived research practice. The following examples highlight how early-career researchers across Switzerland and Europe intentionally integrate empathy and compassion into their work. These case profiles demonstrate that compassionate research is not abstract or symbolic. It can shape how research questions are formulated, how partnerships are built, how data are collected, and how findings are translated into action. Although the disciplinary contexts differ, from health systems and palliative care to wildlife ecology, migration studies, design, and conflict research, each example illustrates how empathy and compassion operate as practical tools that guide engagement, redistribute power, and strengthen both ethical integrity and methodological rigour. Together, these experiences show that building a culture of compassionate research is not only possible, but already underway.

Figure 2. The set used to record the seven interviews with early-career researchers at the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences (FORS), Lausanne.
Source: MAVEN Film, 2026.

Illustrative example 1:
Nicolas Charpentier/University of Geneva

KEY MESSAGE:

Participatory and community-based research is a powerful tool to address epistemic injustice and advance social justice. By co-constructing knowledge with marginalised communities, research can amplify underrepresented voices and contribute to meaningful social change.

The research projects I lead or participate in almost always have a participatory or community-based dimension. The first reason for this is that my immersion in the world of research and my initial contributions to research projects were from the perspective of an activist. Doing so, I was categorised as a community researcher or, depending on the perspective, a field research partner. My education in the scientific field came from the bottom up (in the field rather than through academic training in the first instance), with the scientific challenge of documenting social phenomena using standard research methods. The partnership with the academic world was based in particular on this need to develop knowledge according to standards. But there were other challenges to this need to investigate through participation or collaboration in research. The first challenge was to document and develop knowledge on subjects where social expectations were high and concerned people with very low social recognition (people living with HIV, drug users, gender minorities, undocumented migrants, etc.) and whose opportunities to make their experiences heard were limited (epistemic injustice). The other challenge in relation to these social expectations was that research results should contribute to social change that improves the conditions of these people (social justice). Participation (in the sense of co-construction and collaboration in the various stages of research) is therefore a means of combating epistemic injustice (recognition, empowerment) and pursuing the goal of social justice (research impact). Now that I am a collaborator at a university in French-speaking Switzerland, I am working to promote this perspective in the conduct of research projects and in teaching, and thus to question the ethical scope of this research perspective.

Illustrative example 2:
Louise D'Eer/Ghent University

KEY MESSAGE:

Compassionate research can extend care beyond formal healthcare systems by strengthening community capacity. Through participatory co-creation and local engagement, neighbourhoods can become active partners in supporting people facing serious illness, dying, and loss, fostering social cohesion while complementing on professional services.

While professional care is indispensable, people living with serious illness spend most of their time in the company of family, friends, and neighbours. Recognising the importance of social connection in the context of serious illness, dying, and bereavement, my research focused on the development of two Compassionate Neighbourhoods in Flanders, Belgium. Empathy and compassion were embedded in the research at three levels. First, they shaped the methods used to develop the initiatives. Through participatory approaches, local stakeholders from civil society organisations - including actors from the health, cultural, and volunteer sectors - were actively involved in co-creating the initiatives. This ensured that the resulting activities were grounded in the specific needs, values, and context of each neighbourhood, while also building on existing local assets and strengths. Second, empathy and compassion were reflected in the initiatives themselves. All initiatives sought to strengthen neighborhood capacity around serious illness, dying, and loss by creating opportunities for residents to connect, normalising conversations about these topics, raising awareness, and fostering mutual understanding - often by combining these elements. A clear example is the Node City Festival, a four-day event that invited local organisations and initiatives to host activities related to serious illness, caregiving, dying, and bereavement. The festival included exhibitions, informational sessions, theatrical performances, and other community-based activities. Third, empathy and compassion were evident in the reported outcomes and impacts. The research demonstrates how communities can become active partners in supporting people confronted with serious illness, dying, and loss, thereby alleviating the sole pressure on formal healthcare services while simultaneously strengthening social cohesion and mutual support within neighbourhoods.

Illustrative example 3:

Stéphane Huber/University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland

KEY MESSAGE:

Ethnographic research grounded in participation and relational engagement can transform inquiry into a democratic practice. By approaching homelessness with humility, proximity, and pragmatist philosophy, research becomes a shared space for reflection that amplifies lived experience and contributes to societal understanding and change.

My research project focuses on the issue of habitat and homelessness in French-speaking Switzerland. More specifically, my current fieldwork site is called La Demeure, a yurt run by a quasi-volunteer association that offers people access to a living room, a kitchen, and a collective life based on solidarity and proximity. My research is ethnographic and focuses on participation and direct contact with people. It is therefore primarily a question of attitude in at least two ways: first, of course, towards ways of life that seem foreign to us, an attitude towards people and the relationships that develop between us. But also an attitude towards knowledge and our research. Because of its contribution to societal well-being, I value American pragmatist philosophy. I see inquiry as a collective practice that is not only the domain of academics, police officers, or journalists, it's a practice that everyone can and does apply in their everyday life. But the possibility to inquire is also one of the keys to democratic life and, by extension, the health of our societies. The ability to reflect on ourselves and the problems we experience, to formulate critiques but also solutions, are all essential ingredients for this democratic life. My inquiry focuses on the phenomenon and social problem of homelessness. Characterised by a lack of resources, this way of life is a unique experience in the world, and seems so distant in our society, yet so close. By producing descriptions, narrating these experiences, and allowing them to circulate in various spaces, we contribute to giving substance to thought and to our ability to reflect on ourselves.

Illustrative example 4:
Shona Loong/Geneva Graduate Institute

KEY MESSAGE:

Empathy in conflict research requires continual unlearning, humility, and long-term relationship-building. By centering the perspectives of those living with war and resisting top-down explanations, research can move from detached analysis toward solidarity, care, and more grounded understandings of peace.

My research explores conflict, peacebuilding, and the politics of foreign aid in Myanmar and its borderlands. I seek to approach these themes from the ground up, asking how people who live with war make sense of it, and how they define their own paths to peace. I hope that my work contributes to societal well-being by challenging top-down diagnoses of the root causes of armed conflict - which have often been ineffective in addressing it. In my work, I see empathy firstly as a continual process of unlearning. My research has challenged assumptions that I didn't even know I had: for example, that conflict is something with a clear start and end, or that it is an episode separate from the "normal" progression of society. Doing this work has helped me to realise that armed conflict, even what we see as a "domestic" civil war, is linked to the ordinary workings of colonialism and capitalism. I've also thought about empathy as a means of crossing boundaries between myself and others - and the limitations of doing so. I have been grateful to work with people and organisations deeply embedded in Myanmar's borderlands. I try to, but know that to some extent I can never, fully understand what it is like to grow up in wartime, since I have been lucky enough to have grown up in peace. Finally, I see how empathy extends beyond individual projects - which is the way that Western academia is set up. Rather it's about building long-term relationships that resist this episodic timeline, and recognising too that people may not need more help, but care and solidarity.

Illustrative example 5:
Paolo Martinelli/University of Lausanne

KEY MESSAGE:

Advancing healthcare equity for older migrants requires research that identifies structural barriers while recognizing and strengthening the resources embedded in their social networks. By centering lived realities and contextual support systems, the ANCHOR project seeks to promote more inclusive and equitable healthcare access.

Older migrants face heightened risk of inequities when accessing healthcare. In Switzerland, nearly 10% of older migrants report unmet healthcare needs, a rate rising to almost 20% for specialised medical services. Despite these concerns, no study has examined the barriers they face within the Swiss healthcare system or the resources they draw upon to address their health needs. The ANCHOR project (Aging migrants' Care & Health: Obstacles, Resources, and reserves) seeks to fill this gap by identifying the specific obstacles encountered by older migrants in accessing healthcare in Switzerland, as well as the strategies they mobilise to overcome them. In particular, the project investigates how healthcare-supporting networks interact with individual resources, and how these networks are embedded in migrants' living contexts to provide both formal and informal support in meeting healthcare needs. The insights of this project hold promise for identifying strategies to enhance older migrants' healthcare experiences and for developing approaches to support and strengthen the resources available to those most vulnerable to healthcare inequalities. Aligned with the vision of the Compassionate Science project, the ANCHOR project is rooted in a commitment to healthcare equity as a pathway to ensuring equal rights for both migrant and native-born older adults.

Illustrative example 6:
Natalie Messerli/University of Lucerne

KEY MESSAGE:

Communities already hold the knowledge their health systems need. Research does not give voice, it builds relationships worthy of what is already being said and done. When we recognise that our well-being is bound together, knowledge translation becomes a practice of care, healing, and repair.

My research grows from a belief that health systems can be evidence-informed and equity-driven, systems-oriented, and rooted in care, and that these are not competing aims but a collective practice. Across my portfolio, I explore how evidence and knowledge translation can be reimagined to reflect the knowledge systems communities already carry, particularly those whose ways of knowing have sustained health and healing long before institutions had language for it. By centering these systems, my work widens what counts as evidence and who is recognised as an expert. This reflects a transdisciplinary and relational commitment: listening closely, holding lived experience, and translating that understanding into systemic change. Rather than inviting participation at the surface, our projects are built in relationship, embedded within communities and accountable to them. We work toward shared decision-making, honest authorship, and the return of recognition and resources to those whose knowledge makes the work possible. Whether co-creating a living curriculum for health equity or activating embodied knowledge of invisibilised identities in health services research, I begin from abundance rather than deficit. I understand health as more than a clinical outcome. It is dignity, agency, and interdependence as well as the understanding that no one's health is separable from the conditions others live under. Ultimately, I hope to advance knowledge translation as a practice of care, healing, and repair that is grounded in relationship, recognition, and a collective commitment to more just and responsive systems.

Illustrative example 7:
Cherry-Ann Morgan/Zurich University of the Arts

KEY MESSAGE:

Compassionate research challenges detached and extractive traditions by centering care, relational accountability, and collaboration. By drawing on feminist and decolonial frameworks, research can move from studying communities to standing in solidarity with them, amplifying their voices and co-creating knowledge grounded in authenticity and shared liberation.

From the start, I rejected the Western research tradition particularly its detachment and exploitative gaze. As someone from a marginalised community, I knew being "studied" often meant being silenced. I sought methodologies that centered care: feminist and decolonial frameworks that honoured people as collaborators, not subjects. In my work I examine resistance in design, not as a by-product but as a radical starting point by engaging with communities that preserve tradition while inventing new rituals and crafting joy on their own terms. I see care i.e. empathy and compassion as a methodology that listens deeply, embraces vulnerability and failure while rejecting the myth of researcher neutrality. Research, to me, has to be relational; a space for storytelling that amplifies rather than extracted community voices and it is about being accountable to the people I work with and to the stories we co-create. For me it isn't only about being ethical but authentic and that perspective is one that can be transformative for the fields of design and research. By prioritising care, I challenge the colonial roots of research, turning it into a practice of solidarity and shared liberation where there are no subjects but willing participants in the telling of their story in their way that embraces all of its complexities and nuance.

Illustrative example 8:
Sofia Savinelli/CHUV Lausanne

KEY MESSAGE:

In palliative care research, empathy and compassion are not only ethical principles but essential methodological tools. By prioritising participants' well-being, responding sensitively to vulnerability, and fostering reflexive team support, research can become more inclusive and ethically grounded, helping to ensure that its findings better reflect the experiences of people facing serious illness.

I work as a researcher in palliative care with a nursing background and several years of clinical experience. This combination strongly influences how I approach research. Empathy and compassion are central to my professional identity, helping me connect with participants in a respectful and caring way, which is especially important when studying sensitive topics such as the experience of serious illness. My research mainly uses qualitative methods to explore the experiences of people nearing the end of life. This requires emotional sensitivity, strong ethical awareness, and being fully present during interviews. Showing empathy and compassion during interviews can also have a therapeutic effect, helping participants feel heard and supported during vulnerable moments. I adapt interviews and organisation by prioritising participants' well-being and needs. For example, interviews may need to be paused or stopped if participants become unwell or express strong emotions such as crying or anger, which requires specific skills to respond with sensitivity and professionalism. Showing empathy and compassion is also important when supporting colleagues. Working in palliative care research can be emotionally demanding, so it is essential that we support each other. To foster this, we organise reflexivity workshops where palliative care researchers can share experiences, express vulnerability, and develop strategies for mutual support. By placing empathy and compassion at the core of my research practice, I care deeply about the unmet needs of some minorities and vulnerable groups, such as people who don't speak the language or those without decision-making capacity, who may be intentionally excluded. This awareness encourages me to reflect on how we can adopt more inclusive approaches so that research can better highlight the needs of the entire population and produce findings that are more representative and generalisable.

Illustrative example 9:
Miriam Zemanova/University of Fribourg

KEY MESSAGE:

Compassionate wildlife research can be both scientifically rigorous and ethically responsible. By promoting non-invasive methods and applying the 3Rs principles, researchers can reduce harm to animals while improving data quality and fostering a more responsible research culture.

Wildlife research is vital for guiding effective nature conservation amid the current biodiversity crisis. However, many standard practices – such as capture, marking, tissue sampling, or attachment of tracking devices – can cause distress, pain, or lasting harm to the animals we ultimately aim to protect. Such impacts are not only an animal welfare concern but can also compromise the quality of the collected data. As an ecologist working at the intersection of science, ethics, and education, I seek to promote research practices that are both scientifically rigorous and ethically responsible. A central part of my work is raising awareness of non-invasive research methods, for example, environmental DNA sampling, individual animal identification via natural markings, or species detection using camera traps. These approaches can often yield insights equivalent to those obtained through more intrusive methods while reducing the risk of harm to the animals. My research has shown, however, that non-invasive methods remain underutilised, most likely due to a lack of awareness and training in these approaches, as well as due to limited education on recognising and addressing potential animal welfare issues. To bridge this implementation gap, I created the informational website → 3RsWildlife.info. It is the first online platform dedicated to guiding researchers in applying the 3Rs principles (Replacement, Reduction, and Refinement) to wildlife studies. By providing educational resources and practical guidance, I aim to help foster a research culture grounded in evidence, compassion, and responsibility.

7. Conclusion

This report set out to examine how empathy and compassion function as methodological resources across healthcare, social sciences, and natural sciences. The literature review and illustrative examples consistently demonstrate that empathy and compassion are not peripheral ethical ideals, but practical forces that shape how research is designed, conducted, interpreted, and translated into action. Across disciplines, they strengthen trust, deepen interpretive insight, support ethical reflexivity, and foster more meaningful collaboration with participants, communities, and stakeholders.

One key challenge concerns conceptual clarity. Empathy and compassion are often used interchangeably, inconsistently defined, or insufficiently operationalised. While healthcare literature has made progress in measurement and intervention design, other fields still lack clear frameworks for integrating and evaluating compassion-based approaches. Without shared definitions and methodological guidance, these practices risk being perceived as abstract values rather than rigorous components of research design.

Disciplinary differences also shape implementation. While empathy is well established in healthcare and social sciences, it remains more contested in natural and technical fields. Bridging these disciplinary cultures requires ongoing dialogue and the development of language that demonstrates how compassion complements rather than weakens scientific rigour. The examples in this report show that rigour and relational awareness are not opposing forces, but mutually reinforcing dimensions of responsible research.

Institutional constraints further limit implementation. Current funding, evaluation, and training structures rarely reward relational or participatory work. If empathy and compassion are to be meaningfully integrated into research cultures, they must be supported structurally rather than left to individual initiative alone.

Three sets of challenges limit the implementation of compassionate research: conceptual, disciplinary, and institutional.

- For **early-career researchers**, cultivating empathy and compassion can enhance both ethical integrity and methodological quality. Training in reflexivity, participatory approaches, communication, and boundary-setting can help researchers remain engaged without becoming overwhelmed.
- For **research institutions**, embedding compassionate practices may involve integrating relational competencies into doctoral training, promotion criteria, and mentoring structures. Creating spaces for reflexive dialogue and team support can strengthen sustainability and well-being.
- For **funding bodies and policy-makers**, evaluation frameworks could explicitly recognise participatory design, community engagement, and ethical attentiveness as indicators of research excellence. Supporting interdisciplinary and community-based approaches can help align research agendas with societal needs.

Looking ahead, advancing compassionate research will require moving beyond isolated initiatives toward more systemic integration. This includes developing clearer conceptual frameworks, embedding relational competencies in research training, and aligning evaluation and funding structures with these practices. As global challenges become increasingly complex and interconnected, approaches that combine scientific rigour with ethical awareness and social responsiveness will be essential. In this context, compassionate science offers a pathway toward more inclusive, accountable, and impactful knowledge production.

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About the authors

Clément Meier is a senior researcher at the University of Lausanne, where his research focuses on ageing, end-of-life care and planning, health inequalities, and population health. He is involved in several national and international research collaborations related to ageing and end-of-life research. He is a member of the Swiss Young Academy (SYA), currently serves as Speaker 2026/27, and is the Speaker of the Compassionate Science project.

David Jezdimirović is a Digital Editor at the Swiss Academy of Sciences (SCNAT), where he develops and coordinates multilingual communication across digital channels, making scientific and policy-related topics accessible to diverse audiences. He also supports the Swiss Young Academy (SYA) as a Project Assistant for Compassionate Science and the Swiss Young Network for Science Policy and Diplomacy (SYNESPOD).

Jovana V. Milić is a professor in the Department of Chemistry at the University of Turku in Finland, where she leads the Smart Energy Materials team, working on stimuli-responsive materials for sustainable energy technologies. She has been a member of the Swiss Young Academy, co-leading the Swiss Young Network for Science Policy and Diplomacy (SYNESPOD), while serving on the Board of the Young Academies Science Advice Structure (YASAS), invested in science for policy and diplomacy worldwide.

Mélodie Derome is an Ambizione SNSF Fellow and Principal Investigator at the University of Bern and the University of Geneva, where her research focuses on the cognitive and perceptual mechanisms underlying psychotic symptoms, with a particular emphasis on auditory hallucinations in schizophrenia. She leads the HearingThreat project, a multimodal neuroimaging study conducted across two clinical sites in Switzerland.

Marco Cavallaro serves as Swiss National Contact Point for the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) and Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society calls at Euresearch, a non-profit organisation that supports Swiss participation in Horizon Europe. He holds a PhD in Communication Sciences from the Università della Svizzera italiana. Marco is a member of the Swiss Young Academy, where he is actively involved in the UPSTEM project, which addresses the leaky pipeline in STEM fields in Switzerland.

Estefania Cuero is an independent consultant specialising in diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, working across Switzerland. She collaborates with a range of organisations, including universities, research institutions and public authorities, on future-oriented, inclusive organisational development. Estefania is a former member and speaker of the Swiss Young Academy and serves as a board member of the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) Switzerland.

More Information

Compassionate Science

Swiss Young Academy

Who are we?

Swiss Young Academy: As part of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences, the Swiss Young Academy provides young researchers the opportunity to carry out inter- and transdisciplinary projects and activities at the many intersections of science and society. The Young Academy gives voice to young academics within the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences and serves as a networking platform to bring together individuals from many different scientific fields and institutions of higher education.

Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences: The Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences (a+) are an association of the five scientific academies of: the Swiss Academy of Sciences (SCNAT), the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (SAGW), the Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences (SAMS), the Swiss Academy of Engineering Sciences (SATW) and the Swiss Young Academy (SYA). In addition to the academies, they include the TA-SWISS and Science et Cité centres of excellence as well as other scientific networks. The Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences network the sciences regionally, nationally and internationally. They represent the scientific communities in a disciplinary, interdisciplinary and independent manner, regardless of institutions and subjects. Their network is long-term oriented and committed to scientific excellence. They advise politicians and society on knowledge-based and socially relevant issues.