



Self-compassion and life satisfaction: The mediating role of hope[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 December 2015
Received in revised form 26 March 2016
Accepted 29 March 2016
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Self-compassion
Life satisfaction
Hope
Well-being

ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the relationship between self-compassion, hope and life satisfaction in a sample of Chinese adults. Three hundred and twenty adults completed the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS), the State Hope Scale (SHS) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). The structural equation model's results showed that self-compassion was positively associated with hope and life satisfaction, that hope was positively associated with life satisfaction, and also that hope fully mediated the positive relationship between self-compassion and life satisfaction. Additionally, multi-group analyses showed that the structural model was not moderated by gender or age. The present study highlights the mediating role of hope as an underlying mechanism between self-compassion and life satisfaction. The theoretical and practical implications, as well as the limitations of the present study, are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Self-compassion is a healthy and positive self-attitude involving “being open to and moved by one's own suffering, experiencing feelings of caring and kindness towards oneself, taking an understanding, nonjudgmental attitude towards one's inadequacies and failures, and recognizing that one's own experience is part of the common human experience” (Neff, 2003a, 2003b). Accordingly, self-compassion consists of three main components: self-kindness (treating oneself with understanding rather than with harsh self-judgment), common humanity (seeing one's imperfections as a part of human condition rather than viewing them as isolating), and mindfulness (being aware of present painful thoughts and feelings in a balanced way rather than over-identifying with them) (Neff, 2003a, 2003b). Maintaining compassion for oneself encourages individual to take actions towards personal growth in order to promote well-being (Neff, 2003a). Growing evidence suggests that self-compassion is robustly related to multiple aspects of well-being (see Barnard & Curry, 2011 for a review).

Despite the well-established relationship between self-compassion and well-being, research has attempted to explore the underlying mechanisms in the last few years. However, much of the research predominantly focused on how self-compassion decreased the negative

components of well-being, such as depression (Raes, 2010), anxiety (Arimitsu & Hofmann, 2015) and perceived stress (Finlay-Jones, Rees, & Kane, 2015). Little research has addressed the potential mechanism underlying the positive relationship between self-compassion and life satisfaction, a positive well-being outcome. The present study intended to examine whether hope can mediate the positive relationship between self-compassion and life satisfaction.

1.1. Self-compassion and life satisfaction

Self-compassion promotes well-being through helping individuals feel cared for, connected, and emotionally calm when one undergoes difficulties and hardship (Gilbert, 2005). Specifically, self-compassion helps an individual rectify maladaptive patterns of thought and behavior (Neff, 2003a), and protects against failure with adaptive coping strategies (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005). Therefore, self-compassion provides an individual with motivating force for growth and cultivates well-being (Neff, 2003a). Empirically, higher self-compassion is linked with decreased negative affect (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007), anxiety and depression (Arimitsu & Hofmann, 2015), and increased positive affect and happiness (Neff et al., 2007). Abundant evidence suggests that self-compassion is beneficial for increasing life satisfaction, which refers to the global cognitive evaluations of one's life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Correlational studies show that self-compassion is positively associated with life satisfaction (Neely, Schallert, Mohammed, Roberts, & Chen, 2009; Seligowski, Miron, & Orcutt, 2014; Van Dam, Sheppard, Forsyth, & Earleywine, 2011; Wei, Liao, Ku, & Shaffer, 2011), and this positive association has been demonstrated across cultures, such as American, Thai, and Chinese (Neff, Pitsungkagarn, & Hsieh, 2008; Yang, 2016). Further, self-compassion interventions have also

[☆] This research was supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, the Project of Beijing Municipal Commission of Education (PXM2014_014202_07_000067), and the Beijing Well-Being Foundation (No. 00203442015-01-005).

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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been found to increase individuals' satisfaction with life (Neff & Germer, 2013).

As for the underlying mechanism between self-compassion and life satisfaction, we were aware of only one study suggesting that positive automatic thought was a mediator (Arimitsu & Hofmann, 2015). Yet, the model is still insufficient in explaining how self-compassion conveys its beneficial effects for life satisfaction. Self-compassion not only emphasizes on the positive cognitive appraisal of oneself, but also highlights the motivating function in taking actions towards personal growth (Neff, 2003a). Thus, the positive automatic thought probably couldn't explain the relationship fully (Arimitsu & Hofmann, 2015). In the present study, we speculated that hope, a broader cognitive-motivational state, might account for the mechanism underlying the self-compassion–life satisfaction relationship.

1.2. Hope as a mediator between self-compassion and life satisfaction

Hope is conceptualized as individual's perceived confidence to produce plausible routes to desired goals (*pathway*, the cognitive component), and perceived motivation to use those pathways to begin and maintain efforts in pursuing desired goals (*agency*, the motivational component) (Snyder, 2002). Individuals with higher hope are more affirmative with their goals and keep higher motivation in pursuing them (Snyder, 2002), and tend to be satisfied with what have been achieved in life (Kwok, Cheng, & Wong, 2015). The majority of cross-sectional studies suggest that hope is strongly correlated with greater life satisfaction (Bailey, Eng, Frisch, & Snyder, 2007; Wong & Lim, 2009). Besides, longitudinal research indicates that hope is an important predictor of latter life satisfaction after controlling the initial life satisfaction (Marques, Lopez, & Mitchell, 2013; Marques, Lopez, & Pais-Ribeiro, 2011).

Neff and Faso (2015) recently provided empirical evidence regarding the positive link between self-compassion and trait hope in a relatively small sample among parents of children with autism, suggesting that parents with higher levels of self-compassion were more hopeful about the future. Relatedly, a study by Sears and Kraus (2009) demonstrated that self-compassionate loving-kindness meditation increased the possibility of identifying desirable goals and confidence about producing effective pathways to achieve them, which, in turn, effectively increased mediator's level of perceived hope. Moreover, another study suggested that individuals with higher self-compassion perceived greater competence, make greater effort and maintain higher persistence towards academic goals even when confronted with obstacles (Neff et al., 2005), which reflect the typical characteristics of hope.

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that self-compassion promotes perceived hope by facilitating individual identification of desired goals, perceiving and sustaining higher motivation towards goals even when faced with obstacles, which, in turn, increases life satisfaction over time. That is, hope is expected to mediate the positive relationship between self-compassion and life satisfaction.

1.3. The present study

The present study aims to investigate the relationship between self-compassion, hope and life satisfaction, and to examine whether hope is a mediating path from self-compassion to life satisfaction. Besides, a previous study suggested that age, but not gender, moderated the relationship between self-compassion and well-being in adolescents (Bluth & Blanton, 2015). However, it is unclear whether gender and age differences exist in the underlying mechanism in adults. Thus, we also intend to use multi-group analyses to test whether gender and age influence the relationships among self-compassion, hope and life satisfaction in adults. Based on the aforementioned studies, we propose the following hypotheses: (1) self-compassion is positively associated with hope and life satisfaction; (2) hope is positively associated with life satisfaction;

(3) hope mediates the positive relationship between self-compassion and life satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Procedures and participants

The study was conducted online via a Chinese survey website (<http://www.sojump.com>). We received 335 questionnaires, and we deleted 15 questionnaires, which rated the same option on all the scales. The valid sample included 320 Chinese adults (146 were men; mean age = 25.45 years, SD = 4.10, age range: 18–48; 46 married). Participants also reported the occupation condition, monthly income and education level.¹ The demographic variables were controlled for analysis in this study.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Self-compassion

The self-compassion was measured through Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003b), which contains 26 items and assesses the three components of self-compassion and their negative counterparts: self-kindness (self-judgment), common humanity (isolation), and mindfulness (over-identification). Participants rated each item (e.g., "I'm tolerant of my own flaws and inadequacies") on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*). The Chinese version of the SCS has been demonstrated to be a reliable measurement in Chinese populations (e.g., Yang, 2016).

2.2.2. Hope

The participants' hope level was measured by State Hope Scale (SHS; Snyder et al., 1996). It is a 6-item scale that measures beliefs about how successful the person is in pursuing goals (*agency*) and how confident in finding ways to attain goals (*pathways*). Three items measure the *agency* subscale (e.g., "At the present time, I am energetically pursuing my goals") and three items measure the *pathways* subscale (e.g., "I can think of many ways to reach my current goals"). Participants were asked to rate on an 8-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*definitely false*) to 8 (*definitely true*). The Chinese version of SHS has showed good reliability and validity in Chinese populations (e.g., Kwok et al., 2015).

2.2.3. Life satisfaction

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) was administered to assess participants' global life satisfaction. The SWLS consists of five items. Individuals were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagreement with each statement (e.g., "I am satisfied with my life") on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The Chinese version of the SWLS has demonstrated good reliability and validity in Chinese adults (e.g., Kong, Wang, & Zhao, 2014).

2.3. Data analysis

SPSS 20.0 was used to calculate descriptive statistics and correlations of key variables. Structural equation modeling (SEM) procedures using Mplus 7.0 with maximum likelihood estimation (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012) were employed for hypotheses test. In the SEMs, the

¹ Occupation condition: 44% were students, 48% were employed, 2% were waiting for employment, and 6% selected "other" option; monthly income: 12% were below 1500 RMB, 24% were between 1500 and 3000 RMB, 28% were between 3001 and 5000 RMB, 17% were between 5001 and 8000 RMB, 6% were between 8001 and 10,000 RMB, 6% were between 10,001 and 15,000 RMB, and 7% were above 15,000 RMB; education level: 2% were junior high school, 4% were senior high school, 64% were undergraduate, and 30% were postgraduate.

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