



Short Communication

# Self-compassion, relationship harmony, versus self-enhancement: Different ways of relating to well-being in Hong Kong Chinese

Xue Yang

R351, Department of Psychology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong



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## ABSTRACT

The current study examined the relationships of self-compassion with self-enhancement and harmonious relationship and compared their effects on well-being in a Hong Kong sample. Hong Kong college students ( $n = 246$ ) completed a Chinese version of a questionnaire to assess their levels of self-compassion, self-enhancement, relationship harmony, life satisfaction, and depression. Results showed that self-compassion, relationship harmony, and self-enhancement were positively associated. In addition, self-compassion was the most robust predictor of low depression and high life satisfaction, followed by relationship harmony; while self-enhancement did not predict well-being. Implications for self-compassion and well-being in a Hong Kong population are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Well-being can be promoted by not only self-enhancement or relationship harmony but also self-compassion (Neff, 2003a, 2003b; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejthirath, 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Different from self-enhancement through feeling better than others and harmonious relationship through feeling of belonging, self-compassion stresses inner peace and self-resilience (Leary, Tate, Adams, Batts Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff, 2003a, 2003b). This concept is interesting because its construct is Asian in origin but it is operationalized by Western researchers (Neff, 2003a, 2003b). Little is known about the unique effect of each predictor on well-being outcomes in Hong Kong Chinese, especially after accounting for the other two. The current study aims to fill the research gap to examine relationships of self-compassion with self-enhancement and harmonious relationship and compare their effects on depression and life satisfaction in a Chinese context.

### 1.1. Self-compassion, self-enhancement, and relationship harmony

According to Neff (Neff, 2003a, 2003b), self-compassion is a trait including multiple facets, i.e., self-kindness (versus self-judgment), mindfulness (versus overidentification), and common humanity (versus isolation). Self-kindness refers to self-understanding and self-warmth in negative events, rather than being self-critical or self-blamed. Mindfulness means experiencing the suffering in a balanced and peaceful way and focusing on the current moment instead of rumination or suppression. Common humanity refers to the recognition that

negative events that happen to “me” are the common human experience, instead of being isolated or unequal with others. These components make self-compassion become a strong predictor of positive feelings and its nature of self-regulation can directly contribute to adaptive reactions and well-being (Brion, Leary, & Drabkin, 2014; Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2005). The association between self-compassion and well-being has also been demonstrated across cultures, such as American, Thai, Taiwanese, and Chinese (Birkett, 2014; Neff, Pisitsungkagarn, & Hsieh, 2008).

Although both self-compassion and self-enhancement enhance well-being, the former has been suggested as an appealing alternative to the construct of the latter (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003b). Self-enhancement often depends on downward social comparisons, performance evaluations (e.g. realistic or unrealistic praise), and external and ideal standards to achieve positive feelings (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Crocker & Park, 2004). Self-compassion however enhances well-being by reducing self-criticism, recognizing human nature, and increasing self-acceptance and thus entails many of the psychological benefits as self-enhancement does but avoids many of its pitfalls (Neff, 2011; Neff & Vonk, 2009).

Developing harmonious relationships and connections with others is another source of positive feelings and well-being especially for people in collectivism cultures (Chang, Osman, Tong, & Tan, 2011; Chen, Chan, Bond, & Stewart, 2006). Relationship harmony may relate with self-compassion since both have been suggested being linked with the feeling and need of social connection (Chang et al., 2011; Yarnell & Neff, 2013). Neff and Beretvas (2013) found that self-compassionate individuals were evaluated by their partners as being more autonomy-supporting, emotionally connected, and accepting

E-mail address: [xyang@psy.cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:xyang@psy.cuhk.edu.hk).

conflicts. By recognizing that everyone is equally worthy of consideration, self-compassionate people are emotionally supportive towards both the self and others and avoid self-centeredness without negating the self (Crocker & Canevello, 2008; Neff & Pommier, 2012).

## 1.2. The current study

Little research has directly tested relationships among self-compassion, relationship harmony, and self-enhancement or compared their association strength with well-being. The current study hypothesized that self-compassion would positively relate with self-enhancement and harmonious relationship. In addition, self-compassion would have unique contributions to well-being after controlling self-enhancement and relationship harmony, and it would be the strongest predictor compared with the other two. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that self-enhancement and relationship harmony have been well-documented as cultural-related predictors. Westerners are more self-enhanced (Bond, 2013; Chen, Lam, Buchtel, & Bond, 2014; Lee, Oyserman, & Bond, 2010), while Asians (including Hong Kong Chinese) stress more relationship harmony for well-being (Chang et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2006). Thus, it was also hypothesized that self-enhancement predicts little well-being in Hong Kong Chinese after controlling the other two predictors.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The current study recruited 246 Hong Kong college students (74 males), aged from 18 to 24 years. They completed a questionnaire in Chinese online. The process required 15–20 min. SPSS 18 and AMOS 21 were used for data analyses.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Self-compassion

The 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a) includes six subscales: Self-kindness (5 items, e.g., “I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like”; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ); self-judgment (5 items, e.g., “I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies”; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ ); common humanity (4 items, e.g., “I try to see my failings as part of the human condition”; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ ); isolation (4 items, e.g., “When I think about my inadequacies it tends to make me feel more separate and cut off from the rest of the world”; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ); mindfulness (4 items, e.g., “When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation”; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .59$ ); and over-identification (4 items, e.g., “When I'm feeling down I tend to

obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong”; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .74$ ). Participants rated items on a 5-point scale from “Almost Never” to “Almost Always.” The scores of self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification subscales would be reversed in the following analyses. A higher total score indicates a higher level of self-compassion. Cronbach's alpha of the total scale was .84 in the current sample.

#### 2.2.2. Self-enhancement

Self-enhancement was assessed by “Better-than-average” Effect approach (adopted from Heine & Renshaw, 2002). Participants needed to evaluate how accurately the 10 desirable traits characterized themselves compared to the average student on a Likert scale, ranging from 0 (much less than an average student) to 100 (much more than an average student). Cronbach's alpha was .89 in the current sample.

#### 2.2.3. Relationship harmony

The Interpersonal Relationship Harmony Inventory (Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997) was used to assess the degree of an individual's perceived relationship harmony. Participants were instructed to think (for about 5 min) of five different dyadic relationships and to rate the degree of harmony within each relationship on a 7-point scale ranging from “very low” to “very high”. Cronbach's alpha was .78 in Chinese condition and .81 in the current sample.

#### 2.2.4. Depression

The 21-item Beck Depression Inventory (Beck & Steer, 1987) was used to assess cognitive, affective, motivational, and somatic symptoms of depression. Responses were given on a 4-point scale (from 0 to 3), with higher scores representing more depressed effect. Cronbach's alpha was .91 in the current sample.

#### 2.2.5. Life satisfaction

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a commonly used 5-item measure of global life satisfaction. Responses are rated on a 7-point scale with anchors of 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha was .87 in the current sample.

## 3. Results

There was no significant difference in the levels of self-compassion, self-enhancement, and harmonious relationship across gender or age ( $ps > .05$ ). In terms of the relationship between psychological variables (see Table 1), all the dimensions of self-compassion, self-enhancement, and harmonious relationship were significantly correlated with depression and life satisfaction, except for the association between common humanity and depression ( $r = -.08, p > .05$ ).

**Table 1**  
Correlations, mean, and standardized deviation of variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	M	SD
1. Self-kindness										3.20	.64
2. Common humanity	.546**									3.44	.68
3. Mindfulness	.544**	.520**								3.22	.58
4. Overidentity	.149*	-.102	.058							2.72	.76
5. Self-judgement	.194**	-.121	-.077	.718**						2.91	.73
6. Isolation	.052	-.166*	-.017	.704**	.608**					2.75	.77
7. Life satisfaction	.364**	.230**	.316**	.195**	.206**	.225**				4.25	1.15
8. Depression	-.308**	-.081	-.178**	-.469**	-.497**	-.425**	-.416**			1.54	.42
9. Self-enhancement	.263**	.207**	.236**	.127	.156*	.101	.328**	-.342**		53.80	17.79
10. Relationship	.121	.100	.140*	.058	.061	.049	.363**	-.348**	.313**	5.77	.80

Note. The scores of overidentity, self-judgement, and isolation have been reversed.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

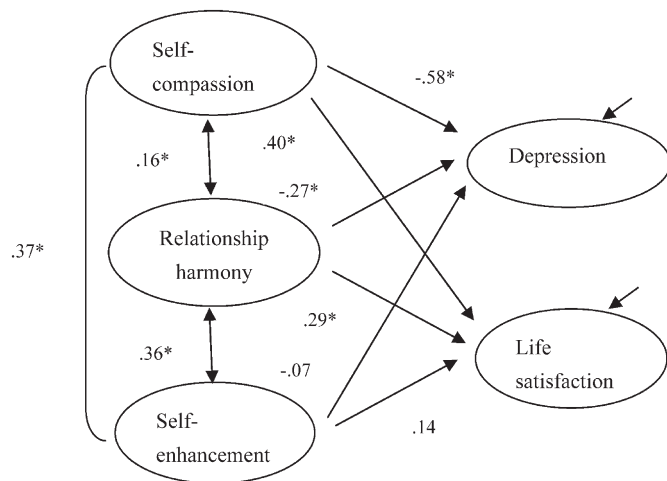


Fig. 1. The model with standardized path coefficients.

As to the model testing (see Fig. 1), first, the measurement model was tested using confirmatory factor analysis which examined the goodness-of-fit of the pattern of observed indicators for the latent constructs in the model. The measurement model showed acceptable fit to the data,  $\chi^2(80) = 135.34, p < .05, CFI = .97, NNFI = .96, RMSEA = .05$ . Secondly, to examine the hypothesized directionality of the relationships among the constructs and the overall fit of the model, structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted and standardized path coefficients were showed to compare the relative sizes. Results showed acceptable model fit,  $\chi^2(81) = 136.28, p < .05, CFI = .97, NNFI = .96, RMSEA = .05$ . As hypothesized, self-compassion was significantly associated with self-enhancement ( $r = .37$ ) and relationship harmony ( $r = .16$ ). Self-compassion and relationship harmony could predict better well-being outcomes, while self-enhancement could not after accounting for the other two predictors. Furthermore, to compare whether the effect of self-compassion on depression was significantly stronger than relationship harmony, path coefficients from self-compassion and relationship harmony to well-being were constrained to be equal. The change of chi-square between the model with paths constrained and the original model,  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 17.56, p < .05$ , demonstrated that self-compassion was the stronger predictor. For life satisfaction, it was indicated that self-compassion was also a relatively stronger predictor than relationship harmony,  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 3.85, p < .05$ .

#### 4. Discussion

The current study is the first attempt to directly examine relationships of self-compassion with relationship harmony and self-enhancement, and to compare each effect on well-being when accounting for the other two in Hong Kong Chinese. Results showed that self-compassion was positively associated with self-enhancement and relationship harmony, given their common nature of promoting positive feeling and well-being although in different ways. As hypothesized, self-compassion had the strongest association with well-being, compared with the other two predictors. It is consistent with the argument that self-compassion is a more stable and robust predictor of and sustainable approach to well-being across cultures due to its soothing qualities of self-kindness and the emotional safety from the appreciation of common humanity (Neff, 2011).

As to the cultural-related predictors, after controlling the other two predictors, relationship harmony still predicted well-being (Chang et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2006), while the benefits of self-enhancement became small and limited in interdependent cultures (Heine & Hamamura, 2007). The study also highlights cultural sensitivity in well-being promotion for Hong Kong Chinese that self-compassion

and relationship harmony, instead of self-enhancement, would be more effective and beneficial.

Several limitations need to be considered for future research. First, the study only recruited young Hong Kong residents from college students who have high levels of educations. Future studies should validate the results in other populations in Hong Kong, such as people with different ages, religions, and socio-economic statuses. Future work can also compare the results with people in different cultures to identify the cultural differences in self-compassion and which cultural values can facilitate its cultivation. In addition, the cross-sectional study only provided evidence for the association between self-compassion and well-being in a Hong Kong population. Evidence-based interventions through established training methods (e.g., Compassionate Mind Training) are needed to cultivate self-compassion trait and to establish causal and temporal linkages between self-compassion and well-being.

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