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Self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being in young adults: The mediating role of personal growth initiative

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Eudaimonic approach to well-being is a relatively less researched area in psychology in which human potential and optimal development is emphasised in contrast to the popular hedonic approach that focuses on pleasure attainment. Based on the related literature, we hypothesised a causal link between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being, being mediated by personal growth initiative – a personal resource that facilitates positive development. Using a mediation analysis, we examined the role of personal growth initiative on the relationship between eudaimonic well-being and self-compassion in young adults. The participants were 346 undergraduate students from Bangkok, Thailand. Reliable and valid Likert-type self-report inventories were used to measure the variables. The findings of this study support a positive relationship between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being ($r = .64$, $p < .01$),and personal growth initiative partially mediates this relationship. Being self-compassionate in early adulthood triggers personal growth initiatives and this enhances the eudaimonic well-being of the students in turn. The results are discussed with an emphasis on the mediating role of personal growth initiative in early adulthood. The implications of the study are also discussed with its limitations.

Keywords: eudaimonic well-being, personal growth initiative, self-compassion, young adults

Early adulthood is a period of transitions (Chen & Page, 2016; Karmel, 2014). The transition from school to college, thetransition from dependence to independence, choosing an occupation, establishing a career, earning a living, are some of the important themes of early adulthood (Santrock, 2011). The transition from adolescence to adulthood is called emerging adulthood that ranges from 18 to 25 years of age (Arnett, 2006). This stage is considered to be where the emerging adultsinvolve in activities that affect their careerand personal development (Arnett, 2014) and some of themenrol in higher education institutions like colleges and universities. This stage of transition is particularly significant with the hopes of young people expecting to be autonomous, to have quality relations and to work in their preferred occupation someday, but not yet (Berger, 2014). Higher education requires these students to spend a significant amount of time for study-related activities. Education, in general, can be thought of means to achieve esteem needs, expressing themselves, belongingness, find purpose in society and ultimately reach self-actualization (Neto, 2015).These goals can be linked to Eudaimonic well-being proposed by Ryff (1989) which is centred around human potentials and optimal development.

Based on a review of well-being research, Ryan and Deci (2001) identifies two distinct philosophies -hedonic and eudaimonic- around which the current well-being research revolves. These perspectives are divergent in some areas and complimentary in others. Generally, the hedonic perspective emphasises on pleasure attainment while eudaimonic perspective focuses on meaning and self-actualization, therefore, well-being is referred to be the degree to which an individual is fully functioning. Ryff's construct of eudaimonic well-being has six dimensions (1) self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff & Singer, 2006). Most of the well-being studies hold the hedonic approach while studies with a eudaimonic approach are relatively sparse.

Emerging adults who engage in university studies go through many challenges related to the roles of young adults as well as students. For instance, difficulty in making the transition to independent adulthood, economic challenges influencing education and employment, role confusion, instability of relationships and identity issues are some of the challenges they have to deal with (Holloway, Holloway, & Witte, 2010). The failure to meet these developmental tasks may give rise to negative behavioural, emotional and cognitive outcomes (Kok, 2015). One important resource for young adults to deal with these challenges is self-compassion that requires a nonjudgmental, emotionally positive, self-attitude (Neff & McGehee, 2010). Neff (2003, 2003b) identified three facets of self-compassion namely self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. Self-kindness refers to being kind, understanding and nonjudgmental toward oneself; perceiving one's experiences as part of the human experience rather than seeing them as isolating is termed as common humanity, and mindfulness pertains to the balanced approach so as to avoid over-identifying with painful thoughts and feelings.

Self-compassion is reported to be an important source of well-being (Barnard & Curry, 2011) as they are positively related (Neff, 2004; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Neff & Pommier, 2013; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007; Zessin, Dickhäuser, & Garbade, 2015). However, self-compassion has been largely ignored in well-being research that focuses on the eudaimonic tradition (Ryan, Huta, & Desi, 2008). A recent attempt in this line has been made by Ferguson and colleagues (2014) on a sample of young women athletes and reported a positive relationship between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being. It is important to study eudaimonic well-being and its relation to

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self-compassion with a sample of young adults as most studies with this sample hold a hedonic approach to well-being or focuses on the ill-being aspects like anxiety (Riggs & Han, 2009); depression (Kuwabara, Van Voorhees, Gollan, & Alexander, 2007); and substance use (Sheidow, McCart, Zajac, & Davis, 2012). Additionally, some aspects of personal development like competence (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005) and exploration (Neff et al., 2007) are positively linked to self-compassion and these variables are similar to dimensions of eudaimonic well-being proposed by Ryff (1989; e.g., exploration & personal growth). Therefore, it can be inferred that being self-compassionate increases the possibility of realizing one's potential and so as to enhance eudaimonic well-being. Research is required to explore the potential impact of self-compassion on the eudaimonic well-being of emerging adults who pursue higher studies.

This study tried to further examine the dynamics of the structural relations between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being of young adults by adding personal growth initiative (PGI) as a mediating variable based on the related literature. For instance, Neff (2003b) explains that self-compassion initiates proactive behaviours that promote or maintain well-being. Being self-compassionate helps people accept responsibility for their well-being and change unhealthy behaviours (Berry, Kowalski, Ferguson, & McHugh, 2010). Though self-compassionhas inherently motivating tendencies (Breines & Chen, 2012; Magnus, Kowalski, & McHugh, 2010; Neff, 2003a) people with self-compassion have to 'plan and initiate effective behaviours' so as to flourish and realize their potential and enhance eudaimonic well-being (Ferguson et al., 2014).

Personal growth initiative is conceptualized as a personal resource which includes certain skills that help make changes so as to facilitate positive development (Weigold & Robitschek, 2011) and it is positively related to well-being (Freitas et al., 2016). Personal growth initiative is composed of four dimensions (Robitschek, 1998; Robitschek et al., 2012) namely, readiness for change (being able to create or identify viable situations that promote growth), planfulness (ability to devise strategies that facilitate development), using resources (making use of external & personal resources in view of personal growth), and intentional behaviour (the dispositional tendencies to attain the goals set for change).

Thus, it logical to assume that personal growth initiative mediates the relationship between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being. Provided the empirical and theoretical support, the following hypotheses were framed: (1) self-compassion and personal growth initiative would be positively related to eudaimonic well-being; (2) personal growth initiative mediates the relationship between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being.

Method

Participants

The young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 participated in this study are from two universities in Bangkok, Thailand. The participants were 346 undergraduates (26 males & 342 females). These students were contacted after receiving the consent of the university management. Informed consent was obtained before administering the questionnaires for data collection.

Instruments

Self Compassion: Self Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003a): It has 26 items comprising of six aspects of self-compassion namely self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification.It is a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5(almost always). Reverse scoring needed for negatively phrased items for self-judgment, isolation and over-identification. Research findings support the construct validity, discriminant validity, concurrent validity, test re-test reliabilityand internal consistency reliability of this scale (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003; Neff et al., 2005).

Eudaimonic Well-being: Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-being (QEWB, Waterman, et al; 2010): It is a 21-item, 5point scale ranging from 0 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree). The scale consists of 14 positive and 7 negative items. After the reverse scoring of negative items, a single composite score was calculated by taking the mean of all the scores. According to the authors, the internal consistency of the scale was high (.84) and the results of independent confirmatory factor analysis indicated a common factor structure of the QEWB.

Personal Growth Initiative: Personal Growth Initiative Scale-II (PGI II, Robitschek et al., 2012): It is a six-point scale ranging from 0 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The PGIS-II consists of 16 items, which measure four factors such as readiness for change & planfulness (cognitive dimension), intentional behaviour and using resources (behavioural dimension). The scale reports satisfactory test-retest stability (Robitschek et al., 2012) ranging from 0.73 (using resources) to 0.81 (planfulness). The general PGI score was obtained by summing up the response of all items of the scale.

Data analysis

An examination of the histograms of standardized residuals, along with skewness and kurtosis estimates ensured the normality of the data. Scatterplots of the residuals were examined for linearity and homoscedasticity and no violations were found. For all analyses, statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Hypotheses1 was tested using Pearson Bivariate correlations. The hypothesized mediation (Hypothesis 2) was explored by applying Preacher and Haye's (2008)SPSS macro. For this analysis, 5000 bootstrap samples with replacement were requested. The significance tests for the mediated effect produced by the SPSS macro provided 95% bias-corrected (BC) bootstrapped confidence intervals (CIs) along with unstandardized path coefficients. The traditional regression coefficients for the normal theory approach were also estimated by this analysis.

Results

Descriptive statistics, Cronbach alpha representing internal consistency reliability of scales, and Pearson Product-Moment correlations that indicate the relationship among the variables are reported in Table 1.

Hypothesis testing

Findings show that both self-compassion and personal growth initiative is positively correlated to eudaimonic well-being ($r = .61$, $p < .01$ and $r = .64$, $p < .01$ respectively). Therefore, hypothesis1, which states that self-compassion and personal growth initiative would be positively related to eudaimonic well-being is supported by this study findings.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics, internal consistency reliability of scales, and pearson product–moment correlations for self-compassion, eudaimonic well-being, and personal growth initiative

Variable (Measure)	M	SD	1	2	3
1 Self-compassion (SCS)	3.38	0.35	0.69		
2 Eudaimonic well-being (SPWB)	2.77	0.39	0.61**	0.76	
3 Personal Growth Initiative (PGI)	3.55	0.36	0.64**	0.58**	0.89

Note. SCS = Self-Compassion Scale. SPWB = Scales of Psychological Well-Being. PGI = Personal Growth Initiative. Reliability α (Cronbach, 1951) on diagonal.**p < .01.

Mediation analysis

Figure 1 illustrates the mediation model with the paths and their unstandardized coefficients. A summary of the estimates, standard errors, and 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals for the mediation model is reported in Table 2. The proposed mediation model explained 67% of the variance in eudaimonic well-being. The total effect (path c) of self-compassion on eudaimonic well-being was B = 0.72, p=.001 and the direct effect (path c ') of self-compassion on eudaimonic well-being was B = 0.51, p=.001. The total indirect effect of self-compassion on eudaimonic well-being being mediated by personal growth initiative had a point estimate of 0.21 with a 95% BC bootstrapped CI of 0.12 – 0.31. Hence, it can be concluded that the data are consistent with the proposed model of mediation inwhich personal growth initiative mediated the relationship between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being.

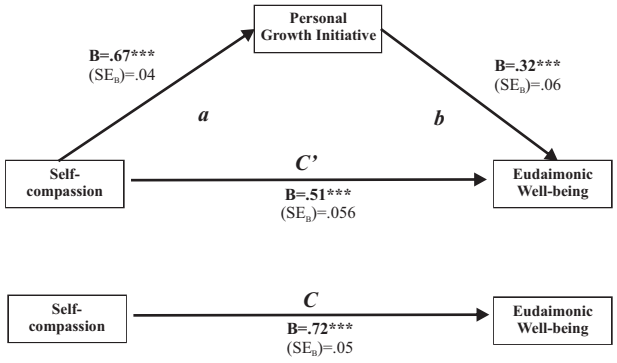


Figure 1: The path model for mediation analysis.

Note. The c coefficient denotes the total strength of the association between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being. The c′ coefficient denotes the strength of the direct path after controlling for the mediated path. The mediated paths are represented by a and b that involve the hypothesized mediator. ***p < .001.

Table 2: Summary of the mediation analysis examining the mediation of personal growth initiative on the relationship between self-compassion and eudaimonic

	Bootstrapping Product of Coefficients		BC Bootstrapped 95% Cia	
	Point estimate	SE	Lower	Upper
Direct effect	0.51	0.06	0.38	0.62
Indirect effect	0.21	0.05	0.12	0.31
Total effect	0.72	0.05	0.62	0.81
Fit Statistics	R^2= 0.67; F=(2, 343) 140.79, p < .001			

Discussion

This study supported the positive relationship between both self-compassion and personal growth initiative and eudaimonic well-being. Additionally, the hypothesized a mediation of personal growth initiative on the relationship between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being is also supported by the findings of this study.The findings are consistent with previous research. For instance, Neff et al. (2007) found a positive relationship between self-compassion and personal growth initiative while Robitschek and Keyes (2009) found eudaimonic well-being to be positively related to personal growth initiative. The present study also supports the mediating role of personal growth initiative on the relationship of self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being as observed by Ferguson and colleagues (2014) on a sample of young women athletes.

The major contribution of this study is the examination of the mediating role of personal growth initiative in the causal relationship between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being in undergraduate young adults. However, considering the cross-sectional nature of the research design, the structural relations reflected in the results must be treated as suggestive than definite. This model suggests that the young adults who attend universities with self-compassion are actively engaged in taking initiative, plan their behaviours, and seek support to achieve their goal which in turn help realize their potential, find meaning in what they do and enjoy well-being. These findings are vital because they contribute to the literature on the differential roles of self-compassion and personal growth initiative in promoting a less researched tradition of well-being–eudaimonic well-being. The identification of personal growth initiative as a mediator has many implications.

First, there are many attempts to enhance self-compassion (Boellinghaus, Jones, & Hutton, 2014; Birnie, Speca, & Carlson, 2010; Keng, Smoski, Robins, Ekblad, & Brantley, 2012) hoping that it promotes many positive psychological outcomes including well-being (Zessin et al., 2015). Drawing on the findings of the current study, the attempts to enhance eudaimonic well-being by manipulating self-compassion may also address initiative tendencies (i.e., PGI) of the participants as it mediates the relationship between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being. In other words, the attempts to enhance eudaimonic well-being focusing solely on self-compassion may be improved by integrating the mediating role of PGI. Hence, strategies may be implemented to make sure that the young adults' self-compassion is translated into effective initiative behaviours that facilitate realizing their potential.

Second, personal growth initiative is conceived as a personal resource that involves trainable skills (Weigold & Robitschek, 2011) and there are scientific attempts (Thoen & Robitschek, 2013) to manipulate personal growth initiative. Therefore, efforts to enhance the eudaimonic well-being of young adults may consider PGI as a viable medium of change as far as self-compassion is considered to be a major predictor of eudaimonic well-being.

Third, self-compassion has been reported to have an impact on many positive outcomes like cognitive well-being and psychological well-being, (Zessin et al., 2015) and positive academic outcomes and achievement goals (NeV et al., 2005).

However, these studies theorize the direct influence of self-compassion on other variables. Based on the findings of the present research, it can be inferred that self-compassion can have an indirect influence on outcome variables. This is an indication that the impact of self-compassion on outcome variables could be mediated by other variables along with personal growth initiative.

This research has its own limitations. The structural relations examined in this research must be interpreted with caution. This is because the mediation analysis performed to test the mediation of personal growth initiative in the relationship between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being is based on a cross-sectional design. Mediation studies based on cross-sectional research designs have limitations (Maxwell & Cole, 2007). Thought the data were consistent with the proposed mediational model, the directionality and causality of the relations can only be considered as a framework for future research. To confirm these structural relations, further studies employing experimental and longitudinal designs are needed.

The mediation model proposed in this research is not a complete model with all plausible mediating variables. Therefore, future studies may consider other potential mediating variables to understand young adults' eudaimonic well-being, self-compassion and personal growth initiative and the structural relations among these variables. For instance, Ferguson and colleagues (2014) identified responsibility and self-determination as mediators of the relationship between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being in athletes.

The young adults participated in this study represent the population of emerging adults that attend universities. Therefore, in a strict sense, the findings of this study may be generalized only to the corresponding population. Generalizations of these study findings to other related populations like working young adults must be done with caution. Nevertheless, the universal similarities with respect to the developmental stages of these populations may justify the external validity of this research to an extent. However, further studies are required to confirm the structural relations among the concerned variables in such populations.

In brief, it can be concluded that the current study provided support for the positive relationship between self-compassion, eudaimonic well-being and personal growth initiative. In addition this study also supports the mediating role of personal growth initiative on the relationship between self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being in young adults who are pursuing undergraduate programmes. Hence self-compassion may be a viable source for achieving human potential in young adults while personal growth initiative mediates their efforts to realize their potentials. It might be particularly useful for UG students in realizing their potentials. The limitations of the study discussed earlier must be taken into account when interpreting these findings.

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