Short Communication

Mindfulness, self-compassion and wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

While other studies have examined the effect of mindfulness, self-compassion and wellbeing, further examination is needed regarding these constructs and in particular the relations between different wellbeing constructs. It was hypothesised that mindfulness and self-compassion would be positively related to wellbeing and wellbeing constructs would be positively associated. In a sample of 190 United States participants with meditation experience, both hypotheses were supported. These results are interpreted within the theoretical framework of flourishing where these indicators represent high mental health.

1. Introduction

Flourishing (Huppert & So, 2013) represents a way of integrating the various aspects of positive psychology into a framework and provides a reason for wanting individuals and indeed countries to be high on these indicators. Countries are increasingly incorporating measures of wellbeing into their data collection and some argue that the purpose of government is to increase the wellbeing of the individuals of that country (Clark et al., 2018; Wolf, 2019). Flourishing is understood as high mental health where people are functioning well, feeling good, and subjectively have a positive experience of life (Huppert, 2009). The current study examines indicators of flourishing including mindfulness, self-compassion and well-being.

Mindfulness and self-compassion have relations with other indicators of flourishing. Mindfulness was found to predict psychological wellbeing and the relationship was mediated by self-compassion (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011). People regularly practicing meditation were found to be happier and the relationship can be explained by mindfulness and self-compassion (Campos et al., 2016). Perceived social support predicted psychological wellbeing mediated by mindfulness, self-compassion, and savouring (Wilson et al., 2020).

Flourishing can be indicated by several wellbeing indicators including Psychological wellbeing (PWB), subjective happiness and positive affect. PWB has been described as having optimal psychological functioning and is more than merely the absence of mental illness (Ryan & Deci, 2001). PWB encompasses both eudaimonic and hedonic notions of wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Although these two factors are distinct entities, they are found to overlap when measuring wellbeing in differentiated ways (Compton et al., 1996).

Subjective happiness can be defined as an overall subjective assessment of whether a person is happy or unhappy (Satici et al., 2016). It differs from objective happiness which is understood as utility within a specific moment (Kahneman, 1999). Subjective happiness emphasises how people perceive, interpret, recall, and experience life events in a positive or negative way (Lyubomirsky, 2001). Subjective wellbeing tends to be stable over periods of time and encompasses happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect (Howell et al., 2007).

Positive affect is positive feelings such as of energy, enthusiasm and alertness (Watson et al., 1988). It involves pleasurable interactions with the environment and can be brief, long or stable (Pressman & Cohen, 2005). A study found post-stress recovery from anxiety depended on increases in mindfulness and positive affect, while the levels of post-stress deterioration in cortisol secretion depended on rises in mindfulness both during and after stress (Hou et al., 2014).

The aim of this study is to extend upon the previous research and examine the relations between aspects of flourishing. It is hypothesised that mindfulness, self-compassion and wellbeing will be positively related. It is second hypothesised that the wellbeing indicators of PWB, subjective happiness and positive affect will be positively related.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 190 participants (63% women, 37% men, $M = 43.58$ years, $SD = 14.83$ years). Participants needed to be 18 years or over, from the United States, have completed meditation methods within the last 5 years and/or be currently practicing and not clinically diagnosed with any mental health disorders. Participant ethnicity included White/Caucasian (76%), Black/African American...
(7%), Spanish, Hispanic or Latino (6%), and other (11%). Meditation practices ranged from 1 to 5 times per week ($M = 2.95, SD = 1.54$). An a priori power analysis suggests 84 participants are required for 80% statistical power, $r = 0.3, p < .05$.

2.2. Measures

Mindfulness was measured using the 39-item Five-Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ; Baer et al., 2006; Dolatyar & Walker, 2020). This questionnaire assesses five mindfulness facets: observing, describing, acting with awareness, nonjudging of inner experiences, and nonreacting to inner experiences. An example item is “I’m good at finding words to describe my feelings”. Participants rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (Never or rarely true) to 5 (Very often or always true).

Self-Compassion was measured using the 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003). It examined comfort and care for oneself rather than harsh judgement. An example item is “When I’m feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that’s wrong”. Participants rated agreement on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Psychological Well-Being was measured using the 42-item Psychological Well-Being Scale ( Ryff, 1989). The scale measures six areas of PWB: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. An example item is “I sometimes feel as if I’ve done all there is to do in life”. Agreement was rated on a 6-point scale from 1 (strong disagreement) to 6 (strong agreement).

Positive affect was measured using the 10-item positive affect subscale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988). It uses individual words to assess emotional tendencies. Example items are “interested” and “excited”. Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point scale how they felt in the past year from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely). An example item is “Some people are generally very happy, they enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything”. Ratings were provided on a 7-point scale from 1 (not a great deal) to 7 (a great deal).

2.3. Procedure

Ethics was approved by a local institutional review board. The study was advertised on Prime Panels (https://www.cloudresearch.com/products/prime-panels/). Participants clicked on a link leading to the questionnaire homepage. Informed consent was provided and participants completed the scales and demographic questions. Once the questionnaire was completed, participants were thanked for their time and received payment.

3. Results

Hypothesis 1, that mindfulness and self-compassion will be positively related to wellbeing, was tested using a correlation analysis (see Table 1). It was found that mindfulness had a strong positive relationship with PWB, subjective happiness and positive affect. It was also found that subjective happiness had a strong positive relationship with PWB, subjective happiness and positive affect. These results support Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2, that wellbeing constructs will be positively related, was tested using a correlation analysis (see Table 1). It was found that PWB had a strong positive relationship with subjective happiness and positive affect. It was also found that subjective happiness had a strong positive relationship with positive affect. These results support hypothesis 2.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
<th>6.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Mindfulness</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.73***</td>
<td>0.72**</td>
<td>0.49**</td>
<td>0.57**</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Self-compassion</td>
<td>0.73***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.72**</td>
<td>0.63***</td>
<td>0.53***</td>
<td>0.17***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Psychological well-being</td>
<td>0.72**</td>
<td>0.72**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.70***</td>
<td>0.67***</td>
<td>0.16***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Subjective happiness</td>
<td>0.49**</td>
<td>0.63***</td>
<td>0.70***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.57**</td>
<td>0.12**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Positive affect</td>
<td>0.57**</td>
<td>0.53***</td>
<td>0.67***</td>
<td>0.57**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.07**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Age</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.17***</td>
<td>0.16***</td>
<td>0.12**</td>
<td>0.07**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>132.53</td>
<td>112.96</td>
<td>196.96</td>
<td>19.13</td>
<td>34.44</td>
<td>43.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>19.03</td>
<td>22.86</td>
<td>36.92</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>8.62</td>
<td>14.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach alpha</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

Hypothesis 2.

4. Discussion

The aim of the current study was to examine if indicators of flourishing were related. The first hypothesis was supported as mindfulness and self-compassion were found to be positively related to wellbeing. The second hypothesis was also supported as PWB, subjective happiness and positive affect were different indicators of wellbeing that were found to be positively related. These findings suggest interrelationships between the various constructs of flourishing and therefore improvements in some should be related to improvements in others in a virtuous cycle.

The findings of the first hypothesis are consistent with the literature as other studies have also found relationships between mindfulness, self-compassion and wellbeing (e.g., Campos et al., 2016; Hollis-Walker & Colesimino, 2011). This suggests flourishing is a beneficial cycle and having high scores on these indicators is likely to be related to other beneficial outcomes. According to the theory of flourishing (Huppert & So, 2013), it also means they are likely to be low on negative indicators of well-being and less likely to have mental health issues.

The findings of the second hypothesis were also expected as relations were found between PWB, subjective happiness and positive affect. There is some debate about whether the differences between these constructs are meaningful or not (e.g., Chen et al., 2013). This study suggests very strong relationships between them but below the threshold for multicollinearity and Chen et al. (2013) found differences when using more nuanced analysis.

Limitations of this study should be noted. This study relied on self-report measures. Future studies could incorporate behavioural, other-report, or physiological measures. The cross-sectional design of this study is a limitation. Future studies could incorporate an experimental, time-lag or longitudinal design. The PWB scale of this study was only examined at the global level. Future studies could examine PWB at the facet level. This study included participants who were mainly from a Western background. Future research should be conducted in a range of countries to determine the generalisability of the results.

In conclusion, this study found relations between measures of flourishing including mindfulness, self-compassion and wellbeing. It also found correlations between the PWB, subjective happiness and positive affect. This suggests that improving certain aspects of flourishing is likely to have impacts on other indicators and even within aspects of wellbeing there are likely to be virtuous benefits.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Tegan McKay: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft. Benjamin R. Walker: Supervision, Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.
Declaration of competing interest

We have no known Conflict of interest to disclose.

References


