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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### LIFE SATISFACTION AND SELF-COMPASSION: A STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELING

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#### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationships between life satisfaction and self-compassion. Participants were 381 (193 female and 188 male) university students, between age range of 17–26, who completed a questionnaire package that includes the Satisfaction with Life Scale and the Self-compassion Scale. The relationships between life satisfaction and self-compassion were examined using correlation analysis and the hypothesis model was tested through structural equation modeling. In correlation analysis, self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness were found positively and self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification factors of self-compassion were found negatively related to life satisfaction. The model demonstrated fit ( $\chi^2=34.39$ ,  $df=9$ ,  $\chi^2/df= 3.82$ ,  $p=.00008$ ,  $AGFI=.92$ ,  $GFI=.97$ ,  $CFI=.97$ ,  $NFI=.96$ ,  $NNFI=.93$ ,  $IFI=.97$ ,  $RFI=.91$ ,  $SRMR=.072$ , and  $RMSEA=.090$ ). According to path analysis results, self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness were predicted positively by life satisfaction. Moreover life satisfaction predicted self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification in a negative way.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Happiness and subjective well-being has been a topic of interest for many centuries and accepted very important for most of the people so individuals have wondered about what makes a happy life (Diener, 1984; Diener *et al.*, 1985). Although subjective well-being and happiness are popular subjects and have a long history in philosophy and psychology, recently researchers have begun to investigate the constructs of happiness and subjective well-being (Lim and Putman, 2010). In addition, lately psychologists became more interested in positive feelings and emotions of well-being instead of depression and anxiety (Van Hoorn, 2007). Subjective well-being which has been defined as an individual's experience or appraisal of the positive qualities in his or her life (Diener, 1984) is 'a broad category of phenomena that includes people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction (Diener, Sih, Lucas and Smith, 1999). Previous research reported that subjective well-being has two distinctive constructs. The first one is an affective and emotional part, which usually further broken down into presence of positive affect which refers to experience of pleasurable emotional states and moods such as excitement, vigor, confidence, and optimism and the absence of negative affect which refers to frequency of negative or bothersome emotions such as fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, or hostility (Diener and Emmons, 1984; Diener, Lucas and Oishi, 2002; Suldo and Huebner, 2005).

The second one is cognitive judgmental part, which referred to life satisfaction or perceived quality of life (Andrews and Withey, 1976) that depends on individual judgements about perceived life circumstances. Life satisfaction refers to the cognitive appraisal of one's quality of life and depends on one's cognitive and subjective evaluation (Gilman and Huebner, 2003), described as "excellence or goodness in aspects of life that go beyond mere subsistence, survival, and longevity" (Frisch, 2000, p. 208). Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli (2000) proposed that life satisfaction can be described as the extent to how much a person's life is satisfying her/his physical and psychological desires and wishes. The person wishes can be reflected in many different aspects of life such as family, friends, work, and school (Rostami and Abedi, 2012). Hence, people evaluate how well they are doing in lives that are important to them when they judge their life satisfaction (Caldwell, 2009).

Research has shown that life satisfaction can act as a protective factor against the development of psychopathology (Suldo and Huebner, 2004) and people who have greater life satisfaction tend to experience better mental and physical health (Siahpush, Spittal, and Singh, 2008). In addition, life satisfaction is positively related to adaptive constructs such as happiness and optimism (Sapmaz and Doğan, 2012), self-esteem (Yiğit, 2012), identity achievement (Özgüngör, 2009), emotional intelligence (Palmer, Walls, Burgess, and Stough 2001), perceived social support (Edwards and Lopez 2006), parental support (Suldo and Huebner, 2006), marital adjustment (Çelik and Tümkaya, 2012), hope (Bailey, Eng, Frisch, and Snyder, 2007), positive affectivity (Busseri, Sadava, and Decourville, 2007), ego strength, and positivism (Diener, Napa-Scollon,

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Oishi, Dziketo, and Suh, 2000). On the other hand life satisfaction negatively associated with perceived stress (Extremera, Duran and Rey, 2009) as well as loneliness (Goodwin, Cook, and Yung, 2001), negative automatic thoughts (Bulut, 2007), alexithymia (Palmer, Donaldson, and Stough, 2002), and depression (Wong and Lim 2009).

### **Self-compassion**

Self-compassion which has been explored and has begun to study by western psychologists in recent years is a substantial psychological construct derived from Buddhist thought (Neff, 2003a, b). Self-compassion can be defined as being caring and compassionate toward oneself during the difficult times (Bennett-Goleman, 2001). This construct is an alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself and involves being open to one's own suffering, rather than avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to diminish one's suffering and to ameliorate oneself with kindness, offering non-judgmental understanding to one's problem, inadequacies, and failures, so that one's experience is seen as part of the larger human experience and avoiding evaluations of self-worth (Neff, 2003a, b).

According to Neff (2003a, b), self-compassion consists of three components: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over identification. Self-kindness involves being kind, content, and understanding toward oneself when an individual suffers, fails, or feels inadequate, instead of punishing himself/herself with self-criticism. The first component; self-kindness entails that being imperfect and failures, difficulties in life is inevitable, so an individual can soothe and warm himself / herself when confronting his/her pain rather than getting nervous or sad when things get bad or have a fail in his/her life (Neff, 2012). The second component; common humanity is being aware of one's pleasant or painful experiences as not personal, but as all human beings'. Common humanity involves recognizing that all humans are flawed that they fail and have also inadequacies (Neff, 2009) and forgiving oneself for being just a human, for being limited (Barnard and Curry, 2011).

The third component, mindfulness is a non-judgmental, balanced awareness mind-state in which feelings and thoughts are observed as they are, without trying to change or denying them and prejudice (Neff, 2012), accepting painful feelings and thoughts in mindful awareness instead of being completely absorbed in them or exaggerate them (Barnard and Curry, 2011).

Self-compassion is an important way to raise emotional well-being and contentment in life, fosters positive mind states such as happiness and optimism, allows to individual flourishing (Neff, 2011), and promotes health-related behaviors (Adams and Leary, 2007). Self-compassionate individuals were less likely to feel isolated by their problems and experience less anxiety when thinking about them (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, and Hancock, 2007). Research has found that self-compassion is associated with happiness and positive affect (Neff, Rude, and Kirkpatrick, 2007), psychological well-being (Neff, 2004; Neff, 2004), and social connectedness (Neff and McGehee,

2010). Similarly greater self-compassion is linked to less anxiety and depression (Neff, 2009). Neff, Rude, and Kirkpatrick (2007) also demonstrated that self-compassion was associated with wisdom, personal initiative, and curiosity. Other studies have showed that self-compassion is negatively associated with perfectionism (Neff, 2003a), social anxiety (Werner *et al.*, 2011), loneliness (Akin, 2010), and internet addiction (Iskender and Akin, 2011), and positively associated with social relationship, emotional intelligence, self-determination (Neff, 2003a), positive mental health and adaptive functioning (Neff, 2004), self-efficacy (Iskender, 2009), and optimism (Neff and Vonk, 2009).

### **The present study**

Life satisfaction is not only a key indicator of psychological well-being, a core dimension of subjective well-being and an important correlate of psychological health (Diener, 1984; Diener *et al.*, 1999; Pavot and Diener, 2008), but also emerged as a strong predictor of other important constructs such as self-compassion which heals the painful experiences of all humans with compassion and understanding (Neff, 2012). In a similar way, by nature, self-compassion may be significant predictor of well-being and life satisfaction, possibly by buffering people against the displeasing emotional and cognitive reactions that accompany negative life experiences (Allen, 2011). People who are self-compassionate tend to experience more happiness, optimism, curiosity, and positive affect than those who lack self-compassion (Neff, *et al.*, 2007). Also key feature of self-compassion is the lack of self-criticism and self-criticism is negatively related to happiness (Doğan, Sapmaz and Çötök, 2011).

Research on self-compassion is relatively new, different researches that study researcher that study self-compassion and its relation to positive findings in various areas of life are also needed. One of these areas is the relationship between self-compassion and life satisfaction. Along with other positive constructs (Bailey *et al.*, 2007; Busseri *et al.* 2007; Edwards and Lopez 2006; Özgüngör, 2009; Palmer *et al.*, 2001; Sapmaz and Doğan, 2012; Suldo and Huebner, 2006; Yiğit, 2012) life satisfaction may be an important predictor of self-compassion. Thus, the aim of the present study is to examine the relationships between life satisfaction and dimensions of self-compassion. Based on the relationships of life satisfaction (Bulut, 2007; Goodwin, Cook, and Yung, 2001; Pavot and Diener, 1993; Suldo and Huebner, 2004) and self-compassion (Akin 2010; Iskender, 2009; Neff, 2003a, b; Neff, 2004; Neff, Kirkpatrick, and Rude, 2005; Neff, *et al.*, 2007; Neff and Vonk, 2009; Neff and McGehee, 2010) with psychological constructs we hypothesized that life satisfaction would be associated negatively with self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification and positively with self-kindness, awareness of common humanity, and mindfulness.

## **MATERIALS AND METHOD**

### **Participants**

Participants were 381 volunteer undergraduate students (193 (51%) female and 188 (49%) male) studying various subjects,

at the mid-size state university, Turkey. Of the participants, 104 (27%) were freshman, 93 (24%) were sophomores, 82 (22%) were juniors, and 102 (27%) were seniors. Their ages ranged from 17 to 26 year-old ( $M = 20.9$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ).

### Measures

*The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS, Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin, 1985).* The SWLS consists of five items (e.g., In most ways my life is close to my ideal) using a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A sum of all scores yields a total score that ranges from 5 to 35; a higher score indicates a higher life satisfaction level. Turkish adaptation of this scale had been done by Durak, Senol-Durak, and Gencoz (2010). They found that internal consistency coefficient was .81 and the corrected item total correlations ranged from .55 to .63. Results of confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the scale was well fit. *Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003b).* The Self-Compassion Scale consists of 26 items and six sub-scales. Responses are given on a 5-point scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Mean scores on the six subscales are then averaged (after reverse-coding negative items) to create an overall self-compassion score. Turkish adaptation of the scale has done by Deniz, Kesici and Sümer (2008). Different from the original scale, the Turkish version showed a single dimension and in addition, the scale was reduced to 24 items since two items which were below .30' as a result of total item correlation were taken from the scale. Internal consistency reliability obtained for the adapted version was .89 and test-retest reliability was .83.

### Procedures

Participants voluntarily participated and were free to fill out the questionnaires without pressure. Completion of the questionnaires was anonymous and there was a guarantee of confidentiality. The instruments were administered to the students in groups in the classrooms. The measures were counterbalanced in administration. Prior to administration of measures, all participants were told about purposes of the study. In this research, Pearson correlation coefficient was applied to assess statistical significance for the relations of life satisfaction with self-compassion and to test the hypothesis model structural equation modeling (SEM) was used. Analyses were carried out with LISREL version 8.54 (Jöreskog and Sorbom, 1996) and IBM SPSS Statistics 20.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Data and Inter-correlations

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients for the variables.

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that there are significant correlations between life satisfaction and self-compassion. Correlations between life satisfaction and self-compassion were statistically significant. Self-kindness ( $r = .44$ ), common humanity ( $r = .37$ ), and mindfulness ( $r = .46$ ) related positively to life satisfaction. On the other hand, self-judgment ( $r = -.45$ ), isolation ( $r = -.43$ ), and over-identification ( $r = -.44$ ) were found negatively associated with life satisfaction.

### Structural Equation Modeling

The results of SEM analysis presented in Figure 1. The model demonstrated fit ( $\chi^2 = 34.39$ ,  $df = 9$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 3.82$ ,  $p = .00008$ ,  $AGFI = .92$ ,  $GFI = .97$ ,  $CFI = .97$ ,  $NFI = .96$ ,  $NNFI = .93$ ,  $IFI = .97$ ,  $RFI = .91$ ,  $SRMR = .072$ , and  $RMSEA = .090$ ) and accounted for 19% of self-kindness, 14% of common humanity, 21% of mindfulness, 22% of self-judgment, 19% of isolation, and 22% of over-identification variance.

It can be seen from figure 1 that self-kindness ( $\gamma = .44$ ), common humanity ( $\gamma = .38$ ), and mindfulness ( $\gamma = .46$ ) were predicted positively and self-judgment ( $\gamma = -.47$ ), isolation ( $\gamma = -.43$ ), and over-identification ( $\gamma = -.47$ ) were predicted negatively by life satisfaction.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationships between life satisfaction and self-compassion. The findings of the present study have demonstrated that there are significant relationships between life satisfaction and the dimensions of self-compassion. As expected, path analysis illustrated that self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness were predicted by life satisfaction positively. These dimensions involves being kind toward oneself and understanding to oneself, seeing our own experiences as part of the larger human experiences and holding painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness (Barnard and Curry, 2011; Neff, 2003a). The positive relationships between self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness and life satisfaction which have found in the present study support the results of previous research which suggest that self-compassionate people possess many of the psychological strengths such as happiness, optimism, and positive affect (Neff, *et al.*, 2007), and psychological well-being (Neff, 2004). Similarly, life satisfaction was found correlated positively with adaptive psychological variables, including happiness, optimism, self-esteem, and hope. In addition, Gilbert (2005) suggested that self-compassion enhances well-being through helping individuals feel cared for, connected, and emotionally calm.

Self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification were associated negatively with life satisfaction. These dimensions refer self-criticism, feeling separate and isolated and exaggerating the dramatic story-line of one's suffering (Neff and McGehee, 2010). Similar results were obtained in other studies. Research on self-compassion consistently proved that self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification factors related positively to negative variables such as anxiety, depression, self-criticism, neuroticism, rumination, thought suppression, neurotic perfectionism (Neff, 2003a, b; Neff, Kirkpatrick, and Rude, 2005; Neff, Rude, and Kirkpatrick, 2007), social anxiety (Werner *et al.*, 2011) and loneliness (Akin, 2010). Additionally, life satisfaction was found related negatively to perceived stress (Extremera *et al.*, 2009), loneliness (Goodwin, Cook, and Yung, 2001), negative automatic thoughts (Bulut, 2007), alexithymia (Palmer, Donaldson and Stough, 2002) and depression (Wong and Lim 2009). This study has also some limitations. First of all, participants were composed of university students living in Turkey. Because generalizability

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Inter-correlations of the Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Life Satisfaction	1.00						
2. Self-kindness	.44**	1.00					
3. Common humanity	.37**	.52**	1.00				
4. Mindfulness	.46**	.67**	.56**	1.00			
5. Self-judgment	-.45**	-.36**	-.22**	-.39**	1.00		
6. Isolation	-.43**	-.30**	-.19**	-.38**	.58**	1.00	
7. Over-identification	-.44**	-.32**	-.21**	-.39**	.63**	.59**	1.00
Mean	21.91	14.3	11.6	11.93	12.43	11.54	11.17
SD	5.86	4.27	3.34	3.43	4.35	3.74	3.85
Skewness	-.32	.19	.20	.17	.46	.29	.29
Kurtosis	-.22	-.55	-.22	-.66	-.12	-.52	-.65

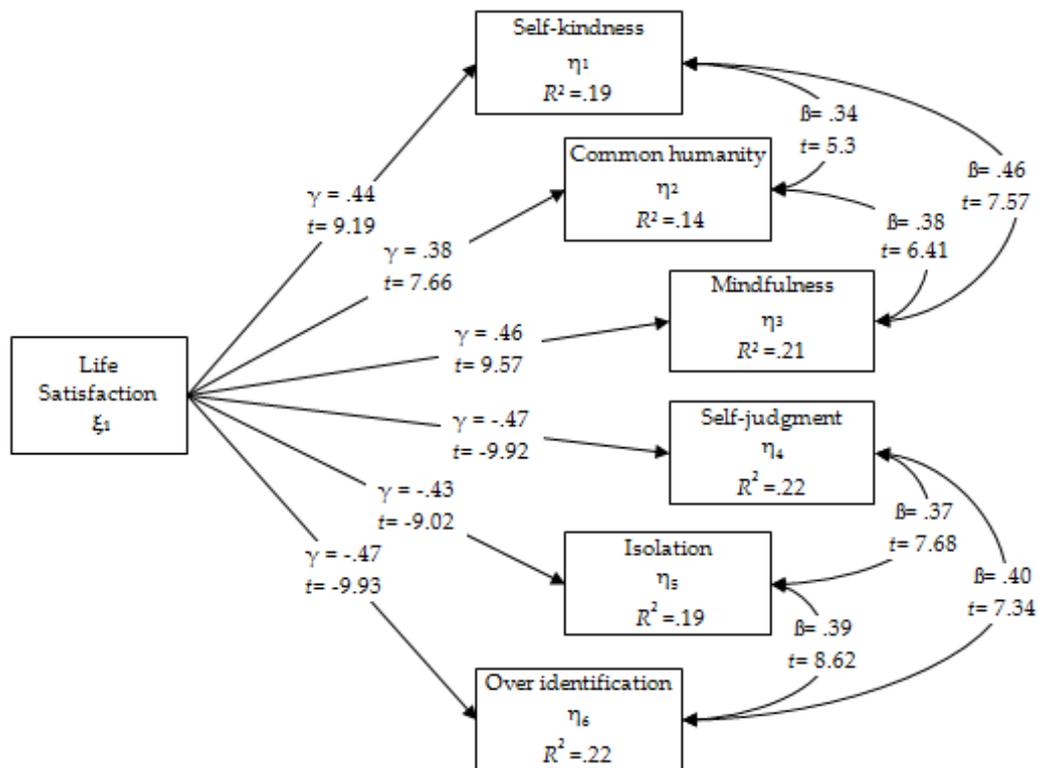
\*\* $p < .01$ 

Figure 1. Path analysis between life satisfaction and self-compassion

of the study findings is somewhat limited, it is also important to investigate the variables studied in this research on other sample groups other than university students. Secondly, because this research intended to build a model rather than test a model that already exists, findings from the research are of explanatory characteristics. Therefore, if it is not tested on another sample, it is wise to avoid taking the findings as definite. The third, even though structural equation modeling suggests results related to causality, it is difficult to give full explanation related to causality among the variables examined in the research, because correlational data were used. And finally the data reported here for life satisfaction and self-compassion are limited to self-report. Although this study includes multiple limitations, it also contributes to the literature on life satisfaction and self-compassion. The present research indicates that as life satisfaction increased, self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness increased as well. On the other hand, as life satisfaction decreased, self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification decreased. This research also suggests that enhancing of life satisfaction could

be highly beneficial for self-compassion. Nonetheless it is important to note that further research investigating the relationships between life satisfaction and self-compassion, and other psychological constructs are needed to reinforce the findings of this study.

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