Examining the Relationship between Self-compassion, Differentiation and Empathy with Happiness in Azad University Students of Ahvaz

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was examining the relationship between self-compassion, differentiation and empathy with happiness in Azad university students of Ahvaz. 283 female and male university students were selected randomly. Self-compassion Questionnaire, Self-differentiation Questionnaire, Empathy Questionnaire and Oxford's Happiness Questionnaire were used in the present study. The results of analyzing data using Pearson correlation coefficient and regression method showed there is a significant and multiple relationship between self-compassion, self-differentiation and empathy and happiness. So, self-compassion, self-differentiation and empathy are the predictors of happiness.

INTRODUCTION

Happiness is one of the most important mental needs. It has not only main effects on forming humans' personality and life, but it also is of great importance in mental health and coping with today's problems. A happy person is an efficient, innovative, productive and constructive person (Roteshtin, 2010). Researchers consider happiness as a positive mental state that is identified with high level of total satisfaction, positive emotion, lack of negative emotion and life satisfaction. Having positive emotions with others, purpose of life, personality growth and loving others are also of components of happiness (Cohen and Pressman, 2005). There is a strong relationship between happiness and mental health (Pornegar, 2994). Cozema and Stones (2000) believe that cognitive mental health is the same as happiness and life satisfaction. They also consider cognitive mental health as a balance between positive emotion and negative emotion. Happy individuals accompany positive events by valuing their skills and they do not accompany negative emotions (Conrad, Abrin and Hasting, 2011). Most of the time happiness is considered as a multi-dimensional structure. It has cognitive and emotional dimensions. The emotional dimension includes existence of positive emotions and lack of negative emotions. The cognitive dimension includes the total evaluation of the life that includes various fields. In other words, happiness is not just lack of diseases, but it includes higher levels that involve both emotion and cognition.

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Bagheri, Akbarizadeh and Hatami, 2010; Hoang and Hamphriz, 2012). In other words, happiness is a kind of individuals’ evaluation of life. Individuals’ evaluation of life can be in general or in a specific field such as marriage, occupation or evaluating emotions about recent events of life (Paeizi, Shahraray, Farzad and Safaee, 2007).

Cavamato (1999) believes that increasing happiness is directly associated with increasing health, appetite, sleep, memory, family relationship, friendship, family conditions and finally the mental health. Pornegar (2004) believes that there is a strong relationship between happiness and mental health. Alberkesten (2003) believes that experiencing stress reduces happiness. It means that the more the persons are stressful, the less the level of happiness is in them and their mental health is threatened. Roodrigers (2006) showed in a research that the explanation style, life satisfaction, happiness and hope are related to each other. The individuals that have positive explanation style, have more happiness, hope and life satisfaction. Self-compassion means a state of warmness and acceptance toward those aspects of individuals’ life that they do not like. It requires three main components. The first one is kindness to themselves versus self-judge, the second one is humane share versus isolation and the third one is mindfulness versus extreme assimilation (Nof, 2003). The combination of these related components is the determinant of individuals that are compassionate to themselves. Being kind with oneself means attending and understanding oneself instead of judging or criticizing of deficiencies and incompetence of oneself (Nof, 2009). Admission of the point that all people have defects, make mistakes and get involved of unhealthy behaviors, is the characteristic of humane share. Mindfulness versus incremental assimilation, leads to a balanced and clear awareness of the experiences of the present time and causes the painful aspects not be ignored and yet do not occupy the mind frequently. Individuals, while are experiencing pain and coping challenges of life, may evaluate themselves negatively and unconsciously instead of watching themselves consciously and look at their experiences from a higher view that causes realism and comprehensiveness in them (Nof, 2009). It does not mean not attending or not modifying the failure. When self with the believe that self-criticism can make the person change and improve, be judged because of the mistakes that were semi-difficult, its supportive functions conceals defects of the individual's self-awareness in order not to the dignity of the person be threatened (Saeedi, Ghorbani, Sarafraz and Sharifian, 2013). Research evidences have shown that individuals who behave themselves by compassion, have some characteristics such as optimism, curiosity, exploration, positive emotions and innovation that are presented as psychological abilities (Nof and Kirk Patrick, 2007). Also higher scores in Self-compassion Questionnaire is associated with lower anxiety and depression (Anjadani, Ghorbani, Farahani and Hatami, 2010).

Self-differentiation shows the amount of individual's ability in separating their intellectual and emotional processes of the others’. Differentiated individuals have a specific definition of themselves and their beliefs, they can choose their direction in life, do not lose their control in the extreme emotional situations that leads to involuntary behaviors and making failed decisions in most people, and make decisions considering reason and logic. In contrast, individuals that are not differentiated, do not have independent personal identity, in tensions and interpersonal issues act according to the emotional atmosphere that exists in the environment around them. So, they experience high chronic anxiety and are willing psychological problems and incidence of disease symptoms (Boen, 1978). Differentiation has two dimensions, intrapersonal and interpersonal. In intrapersonal dimension, differentiation means the individual's ability to differentiate emotional feelings of logical thinking and in interpersonal dimension, it means the ability to balance between being dependent and autonomated and keeping close relationship with others (Boen, 1978; Care and Boen, 1988). Based on Boen's theory, differentiation is composed of four parts that include:

Emotional reaction: Willing to autonomous emotional responses to environmental stimuli that may appear as indifference or extreme sensitivity.

The place of self: Having clear description of self, considering personal beliefs valuable and keeping them even facing the pressure of group.

Emotional cut: Feel threatened in close relationships, fear of intimacy and extreme vulnerability in close relationships that is characterized by emotional distancing of others.

Mixing with others: Emotional involvement with important persons of life and extreme identification with them. According to the theory of Boen, those who have high identification, have independent behaviors and show less emotional reactions in their relationships. They can keep the boarders of their identity and target-focused behavior while they have intimate relationship with others. This kind of individuals can differentiate their
emotion and thought and apply them according to the situation, control their anxiety and other emotions and have less problem in their relationships(Boen, 1978). They avoid mixing with others or emotional cut as an anxiety regulation mechanism and can keep the place of self and be faithful to their beliefs and values. Low differentiation is associated with decreasing autonomy and increasing emotional reaction. Individuals that have lower differentiation can control their emotions less and they face problems in their close relationships(Boen, 1978). Researches have shown that high level of differentiation has a positive relationship with psychological adjustment(Scorn et al., 2004) and better marital adjustment skill(Scorn and Dandy, 2004). A reverse significant relationship was seen between high levels of differentiation and adults’ insecurity dimensions(Scorn and Smith, 2003).

Empathy is individuals' fundamental capacity for regulating relationships, supporting common activities and group cohesiveness. This ability has a basic role in social life(Reef, Cattler and Fifering, 2010) and motivating force of social behaviors and those behaviors that bring about social cohesiveness(Julifi and Farington, 2004, Ref et al., 2010). Empathy is considered as an essential element for successful interpersonal functions(Sosa, McDonald, Rushby, Lee, Dynoska and James, 2010). Based on interpersonal views, incompatible interpersonal patterns are the result of individuals’ current interactions and social environment. Interpersonal relationships not only form social behaviors but also affect individuals’ feeling of themselves and of others(Elden and Taylor, 2004).

Empathy has a fundamental role in interpersonal commitments and social interactions(Fentlen et al., 2009), quality of family relationship(Lizarag et al., 2003), developing friendship and keeping it(Findlay, Girardy and Caplan, 2006), increasing the probability of help, altruism and developing and keeping interpersonal relationship(Anderson and Catner, 2002). Researches show deficit in empathy is associated with various psycho-neurological disorders such as antisocial behaviors, delinquency(Miller and Eistenberg, 1998) and schizophrenia(Mentag, Hynz, Conz and Galinat, 2007).

Since happiness is one of the most important issues of humans’ life nowadays, more researches in this field are needed. Based on that, the aim of the present study is identifying the correlation between self-compassion, self-differentiation and empathy and happiness in Azad University students of Ahvaz.

**HYPOTHESES OF THE RESEARCH**

The first hypothesis: There is a relationship between self-compassion and happiness.
The second hypothesis: There is a relationship between self-differentiation and happiness.
The third hypothesis: There is a relationship between empathy and happiness.
The fourth hypothesis: There is multiple relationships between self-compassion, self-differentiation and empathy and happiness.

**METHODS**

The present study is correlational. In this design just the amount of correlation and the relationship between variables is studied. The researcher aims to investigate the simple and multiple relationships of predictor variables( self-compassion, self-differentiation and empathy) with criteria variable( happiness) among Azad University students of Ahvaz. The implementation method was in form of a questionnaire.

**STATISTICAL POPULATION AND SAMPLE**

The studied population included all undergraduate university students of Azad University of Ahvaz(5356 male students and 4890 female students) in academic year of 2014-2015. The statistical sample of the research included 283 individuals that were selected randomly and using Morgan’s sample size determination.

**TOOLS**

*Oxford's Happiness Questionnaire:* To assess happiness, Hills and Argail’s revised questionnaire (2002) was used that has 29 items and is a four-grade responding scale(never=0, high=3). Hills and Argail(2002) reported reliability coefficient of 0.91 for questionnaire and internal correlation of 0.65 for the items. Hadinejad and
Zarei (2009) normed this questionnaire on high school students in Iran. They examined its content validity, convergent validity and divergent validity with five big personality factors, in addition they reported re-test reliability (with an interval of 4 weeks) of 0.78 (P<0.01) and Chronbach's alpha of 0.84. Sabet and Lotfi Kashani (2010) reported evidences of the reliability of the structure of this questionnaire and reported Chronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.88 for male participants and 0.91 for female participants. Chronbach's alpha of 0.82 was calculated in the present study.

Self-compassion Questionnaire: Self-compassion Questionnaire was made by Nof in 2003. It is a self-report scale and has 26 items. The responses are measured on a 5-degree range of Likert's scale from 1 (Nearly never) to 5 (Nearly always) and the sum of responses identifies the individual's total score in test. Researches have shown appropriate convergent validity, discriminant validity, internal consistency and re-test reliability (Nof, 2011).

This questionnaire was first translated and normed in Iran by Sadeghi, Khosravi and Yabande (2013). The reliability of this scale was reported 0.86 for the whole test using Chronbach's alpha. Also, Chronbach's alpha of 0.76 was reported for the whole scale. Chronbach's alpha of 0.82 was calculated in the present study.

Self-differentiation Questionnaire: This questionnaire was made by Scoron and Fridlander in 1988 based on Boen’s theory (Quoted by Skian, 2005). This questionnaire has 43 items and 4 subscales including emotional reactivity, the place of self, emotional escape and mixing with others. The questionnaire is graded from 1 to 6 based on Likert's scale. The way of grading in Self-differentiation Questionnaire is that the whole questionnaire is graded reversely except items number 4, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, 31, 37 and 43. The maximum of real score is 276. The lowest number of this questionnaire shows lower levels of differentiation. This questionnaire was conducted on 26 first grade high school students in Iran by Skian in 2005. Scoron and Fridlander reported Chronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.88 for this questionnaire and 0.63, 0.75, 0.60 and 0.70, respectively, for the subscales. Skian(2005) reported Chronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81 in his research. Shakibaee used re-test method and reported Chronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.77 for this questionnaire.

Empathy Scale: This scale is provided by Baron and Cohen. It has 40 items and assesses empathy. It assesses 3 factors: cognitive empathy(9 items), social skills(8 items) and emotional reactivity(9 items). Participants responded the items based on a four-degree scale from totally disagree to totally agree. Chronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.85 was reported for this scale( Kim and Lee, 2010). The Persian version of this scale was provided, by translating the original version, by Abolghasemi in 2010. Its Chronbach's alpha coefficient was reported in a range of 0.83 to 0.90 and its re-test coefficient( with an interval of 4 weeks) was reported in a range of 0.71 to 0.78. Content validity of this questionnaire was based on the comments of some psychometric specialists (Abolghasemi, 2010). In the present study, the reliability of the questionnaire by Chronbach’s alpha Was reported 0.91.

FINDINGS

The descriptive indices of the variables of the study, mean and standard deviation, can be seen in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>standard deviation</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-compassion</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>129.23</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self- differentiation</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>134.77</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>79.71</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To examine the relationships between research variables and to examine the first and the second assumptions, Pearson correlation was done and its results are shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion variable</th>
<th>Predictor variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Correlation coefficient</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>Self-compassion</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self- differentiation</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As it is seen in Table 2, there is a positive and significant relationship between self-compassion and happiness among university students (r=0.83, P<0.0001), so the first assumption is confirmed. In other words, if self-compassion increases among university students, happiness increases in them. Also, there is a positive and significant relationship between differentiation and happiness among university students (r=0.71, P<0.0001), so the second assumption is confirmed. In other words, if the differentiation increases in university students, happiness increases in them. Also, there is a positive and significant relationship between empathy and happiness among university students (r=0.75, P<0.0001), so the third assumption is confirmed. In other words, if empathy increases among university students, happiness increases in them. Also, there is a positive and significant relationship between self-compassion, self-differentiation and empathy and happiness among university students (r=0.696, P<0.0001), so the fourth assumption is confirmed.

Table 3. Multiple correlation coefficients of predictor variables with happiness among university students by Word method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variables</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>R² Adjusted</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-compassion</td>
<td>9.66</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>23.51</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-differentiation</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>0.631</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.631</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>12.93</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it can be seen in Table 3, the regression of predicting happiness in university students through self-compassion, self-differentiation and empathy is positive and significant (F=23.51, P<0.0001), so the fourth assumption is confirmed. Self-compassion, self-differentiation and empathy can predict positively and significantly the happiness among university students through Beta coefficient of 0.56, 0.631 and 0.71, respectively. The value of R² shows that 0.71 percent of the variance of happiness among university students is explained by the mentioned variables.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the relationship between self-compassion, self-differentiation and empathy and happiness among university students and the results below are obtained:

1- There is a relationship between self-compassion and happiness. Findings of the present study are consistent with the results of the studies that show existence of compassionate attitudes in individuals helps them to feel a connection between themselves and the others and through this feeling, cope with negative emotions (Nof and McGi, 2010). So, individuals that have higher self-compassion, while experiencing unpleasant events, especially those that involve social evaluation and comparison, experience fewer negative emotions because they consider that a human can make a mistake and it is true about all humans. Also, conscious self-compassion helps the individual to prevent forming pessimistic thoughts and obsessive ruminations (Nof, 2009) because the main part of negative emotions that individuals experience, is resulted from mental ruminations that are developed in them because of negative experiences (Besharat, Movahedi Nasab and Alibakhshi, 2010; Nolen Hoksema, 2000).

It can be stated that conscious compassion can reduce negative emotions in individuals because it decreases rumination in them. Actually, self-compassion acts as a fender against the effects of negative events. Individuals who have high self-compassion, accept the negative events of life more easily because they judge themselves with less rigor and their self-evaluation and reactions are more accurate and mostly based on their real performance. It is because self-judge in them is neither an exaggerated self-criticism nor is a self-defense inflation. Based on findings of Liri et al. (2007) self-compassion is associated with lower levels of negative emotions in 3 conditions including facing real negative events, remembering previous negative events and imagining imaginary negative events, and results into facilitating individuals' ability to cope with negative emotions. Individuals who have high self-compassion are more willing to accept their own role and responsibility in negative events, can relate negative events with what they are, ruminate the negative emotions less and as a result, facing their mistakes experience negative emotions less.

2- There is a relationship between self-differentiation and happiness. Also, there is a multiple significant relationship between self-compassion, self-differentiation and empathy and happiness. Therefore, the first, the second and the third assumptions of the study are confirmed. The results of the present study is consistent with the results of studies by Cavamato (1999), Pornegar (2004), Albercaston (2003) Roodrigz (2006) Scorn et al.
The individuals who have differentiation are able to identify their place and situation than the other and it causes high levels of differentiation, better psychological adjustment and acquisition of skills for solving problems (Scorn, 2000). It seems that individuals with differentiation are able to think realistically to different issues, adjust with vicissitudes of life and are largely more satisfied of their life in different situations. They are able to choose to behave according to their emotions or according to their thinking and they complain less facing problems and adversity of life. These individuals are able to solve problems so, they solve them with the aid of others, they control their emotions facing problems and seek logical solutions for their problems. It can be stated that individuals with differentiation are successful in solving their problems and are more satisfied and happy because they are more competent in their interpersonal and social relationships. Happy individuals solve the problems with high spirit and self-confidence and they are successful in that. These kinds of people concentrate on their abilities and competence instead of their weaknesses and thus are happier and more satisfied of their life.

3- Empathy is associated with happiness. It can be explained that having high empathy results into high emotional and cognitive interpersonal relationship and it is effective on developing positive and happy emotions. In fact, happy individuals have high empathy.

Happiness is always accompanied with satisfaction, optimism, hope and trust and hence has an important role in creating self-compassion and self-differentiation. Self-compassion develops background of developing self-confidence and increases the individuals' progress and success in various aspects of life and can develop happiness. Happiness determines the individuals' responsibility and try to be successful. It also, facing a failure, cause the individual to try for success with a strong determination and learning from failures, and develop relationship with the world around. Hardworking on its own causes individuals' progress and success in various aspects of life and can develop happiness. Happiness motivates the individuals to act and increases their awareness. It also facilitates their social relationships and develops the backgrounds of developing self-compassion and self-differentiation. Happy individuals have more spirit of cooperation and are more satisfied compared to the others. Happiness, as one of the fundamental and positive emotions, plays a decisive role in creating self-compassion and differentiation in individuals and society.
accelerating role in the process of expanding the society. Finally, it is recommended that the role of happiness in other emotional aspects be examined. Also, the backgrounds of creating and achieving happiness be examined. It is also recommended that similar researches be conducted on other samples with various demographic characteristics to increase the generalizability of the results.

REFERENCES

11. Findlay LC, Girardi A, Coplan RJ. Links between empathy, social behaviour, and social


