

## The Relationship between Self-compassion and Emotional Experiences

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### Abstract

There is lack of research on the topic of self-compassion in Mizo population, so this study was conducted to explore the relationship between self-compassion and emotional experiences and to see if gender difference exist in self-compassion and emotional experiences among Mizo population. The sample consists of 453 Mizo college students (213 male and 240 female) enrolling in private and government colleges in Aizawl, the capital city of Mizoram. In this study, emotional experiences refer to positive affect and negative affect. The result of the study indicates that self-compassion and emotional experiences are significantly related, self-compassion is positively related to positive affect and negatively related to negative affect. Gender difference is also observed in self-compassion and emotional experiences.

**Keywords:** *Self-compassion, Positive affect, Negative affect, Emotional experiences*

Emotion serves an important evolutionary function, to keep human safe from danger and improves relationship. Some emotions are considered to be positive while others are labeled as negative emotions. All emotions are important even the ones considered to be negative. For example fear can prevent individuals from harm. Emotions are considered appropriate or inappropriate depending on the situation. Human beings experience different kinds of emotion, the situation that we are in, the people that we meet and everything else can be a potential emotion elicitor. Thus, emotional experience results from anything that has an impact on the person and how these situations are comprehended by the person. Even though all emotions are important individuals who experience more positive emotion than negative emotion are said to be happy and have great emotional well-being.

In situations that are out of one's control it is easier to change one's own thoughts and feelings rather than trying to change situation and people. Individuals under the same situations may experience different emotion because the way individuals view the situation will determine the kind and intensity of emotional experiences. One psychological concept that influence the way individuals process their situation is self compassion. Self-compassion is even considered as an emotion regulatory system (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), it helps process unfavorable situations in a more positive light by providing an adaptive way of regulating emotions and generate pleasant affect by enabling the person to feel connected and soothed even in difficult times (Odou & Brinker, 2015).

### **Emotional experience**

Emotional experience refers to an individual's physiological arousal and cognitive evaluation of the situation. In this study, emotional experiences are categorized as positive and negative affect. Affect is commonly referred to as feelings (Russell, 2003) and is described as 'the feelings associated with emotional processes' (Panksepp, 2003). The experienced emotion may be expressed or suppressed. Both in western and eastern society women are considered to be more emotional than men. Women are sensitive to negative stimuli (Gohier et al., 2011) and they are often seen as more emotional than men when dealing with negative emotions (Gard & King, 2007). Numerous studies show that women experience negative emotions more frequent and more intense than men (Fernández et al., 2012; Bradley et al., 2001). Other studies come up with different conclusion stating that gender difference in emotional experience depends on the type of emotion for example, women compared to men show greater galvanic skin response and elevated heart rate when induced feeling of sadness and disgust and for men emotional reactions become more intense if the stimulus is threatening or erotic (e.g., Kret & De Gelder, 2012; Fernández et al., 2012; Karama et al., 2002). There is no consensus proof as to whether women are more emotional than men and many studies concluded that gender difference does not exist in emotional experience (Hillman et al., 2004; Codispoti et al., 2008; Carvalho et al., 2012).

### **Self-compassion**

Self-compassion is the ability to experience unfavorable life circumstances without being overwhelmed by the situation. This state of mind occurs through awareness of one's own thoughts and emotions, understanding the universality of suffering and taking balanced perspective of the situation without self-blame. Self-compassion is evident and important particularly in times of struggling and failure as it helps lessen the negative experiences and help people thrive. According to Neff, self-compassion is compassion turned inwards (Neff & Germer, 2007). According to Neff (2003b), self-compassion has three main components- self-kindnesses, common humanity and mindfulness. In the face of life's hardships, Self-kindness refers to being supportive and gentle with self instead of being overly criticizing the self, it is kindness turned inwards. Common humanity refers to realizing that failure and weakness are not unique but rather part of life, everyone has flaws and makes mistakes. Mindfulness refers to being aware of one's thoughts and emotions which help put things into perspective and taking balanced view of the situation.

### **Relationship between Self-compassion and emotional experiences**

Studies have consistently found negative association between self-compassion and psychopathology such as depression and anxiety (e.g., MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). The overall research findings on self-compassion point self-compassion as having relationship with psychological indicators of well-being. Majority of studies agree that self-compassion is positively related to positive psychological indicators such as secure attachment, emotional well-being, mindfulness, happiness, positive affect etc (Bluth & Blanton, 2014; Cunha et al., 2013; Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011; Neff et al., 2007) and negatively related with maladaptive outcomes such as negative affect, aggression etc (Barry et al., 2015; Bluth & Blanton, 2015; Zeller et al., 2014).

Self-compassion is linked to subjective well-being, both the cognitive and affective components. Several studies show that self-compassion and emotional (affective) experiences are correlated both in adult and adolescents and the effect size ranges from small to large (Bluth & Blanton, 2014; Bluth & Blanton, 2015; Zessin et al., 2015). Self-compassion lessens the effect of negative life events on emotional experiences, and individuals with higher self-compassion tend to view their problems from a balanced perspective which lessens the extreme reaction to negative events (Leary et al., 2007). This does not mean suppressing unwanted emotions. In fact, self-compassionate individuals are not likely to suppress their emotions (Neff, 2003a) or try to replace negative feelings with positive ones. Self-compassionate individuals accept their thoughts, emotions and situations without harsh self-judgment which generate positive emotions. Individuals with self-compassionate frame of mind also tend to experience more positive emotions than those who are self-critical (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011; Neff et al., 2007). Self-compassionate individuals are calm and experience less negative affect when encountering failure or embarrassing situation (Leary et al., 2007).

### **Gender difference**

Gender roles and societal norms expect females to be nurturing which includes prioritizing other needs before their own needs (Baker-Miller, 1986; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004). The quality of nurturance associated with female gender role may facilitate self-compassion. At the same time, self sacrifice which is also associated with female gender role (Baker-Miller 1986; Raffaelli & Ontai 2004; Ruble & Martin 1998) may hinder the development of self-compassion. Gender norms expect men to be strong, independent, emotionally less expressive especially relating to emotions such as affection and be pragmatic instead of ruminating over problems (Deaux & Kite 1993; Levant, 2011; Pederson & Vogel, 2007). Society is also more tolerant of women expressing emotion while men are given the role of protector which often times translate to men being less expressive.

Gender role expectation and societal norms dictate to certain degree human behavior and ways of thinking. Research on gender difference in self-compassion yielded inconsistent findings. Some studies found female as having slightly lower self-compassion than male (Neff, 2003a; Neff & Beretvas, 2013; Neff et al., 2005; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Neff & Vonk, 2009; Raes, 2010; Yarnell & Neff, 2013). At the same time there are also studies showing that gender difference does not exist in self compassion (Iskender, 2009; Neff et al., 2007; Neff & Pommier, 2013).

In terms of emotional experience, females experience emotion more intense than male both positive and negative emotions (Wood et al., 1989; Lee et al., 1991) and the gender difference are more pronounced in negative emotion. Research shows that female experiences more negative affect than male (Lucas & Gohm, 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema & Rusting, 2003). Some studies show that male experience greater positive emotion than female (Easterlin, 2003; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001) while other study shows no gender difference (e.g., Zuckerman et al., 2017).

### **The present study**

Every day people encounter different situation which can evoke whole range of emotions. The ways people choose to interpret situation determine their feelings. Emotional experiences are meaningful actions and directly or indirectly determine well-being. Self-compassionate people choose to see their situation in a positive light but at the same time understand and embrace their feelings. Self-compassion enables people to understand innate human nature which is ‘men are not without faults and setbacks are part of life’. Self-compassion is believed to help interpret unfavorable situation in a positive light and generate positive emotions even at difficult times. The appropriateness of emotional experience (intensity and valence) depends on the situation but generally people strive for happiness and self-compassion is a concept that will help understand life circumstances which in turn results in positive emotion. The topic of self-compassion is rarely explored among Mizo population despite its benefit to mental health shown by studies conducted in other parts of the world. Self-compassion is a skill that can be taught (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff & Germer, 2012) and having self-compassionate mind set can generate positive affect.

Given the potential benefit of self-compassion based on the theory and research conducted in the field of emotion and self-compassion the following objectives were framed:

O1. To determine the relationship between self-compassion and emotional experiences

O2. To determine if gender difference exists in self-compassion and emotional experiences

The hypotheses for the study were:

H1. There will be a significant positive relationship between self-compassion and positive emotional experience (positive affect)

H2. There will be a significant negative relationship between self-compassion & negative emotional experience (negative affect)

H3. Male and female will be significantly different in self-compassion and emotional experiences

H4. Male and female will be significantly different in emotional experiences

### **Method**

Random sampling method was used to select participants for the study. 450 Mizo college students (213 male and 240 female) enrolling in private and government colleges in Aizawl city participated in the study. The average age of the participants was 20.5 years. Majority of the participants (67.99 %) live with both biological parents and the rest (32.01 %) lives with only one biological parent or lives in step family or with their other relatives. Incentive was not given and only those who agreed to participate were included in the study. Written consent was taken from all the participants and confidentiality was assured. This research is conducted to fulfill P.hd degree in the field of psychology.

To measure self-compassion and emotional experiences the following two scales were used.

1. **Sussex Oxford Compassion Scale for Self (SOCS-S):** Self-compassion was measured using SOCS-S developed by (Gu et al., 2019). This scale consists of 20 items having five-point likert-type scale ranging from 1 “Not at all true” to 5 “Always true”. This scale has five subscales, four items in each subscale. The subscales are – 1) recognition of suffering in self (SOCS- RS) 2) understanding the universality of suffering (SOCS- UU), 3)feeling for self when suffering(SOCS- FP), 4)tolerating uncomfortable feelings(SOCS- TU), and 5) acting or being motivated to act to alleviate one’s own suffering(SOCS- AM). In this study the reliability of the scale and subscales are: for total SOCS-S = 0.85, SOCS-RS = 0.68, SOCS-UU = 0.78, SOCS-FP = 0.57, SOCS-TU = 0.54, SOCS-AM = 0.72.
2. **Positive and negative affect (PANAS):** Emotional experience was measured using PANAS developed by Watson and colleagues (Watson et al., 1988). This scale measures the extent to

which individuals experience positive and negative affect during the past week. This scale consists of 20 items, 10 items measuring positive affect and 10 items measuring negative affect. The scale is a four-point likert type scale ranging from 1 “Very slightly or Not at all” to 4 “Most of the time”. The reliability of the scales in this study are: for positive affect =0.80, for negative affect = 0.76.

### Results

Data was analyzed using SPSS. With reference to central limit theorem the score distribution was considered normal since the sample is large enough. For this study skewness and kurtosis below 1 was considered to be normal. One subscale of self-compassion – Understanding Universality of Suffering was skewed and was transformed using square root transformation. Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

To test hypotheses 1 & 2 Pearson’s coefficient correlation was employed

Pearson’s correlation analysis was employed to analyze the relationship between, SC and emotional experiences (both positive & negative affect) (Table 2). The result showed that Self-compassion total score was significantly and positively correlated with Positive affect ( $r=.27, p<.01$ ) and negatively correlated with Negative affect ( $r= -.15, p<.01$ )

The relationship between the components of Self compassion with Affect is given below:

Recognizing suffering had a significant positive relationship with positive affect ( $r=.14, p<.01$ ). Recognizing suffering also had positive relationship with negative affect but the relationship was not statistically significant.

Understanding the universality of suffering had a significant positive correlation with positive affect ( $r=.12, p<.01$ ) and significant negative correlation with negative affect ( $r= -.11, p<.01$ ).

Feeling for the person suffering had a significant positive correlation with positive affect ( $r=.27, p<.01$ ) and significant correlation with negative affect( $r= -.15, p<.01$ )

Tolerating uncomfortable feelings had a significant positive correlation with positive affect( $r=.21, p<.01$ ) and significant correlation with negative affect( $r= -.17, p<.01$ )

Acting or being motivated to act to alleviate suffering had a significant positive correlation with positive affect( $r=.25, p<.01$ ) and significant correlation with negative affect( $r= -.17, p<.01$ )

The results support Hypotheses 1 & 2 given that total self-compassion score was positively related to positive affect and negatively related to negative affect. The components of self-compassion also revealed the same results except for recognizing suffering which had positive relationship with negative affect contrary to hypothesis. However the relationship was not significant.

To test Hypotheses 3 & 4 t-test was employed

The homogeneity of variance was checked using Leven’s test of equality of variance (Table 3) which guarantee the use of parametric test. To test gender difference in self-compassion and emotional experiences independent t-test was employed (Table 3). Gender difference was observed on all the

components of self-compassion and emotional experiences (both positive and negative affect). Gender difference was not observed in total Self-compassion score.

Female scored significantly higher than male on Recognizing suffering (Male M= 13.30, SD= 3.16; Female M= 14.05, SD= 3.03) and Understanding the universality of suffering (Male M=3.05, SD= .75; Female M= 3.20, SD=.71). Male scored significantly higher than female on Feeling for the person suffering (Male M=13.16, SD=2.63; Female M=12.53, SD=2.76), Tolerating uncomfortable feeling (Male M=12.73, SD=2.66; Female M=11.91, SD=2.80) and Acting or being motivated to act to alleviate suffering (Male M=13.93, SD=2.99; Female M=13.14, SD=3.38). Gender difference was not observed on total Self compassion score.

Male scored significantly higher than female on positive affect (Male M=31.07, SD=7.04; Female M=28.31, SD=6.54) and the reverse is seen in negative affect, female scoring higher than male (Male M=24.50, SD=6.68; Female M=27.04, SD=6.71).

Male and female did not differ in total self-compassion score which was against hypothesis 3 but gender difference was observed on all the components of self-compassion which support hypothesis 3.

Gender difference was observed in emotional experiences, thus supporting hypothesis 4.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics									
	2 gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Skewness	Std error	Kurtosis	Std error
SOCS_TT	male	213	69.77	11.04	.76	-.289	.167	.896	.332
	female	240	68.89	10.65	.69	-.359	.157	.263	.313
	Total	453	69.31	10.83	.51	-.318	.115	.568	.229
SOCS_RS	male	213	13.30	3.16	.22	.023	.167	-.312	.332
	female	240	14.05	3.03	.19	.004	.157	-.367	.313
	Total	453	13.70	3.11	.15	-.002	.115	-.339	.229
SOCS_UU	male	213	3.05	.75	.05	-.348	.167	.717	.332
	female	240	3.20	.72	.05	-.615	.157	.54	.313
	Total	453	3.13	.73	.03	-.485	.115	-.663	.229
SOCS_FP	male	213	13.16	2.63	.18	-.153	.167	.047	.332
	female	240	12.53	2.76	.18	-.216	.157	.156	.313
	Total	453	12.83	2.72	.13	-0.201	.115	.120	.229
SOCS_TU	male	213	12.73	2.66	.18	-.042	.167	.501	.332
	female	240	11.91	2.80	.18	-.107	.157	.293	.313
	Total	453	12.30	2.76	.13	-0.098	.115	.377	.229
	male	213	13.93	2.99	.20	-.272	.167	.317	.332

SOCS_AM	female	240	13.14	3.38	.22	-.170	.157	-.367	.313
	Total	453	13.51	3.23	.15	-0.249	.115	-.099	.229
P_PANAS	male	213	31.07	7.04	.48	.007	.167	-.333	.332
	female	240	28.31	6.54	.42	.020	.157	-.457	.313
	Total	453	29.61	6.91	.32	0.056	.115	-.359	.229
N_PANAS	male	213	24.50	6.68	.46	.313	.167	-.033	.332
	female	240	27.04	6.71	.43	.290	.157	.050	.313
	Total	453	25.85	6.81	.32	0.286	.115	-.010	.229

	SOCS_ TT	SOCS_ RS	SOCS_ UU	SOCS_ FP	SOCS_ TU	SOCS_ AM	P_PAN AS	N_PAN AS
SOCS_TT	1	.702**	.668**	.747**	.742**	.774**	.271**	-.146**
SOCS_RS	.702**	1	.490**	.332**	.366**	.336**	.136**	.037
SOCS_UU	.668**	.490**	1	.332**	.261**	.336**	.123**	-.109*
SOCS_FP	.747**	.332**	.332**	1	.556**	.552**	.274**	-.150**
SOCS_TU	.742**	.366**	.261**	.556**	1	.562**	.206**	-.170**
SOCS_AM	.774**	.336**	.336**	.552**	.562**	1	.255**	-.166**
P_PANAS	.271**	.136**	.123**	.274**	.206**	.255**	1	-.043
N_PANAS	-.146**	.037	-.109*	-.150**	-.170**	-.166**	-.043	1

\*= p<.05; \*\*= p<.01



**Tale 3. Independent Samples Test**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
								Lower	Upper	
SOCS_TT		.017	.898	.866	451	.387	.883	1.020	-1.122	2.888
SOCS_RS		.243	.622	-2.573	451	.010	-.750	.291	-1.322	-.177
SOCS_UU		.792	.374	-2.172	451	.030	-.149	.069	-.285	-.014
SOCS_FP		.114	.736	2.462	451	.014	.626	.254	.126	1.126
SOCS_TU		.179	.672	3.168	451	.002	.815	.257	.310	1.321
SOCS_AM		4.392	.037	2.624	451	.009	.792	.302	.199	1.385
P_PANAS		.704	.402	4.319	451	.000	2.758	.639	1.503	4.013
N_PANAS		.000	.982	-4.034	451	.000	-2.544	.631	-3.783	-1.305

p<.05; p<.01

### Discussion

The main aim of the study is to explore the relationship between self-compassion and emotional experiences i.e., the experience of positive affect and negative affect among Mizo college students. Theories and research findings stated that self-compassion has been said to promote well-being. This study also demonstrates that self-compassion is positively related to experiencing positive affect and negatively related to experiencing negative affect. Those with higher self-compassion experience more positive affect and lesser negative affect. These findings are in line with studies done in other parts of the world where self-compassion is positively related to emotional well-being, increase experience of positive affect (Bluth & Blanton, 2014; Cunha et al., 2013a) and decrease experience of negative affect (Bluth & Blanton, 2015; Zeller et al., 2014).

Individuals who have the skills to be aware of their situations and understand their feelings without being overwhelmed by it experience greater positive affect and lesser negative affect. This study shows that the components of self-compassion such as understanding the universality of suffering, feeling for the person suffering which means being gentle and kind to self relate to greater positive affect and lesser negative affect. In this study, recognizing one owns suffering is related to positive affect but shows no relationship with negative affect. In addition, the ability to tolerate uncomfortable feelings and acting or being motivated to alleviate the suffering relate to experiencing more positive affect and less negative affect. Self-compassion helps individuals remain calm when encountering unfavorable circumstances and lessens the negative emotional experiences (Leary et al., 2007) which may explain why self-compassion and positive affect are positively related and the

inverse relationship is observed between self-compassion and negative affect. Also, self-compassion lessens the effect of negative life events on emotional experiences (Leary et al., 2007) which makes self-compassionate individuals resilient to setbacks.

Gender difference is not observed on total self-compassion scores. However, gender difference is observed on all the components of self-compassion. Females have higher scores on recognizing suffering and understanding the universality of suffering compared to male. Females are sensitive to negative stimuli (Gohier et al., 2013) which seem to aid their ability to recognize their own suffering. Males compared to females have higher scores on feeling for the person suffering, tolerating uncomfortable feelings and acting/motivated to alleviate suffering. There are also studies showing that males are slightly higher on self-compassion than females (Neff & Beretvas, 2013; Raes, 2010; Yarnell & Neff, 2013). Self-sacrifice a trait believed to be associated with gender role may hinder the development of self-compassion in females (Baker-Miller 1986; Raffaelli & Ontai 2004; Ruble and Martin 1998). Gender roles expect men to be strong and a practical problem solver which may explain why males can tolerate uncomfortable feelings more than females and engaged in actions taken to reduce the suffering.

Gender difference is also observed on emotional experiences with female scoring higher on negative affect and male scoring higher on positive affect. This finding is consistent with other findings where males experience more positive emotions and females are more vulnerable to experiencing negative emotions (Lucas & Gohm, 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema & Rusting, 2003; Easterlin, 2003; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001). Since women are considered to be more sensitive to negative stimulus (Gard & King, 2007) and experience the negative emotion more intense than male (Fernández et al., 2012; Bradley et al., 2001), they are vulnerable to experiencing negative emotions which may translate to female experiencing more negative affect than male.

## **Conclusion**

The present study represents how self-compassion relates to emotional experiences among Mizo College students. The finding of this study shows that like most other studies, Mizo college students having higher self-compassion also experience more positive affect and lesser negative affect. Male and female did not differ on the total self-compassion score but interestingly they differ on all the components of self-compassion. For this sample females are greater at recognizing the signs of their own suffering and have greater understanding of the universality of suffering while males are greater at showing self-kindness, tolerating uncomfortable feelings and acting to alleviate suffering. With regards to emotional experiences, males experience more positive affect and lesser negative affect than females.

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