Factor Analysis of Intimate Relationship Satisfaction: Effects of Self-esteem and Self-Compassion on Emotion Regulation

Ziming Shen *

Faculty of Science and Technology, Beijing Normal University - Hong Kong Baptist University United International University

* Corresponding Author Email: s230016045@mail.uic.edu.cn

Abstract. Intimate relationship satisfaction reflects an individual's perception of their current intimate relationship and assesses the extent of their attachment experiences. High levels of intimate relationships are crucial for maintaining individual psychological health, inspiring positive behaviors, and enhancing overall happiness in life. One fundamental element of adult attachment involves the management of emotional discomfort within close and romantic interpersonal connections, which can manifest in various forms, including cognitive reappraisal, expression suppression, attention diversion, and emotional venting. Therefore, to study the factors that enhance satisfaction in intimate relationships, psychologists need to investigate the factors that influence people's choice of emotion regulation strategies. Self-esteem (SE) and self-compassion (SC), as core components of the ego structure, can influence an individual's decision-making when faced with difficult emotions (sadness, anger, anxiety). Thus, this article proposes a hypothesis that the levels of SC and SE will affect individuals' tendency towards emotional regulation. In this article, a review analysis will be conducted to support the existence of this relationship and to indicate that emotional regulation behaviors mediated by high levels of SC and SE are beneficial for improving intimate relationship satisfaction. The study is expected to provide theoretical guidance for interventions and practices aimed at helping people better understand the key factors that influence intimate relationship satisfaction and enhancing emotional regulation skills to improve the quality of intimate relationships.

Keywords: Intimate relationship, satisfaction, Self-esteem and Self-Compassion, Emotion Regulation

1. Introduction

This section will give a brief introduction to independent variables and dependent variables. Initially, the first part of the introduction illustrates independent variables self-esteem (SE), self-compassion (SC). Additionally, the dependent variable of emotional regulation and its various strategies will be discussed to explain how it affects intimate relationship satisfaction.

1.1. Self-esteem and self-compassion

SE is an individual's subjective evaluation of their own worth, encompassing their beliefs and emotional state. Smith and Mackie provided additional clarification on this idea by asserting that our perception of ourselves is reflected in our self-concept; meanwhile, SE refers to the extent to which we hold positive or negative opinions about ourselves [1]. In humanistic psychology, for example, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs and Carl Ransom Rogers' self-theory, SE is considered as a crucial component in illustrating the tendency toward self-growth and self-actualization [2, 3]. Abraham Maslow identified two different forms of "esteem": the need for respect from others, and the need for SE. This SE theory that views SE as a motivator explores the reasons why humans are motivated to maintain high SE [2]. According to the sociometer theory, it is crucial to acknowledge that SE has evolved as a mechanism for evaluating one's social status and level of acceptance within a given social group [4].

Self-compassion (SC) refers to the act of demonstrating kindness and empathy towards oneself when confronted with inadequacies, failures, or various forms of adverse situation. Kristin Neff's concept of SC is a dynamic construct that encompasses three primary components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness [5, 6]. The first component, self-kindness entails treating oneself

with kindness and warmth rather than engaging in harsh self-judged or criticism when an individual experiences pain or personal shortcomings [5-9]. The second component, common humanity involves rationalizing personal failures by attributing them to the common human experience. This method emphasizes a sense of connection, making individuals aware that they are not isolated [5-9]. Thirdly, by balancing one's negative emotions, mindfulness guides people to observe their own emotions in a non-judgmental and accepting state without over-identification [5-9]. Thus, SC is capable of preventing people from being overwhelmed by stress and helping them maintain a stable mental state [6, 10, 11].

1.2. Strategies and effect of emotional regulation

Defining the emotional responses that individuals employ to adapt to social demands, in the last century, James Gross delineated the emotional regulation process into five stages: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation to study regulation strategies [12, 13]. The most prevalent emotion regulation strategies are cognitive emotion regulation strategies which occur in the third stage and are categorized into adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies (ACERS) and maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies (MCERS).

Research indicates that ACERS are more effective in managing individuals' negative emotions, such as anger, stress, and anxiety. MCERS are effective in the short term, but in the long-term studies have found a correlation between their use and the development of emotional problems and psychological disorders in the future. Specifically, the tendency to employ MCERS can significantly predict depression [12, 14]. Furthermore, these strategies not only impact individuals' emotional experiences but also influence their behaviors in social interpersonal relationships, including intimate relationships [15]. Therefore, when conducting an analysis of factors that affect satisfaction in intimate relationships, an individual's propensity to utilize emotional regulation strategies is considered a fundamental factor.

2. Analysis

In this section, the present study will examine the impact of SE on regulating emotions, explore the influence of SC on emotion regulation, and investigate the combined effects of their operation.

2.1. Effects of self-esteem on emotion regulation

This paper focuses on trait SE, which is considered a durable and relatively stable personality trait. Different levels of SE can lead to differences in individuals' interpersonal perceptions and self-evaluations [6, 14]. In fact, having an impact on interpersonal perception and behavior, SE affects the emotional regulation strategies people adopt when facing challenges and consequently impacts the formation of intimate relationships. According to the experimental report by Kamalinasab and Mohammadkhani, SE has a moderate positive correlation with the adoption of ACERS, which can significantly predict the tendency of individuals to utilize these strategies [14]. To be specific, individuals with high SE levels possess confidence in their own worth and are more assured that others care about them. Using more direct adaptive strategies, they tend to in interpersonal relationships. Conversely, individuals with low SE levels exhibit diminished confidence in their self-worth and are more preoccupied with the possibility of rejection and disgust from others. These individuals are more likely to utilize indirect strategies to evade rejection in their interpersonal relationships [4].

Kamalinasab and Mohammadkhani conducted an experiment in 2016 using a convenience sampling method to select 146 college students for a survey. They employed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to measure SE levels and the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire to assess individual preferences for ACERS and MCERS. The study used statistical methods such as Pearson correlation coefficients, bivariate regression analysis, and multivariate regression analysis to analyze

the data. The Pearson correlation coefficients between SE and the five types of ACERS—acceptance, positive refocusing, refocusing on planning, positive reappraisal, and putting into perspective—are -0.172, 0.424, 0.442, 0.483, and 0.264, respectively. The Pearson correlation coefficients between SE and the four types of MCERS—self-blame, rumination, catastrophizing, and blaming others—are -0.133, -0.281, -0.320, and -0.078, respectively. These results indicate that SE is positively related to ACERS and negatively related to MCERS [14]

This result is able to confirm the explanation provided in the previous paragraph that SE can influence individuals' emotional regulation strategies when facing suffering. Compared to studies on the same theme, the promotion of SE on ACERS in Kamalinasab and Mohammadkhani's experiment is more pronounced in the areas of refocusing on planning, positive reappraisal, and putting into perspective, which is inconsistent with previous experiments. This deviation may be attributed to convenience sampling, as the college students selected may be more susceptible to the influence of SE due to shared experiences and cultural factors. Additionally, the use of self-report methods, combined with a toward narcissism associated with high SE, may drive individuals to misrepresent their feelings in self-reports [5, 6], potentially introducing bias into the data collected in this experiment. Furthermore, the relatively small sample size of the experiment has a negative impact on its validity and measurement reliability, making it challenging to generalize the findings to broader contexts.

However, when combined with other relevant studies, these reports consistently indicate that SE can positively predict an individual's use of ACERS [5, 6]. Although the effect is not as significant as SC [6, 14], SE still plays an important role in positive emotion regulation. Low SE is often associated with trait anxiety, and individuals with low SE are more likely to employ MCERS, including expressive suppression strategies, which can lead to more persistent trait anxiety. In contrast, individuals with high SE mediated by ACERS, tend to experience more positive emotions, fewer negative emotions, and better cognitive abilities [12]. A high level of SE facilitates the establishment of secure attachments, thereby promoting the development of intimate relationships.

2.2. Effects of self-compassion on emotion regulation

The same experiments which were studying the effect of SE on emotional regulation, were conducted by Kamalinasab and Mohammadkhani in 2016 to research the effect of SC on emotional regulation [14]. Students were asked to complete surveys to assess their level of SC using the Self-Compassion Scale, and the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire to evaluate their preference of ACERS as well as MCERS. Pearson correlation coefficient, bivariate regression analysis, and multivariate regression analysis were used to analyze the data. Pearson correlation coefficients between SC and the five types of ACERS—acceptance, positive refocusing, refocus on planning, positive reappraisal, and putting into perspective—are -0.202, 0.426, 0397,0.392, and 0.221, respectively [14]. The Pearson correlation coefficients between SC and four kinds of MCERS— Self-blame, Rumination, Catastrophizing, and Blaming others—are -0.310, -0.355, -0.491, and -0.190, respectively [14]. These findings indicate a positive correlation between SC and ACERS, as well as a negative correlation between SC and MCERS. Additionally, in comparison to SE, SC exhibited stronger predictive capabilities for emotion regulation strategies.

Scoglio et al. also indicated a close relationship between SC and emotion regulation [11]. In both clinical and community samples, SC was found to be significantly negatively correlated with difficulties in emotion regulation and positively correlated with the ACERS [11]. For individuals who have experienced trauma, compassion can help reduce feelings of shame and guilt—negative emotions that often exacerbate difficulties in emotion regulation [11]. Through SC, individuals can adopt a more tolerant and understanding attitude toward their traumatic experiences, thereby actively regulating their emotions. Inwood and Ferrari analyzed 1,140 records using the Self-Compassion Scale and the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Skills Scale, among others [10]. According to their study, the regulation of emotions acts as an intermediary between SC and mental well-being [10]. Structural equation modeling validated that SC influences emotion regulation by altering cognitive

evaluations and enhancing acceptance abilities, which in turn reduces symptoms of psychological distress and enhances psychological resilience.

In line with previous findings by Leary and Neff, the results of these experiments' confirm the hypothesis that SC can promote more ACERS regulation of emotions [5, 6]. Neff and Beretvas attributed the role of SC in promoting psychological well-being to the emotional resilience and balance it provides, which enables individuals to engage in positive emotion regulation [8]. Driven by self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification, individuals with low SC tend to be more indifferent toward themselves and often resort to indirect strategies and MCERS to cope with the pain, stress, and anxiety they face [10, 14]. On contrary, individuals with high SC are more likely to employ ACERS, which are long-term effective strategies, to mitigate the negative impact of stressful situations and enhance their personal mental health [10]. Therefore, individuals with elevated levels of SC are more likely to experience satisfaction in terms of happiness, belonging, and comfort [10, 14]. Furthermore, they tend to extend this satisfaction from the individual level to interpersonal and intimate relationships, allowing them to express greater acceptance of romantic relationships [8].

2.3. Synergistic effects of self-esteem and self-compassion on emotion regulation

Kamalinasab and Mohammadkhani's experiment examined the roles of SE and SC in regulating emotions separately. However, it overlooked the potential for these two constructs to collaborate in influencing people's choices of emotional regulation strategies. Both SE and SC are both important components of self-concept, and statistical evidence indicates a strong correlation between the two, which can also be considered as conceptual overlap [7, 16]. Miyagawa explicitly stated that the collaboration between SC and SE is essential for promoting positive functioning at both individual and interpersonal levels, rather than operating independently [7]. This experiment, where emotional regulation is explained as a key component of the intra-functioning components, is capable of reflecting the role of SE and SC in guiding positive emotional management.

Miyagawa, Y., Kanemasa, Y., and Taniguchi, J. conducted a survey of 3,576 online participants using a series of questionnaires [7]. The study employed the Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form, the Two-Item Self-Esteem Scale, the Basic Need Satisfaction in Life Scale, and the UCLA Loneliness Scale Ostracism Short Scale to assess individual levels of SC, SE, needs satisfaction, loneliness, and ostracized experiences respectively [7]. Besides, their experiment applied scales from previous studies to evaluate negativity transformation and openness to self-change. Then, using Latent Profile Analysis, the researchers determined the configuration patterns of SC and SE within individuals and found that individuals could be divided into three distinct style profiles, demonstrating that SC and SE operate synergistically. This study focuses on dimensions that assess essential abilities individuals require in their social lives. Negativity transformation and openness to self-change reflect an individual's ability to cope with negative events, while the need for satisfaction reflects the extent to which an individual meets their psychological needs. Loneliness and ostracized experiences illustrate an individual's responses to interpersonal relationships [7]. Employing the Bolck-Croon-Hagenaars method for data analysis, the researchers found that individuals exhibiting high levels of compassion and SE styles performed better in managing negative events, fulfilling basic psychological needs, and navigating interpersonal relationships [7].

The experimental data provides a compelling explanation for the existence of synergy and indicates that the constructs of SE and SC interact through social connectedness to form a dynamic network [7, 16]. SE and SC not only directly guide positive intra- and interpersonal functions but also influence them collectively. This experiment, similar to the work of Kamalinasab and Mohammadkhani, also highlighted the significant superiority of SC in predicting positive psychological outcomes over SE. Kamalinasab, Mohammadkhani, Neff, and Beretvas attributed this advantage to SC being more focused on one's own needs and less on evaluating one's self-worth, thus avoiding negative outcomes, like anger, aggression, jealousy, and defensive [8, 14]. On the other hand, SE which focuses on the evaluation of one's own worth and is influenced by external demands, weakens the expressions of ACERS and shifts ACERS toward the indirect MCERS. However,

Miyagawa et al. believed that SE is the foundation of SC [7] and this view was confirmed in the report of Holas et al., which stated that SC mediates the relationship between SE and social perception [16]. This finding elucidates that SE and SC are not distinct self-concepts and explains their independent yet unified effects on emotional adjustment.

3. Discussion

This study conducts a comprehensive review of relevant literature and an analysis of experiments to thoroughly explore the impact of SC and SE on emotional regulation in intimate relationships. These studies show that both SE and SC are positively correlated with ACERS and negatively correlated with MCERS. This is because SE fosters a positive self-evaluation, while SC alleviates anxiety related to self-assessment, thereby helping individuals maintain emotional stability and adopt direct strategies for emotional regulation [4, 8]. The experiments also pointed out that SC is more focused on one's own needs, providing an advantage in predicting positive psychological outcomes [5, 10, 14], such as eliminating social anxiety [16]. Subsequent studies have also indicated that persons with high levels of empathy and SC styles perform better in coping with negative events, fulfilling basic psychological needs, and handling interpersonal relationships. Thus, SE and SC interact within individuals through social connectedness to form an interactive network that can jointly promote individual emotional regulation [7, 16].

These findings provide compelling evidence and guidance for psychological interventions, mental health promotion, relationship building, and the enhancement of interpersonal relationships. Based on this conclusion, specific intervention plans can be designed for individuals with low SE and SC levels to improve their emotion regulation skills. For instance, cognitive behavioral therapy can be employed to assist individuals in recognizing and altering negative self-evaluation patterns and enhancing their SE levels. Simultaneously, individuals can be encouraged to cultivate SC and learn to offer themselves warmth and understanding when facing difficulties. Specifically, Neff referenced Kabat-Zinn’s mindfulness-based stress-reduction programs in his review, which are innovative approaches to treating mental illness that emerged from research on SC in the 1990s [5]. By implementing mental health education and training activities, individuals are capable of developing positive mindfulness, self-awareness, emotional regulation skills, and enhancing psychological resilience [8], and reducing the risk of mental health problem, and promoting overall mental health.

In the realm of intimate relationships, this conclusion offers theoretical support for relationship counseling. Both partners in couples and other intimate relationships can better cope with relationship conflicts and stress by enhancing their SE and SC [8]. By helping individuals comprehend the impact of SE and SC on interpersonal relationships and encouraging the use of the ACERS framework in interpersonal interactions can enhance their interpersonal attraction and communication skills, foster a robust social support network, and ultimately promote positive outcomes for their mental health.

This article has several limitations. The majority of the analysis employs theory-driven approaches that focus on the research object and attempt to analyze the underlying mechanisms. Due to a lack of data support, these analyses can only indirectly prove the validity and direction of the model of the influence of SE and SC on emotional regulation in close relationships, but they cannot ascertain the specific strength of this influence. Additionally, when conducting data-driven analysis by using existing data, the limitations of the original experiments also play a significant role. The experiments conducted by Kamalinasab, Mohammadkhani, and Miyagawa et al. all used convenience sampling and self-report methods. The sample sizes obtained through convenience sampling are often less representative, which limits the generalizability of the research conclusions.The subjectivity inherent in individual responses and a lack of self-awareness can introduce substantial bias in self-report methods. For instance, individuals exhibiting elevated levels of SE may be prone to narcissistic tendencies, leading to inaccuracies in self-reporting [5, 6]. Moreover, most studies employed cross-sectional designs, which did not clearly establish causality between self-concepts and emotion regulation.

Future research can be conducted in the following directions. First, more scientific and rigorous sampling methods should be adopted to increase the sample size, thereby enhancing the generalizability and reliability of the research findings. Subsequent experiments can use mediation analysis methods to quantify the mediating role of emotional regulation between self-concept and satisfaction with intimate relationships. Additionally, further in-depth research can explore the synergistic mechanisms between SE and SC, as well as how these constructs jointly influence emotional regulation strategies and satisfaction with intimate relationships. It is crucial to take into account that individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds possess varying values, social norms, and cognitive patterns, which can impact their self-perception, understanding of emotions, and choice of coping strategies, ultimately affecting the expression of SE and SC in emotional regulation [10]. Future research is anticipated to examine whether SE and SC exert different effects on emotional regulation and satisfaction with intimate relationships across various cultural backgrounds and contexts, thereby providing more targeted theoretical support and practical guidance for enhancing satisfaction in intimate relationships. Moreover, longitudinal studies are necessary to further validate the causal relationships between SE & SC and emotion regulation [10,11].

4. Conclusion

This paper explores the influence of SE and SC on emotional regulation styles in intimate relationships and their synergistic mechanisms. The conclusions drawn from a review method is that both SE and SC are positively correlated with ACERS and negatively correlated with MCERS, and they synergistically promote emotional regulation. Individuals with high SE and SC styles tend to perform better in personal emotional regulation and in their intimate relationships. Based on these findings, psychologists can take SE and SC as focal points to design targeted intervention programs and provide psychological support aimed at helping individuals improve their interpersonal relationships. This paper offers a new perspective on how self-concept affects individual behaviors and psychological states, encouraging researchers to further investigate the central role of SE and SC within the self-concept system and their interactions with other psychological factors. This exploration will be of benefit to the ongoing refinement of self-concept theory. By incorporating SE and SC into the research framework of emotional regulation, this paper reviews empirical evidence to construct a more comprehensive and integrated theoretical model of emotional regulation, thereby fostering the integration and innovation of theories within the field of emotional regulation.

References

[1] E. R. Smith, & D. M. Mackie (2007) Social Psychology (3rd ed.) Psychology Press, Hove.

[2] A. H. Maslow (1970) Motivation and Personality (2nd ed.) New York: Harper & Row.

[3] C. R. Rogers (1959) A Theory of Therapy, Personality, and Interpersonal Relationships: As Developed in the Client-Centered Framework. In S. Koch (Ed.), Psychology: A Study of a Science. Formulations of the Person and the Social Context (Vol. 3, pp. 184-256) New York: McGraw Hill.

[4] M. R. Leary (2000) The nature and function of self-esteem: Sociometer theory. Adv. Exp. Soc. Psychol., 32.

[5] K. Neff (2003) Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. Self Identity, **2** (2), 85-101.

[6] M. R. Leary, E. B. Tate, C. E. Adams, A. Batts Allen, & J. Hancock (2007) Self-compassion and reactions to unpleasant self-relevant events: The implications of treating oneself kindly. J. Pers. Soc. Psychol., **92** (5), 887-904.

[7] Y. Miyagawa, Y. Kanemasa, & J. Taniguchi (2024) A compassionate and worthy self: latent profiles of self-compassion and self-esteem in relation to intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning. Curr. Psychol., **43** (16), 14259-14272.

[8] K. D. Neff, & S. N. Beretvas (2013) The role of self-compassion in romantic relationships. Self Identity, **12** (1), 78-98.

[9] M. Wei, K. Y. H. Liao, T. Y. Ku, & P. A. Shaffer (2011) Attachment, self-compassion, empathy, and subjective well-being among college students and community adults. J. Pers., **79** (1), 191-221.

[10] E. Inwood, & M. Ferrari (2018) Mechanisms of change in the relationship between self-compassion, emotion regulation, and mental health: A systematic review. Appl. Psychol. Health Well-Being, **10** (2), 215-235.

[11] A. A. Scoglio, D. A. Rudat, D. Garvert, M. Jarmolowski, C. Jackson, & J. L. Herman (2018) Self-compassion and responses to trauma: The role of emotion regulation. J. Interpers. Violence, **33** (13), 2016-2036.

[12] B. Fernandes, J. Newton, & C. A. Essau (2022) The mediating effects of self-esteem on anxiety and emotion regulation. Psychol. Rep., **125** (2), 787-803.

[13] J. J. Gross (1998) The emerging field of emotion regulation: An integrative review. Rev. Gen. Psychol., **2** (3), 271-299.

[14] Z. Kamalinasab, & P. Mohammadkhani (2018) A comparison of self-compassion and self-esteem based on their relationship with adaptive and maladaptive emotion regulation strategies. Pr. Clin. Psychol., **6** (1), 9-20.

[15] E. A. Myers (2000) Adult romantic attachment: Emotion regulation strategies and relationship satisfaction. University of Montana.

[16] P. Holas, M. Kowalczyk, I. Krejtz, K. Wisiecka, & T. Jankowski (2023) The relationship between self-esteem and self-compassion in socially anxious. Curr. Psychol., **42** (12), 10271-10276.