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## Personality Traits and Self-Compassion in Relation to Psychological Well-Being in Farhangian University Students: A Cross-Cultural Study

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** It has been well established that personality traits and self-compassion are associated with psychological well-being, thus, the current research aimed to investigate the underlying mechanisms in a collectivist culture.

**Methodology:** The present study was a descriptive correlational one in terms of purpose and in terms of data collection. Quantitative research approach was used. Male and female University students of Ahvaz Farhangian University were considered as a studies population. For the purpose of the research, 150 students were selected as a sample using voluntary-available sampling method. for measurement Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale, the NEO Personality Inventory, and Neff's Self-Compassion Scale.

**Findings:** The results of correlation analysis showed that there were significant relationships between the personality traits (neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) and self-compassion (self-kindness, isolation, mindfulness, and the total score of self-compassion) with psychological well-being. The regression analysis showed that neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness significantly predicted psychological well-being.

**Discussion:** The current research was one of the first Iranian studies which addressed to the issues with a cultural point of view. Also, this research tried to direct attention to other social factors influencing gender differences (e.g., traditional socialization) as well which are not discussed in other similar studies. The cultural implications and future orientations have been discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In social and psychological sciences, there is no doubt that concepts have different meanings across cultures. For example, what would define a 'good psychological well-being' in the middle-eastern countries? Does it differ with its definition in western world? Do the factors influencing mental well-being differ across countries and cultures? In USA, which is characterized as an individualist culture, mental well-being is mainly based on Western science and medical models which requires more scientific and objective affairs to deal with problems (Office of the Surgeon General, Center for Mental Health Services, & National Institute of Mental Health, 2011).

In Iran, on the other hand, which was characterized with an old tradition, collectivist culture, and religious practice, psychological well-being was more associated with religiosity (Wahedi & Ahmadian, 2013), social relationships (Shehni Yailagh, Shojaei, Behrouzi, & Maktabi, 2011), and family bonding (Yazdani & Dehyadgari, 2016). However, the Iranian society has undergone lots of changes lately and new trends have been emerged regarding to cultural preferences, for example, individualism and modern life styles are growing fast among new generations (Iman & Marhamati, 2014). Thus, there is a need to investigate the seemingly well-known phenomena such as psychological well-being with a broader perspective and more thoroughly. The World Health Organization (2014) defines mental health as 'a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.' Ryff and Keyes (1995) consider the psychological well-being consisted of six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (see table 1). It has been well established that personality traits (i.e., neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness; e.g., Pandya & Korat, 2015; Grant, Langan-Fox, & Anglim, 2009; Weiss, 1987) and self-compassion (Lihua, Gui, Yanghua, Liqiong, & Jian, 2017; Jeon, Lee, & Kwon, 2016) are associated with psychological well-being.

**Table 1.** The six dimensions of well-being (Adopted from Ryff & Keyes, 1995)

1. Self-acceptance	<p><i>High scorer:</i> Possesses a positive attitude toward the self; acknowledges and accepts multiple aspects of self, including good and bad qualities; feels positive about past life.</p> <p><i>Low scorer:</i> Feels dissatisfied with self; is disappointed with what has occurred with past life; is troubled about certain personal qualities; wishes to be different than what he or she is.</p>
2. Positive relations with others	<p><i>High scorer:</i> Has warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others; is concerned about the welfare of others; capable of strong empathy, affection, and intimacy; understands give and take of human relationships.</p> <p><i>Low scorer:</i> Has few close, trusting relationships with others; finds it difficult to be warm, open, and concerned about others; is isolated and frustrated in interpersonal relationships; not willing to make compromises to sustain important ties with others</p>
3. Autonomy	<p><i>High scorer:</i> Is self-determining and independent; able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways; regulates behavior from within; evaluates self by personal standards.</p> <p><i>Low scorer:</i> Is concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others; relies on judgments of others to make important decisions; conforms to social pressures to think and act in certain ways.</p>
4. Environmental mastery	<p><i>High scorer:</i> Has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities; able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values.</p>

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*Low scorer:* Has difficulty managing everyday affairs; feels unable to change or improve surrounding context; is unaware of surrounding opportunities; lacks sense of control over external world.

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5. Purpose in life

*High scorer:* Has goals in life and a sense of directedness; feels there is meaning to present and past life; holds beliefs that give life purpose; has aims and objectives for living.

*Low scorer:* Lacks a sense of meaning in life; has few goals or aims, lacks sense of direction; does not see purpose of past life; has no outlook or beliefs that give life meaning.

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6. Personal growth

*High scorer:* Has a feeling of continued development; sees self as growing and expanding; is open to new experiences; has sense of realizing his or her potential; sees improvement in self and behavior over time; is changing in ways that reflect more self-knowledge and effectiveness.

*Low scorer:* Has a sense of personal stagnation; lacks sense of improvement or expansion over time; feels bored and uninterested with life; feels unable to develop new attitudes or behaviors

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Given that personality is mainly dependent on one's culture (Diener, Glatzer, Magnum, Sprangers, Vogel, & Veenhoven, 2009), a goal of the current research was to examine how exactly the personality traits are associated with mental well-being in Iranian collectivist culture. For instance, Vakili Mobarakeh, Juhari, Yaakob, Redzuan, & Iranpour Mobarakeh (2015) argued that personality type plays an important role in psychological well-being of Iranian adolescent students who are studying abroad. They further note that Iranian school-aged children should be equipped with appropriate abilities, skills, and knowledge so that they can adjust themselves with other varied, larger, different contexts such as non-Muslim, individualist, or modern societies. Cross-cultural studies (e.g., Vakili Mobarakeh, 2015; Veenhoven, 2013; Diener & Tov, 2009) have shown that European and western people typically report higher levels of overall well-being than Asians, and in this case, Iranians. Regarding to self-compassion, there are growing body of evidence showing that self-compassion contributes to happiness and psychological well-being (Klainin-Yobas et al., 2016; Yang, Zhang, & Kou, 2016; Barnard & Curry, 2011). Neff (2003a) has operationalized the concept consisting of three major components: (1) self-kindness vs. self-judgment, (2) a sense of common humanity vs. isolation, and (3) mindfulness vs. over-identification. There is a consensus that self-compassion is a main part of psychological well-being (Neff & Costigan, 2014) and is associated with desired psychological outcomes such as optimism, wisdom, curiosity, and personal initiative (Homan, 2016). Considering the role of personality traits and self-compassion in psychological well-being, the current research aimed to investigate the underlying mechanisms between the variables and gender differences with a special emphasis on cultural differences.

## 2. Methodology

The present study was a descriptive correlational one in terms of purpose and in terms of data collection. Quantitative research approach was used. Male University students of Ahvaz Farhangian University were considered as a studies population. For the purpose of the research, 150 students were selected as a sample using voluntary-available sampling method. for measurement the following questionnaire were selected. NEO Personality Inventory which was developed by McCrae & Costa (1985) to evaluate personality in terms of factor analysis view. The inventory used in the current research was the short-form which consists of 60 items in 6 factors: Neuroticism (items 1, 6, 11, 16, 21, 26, 31, 36, 41, 46, 51, and 56), extraversion (items 2, 7, 12, 17, 22, 27, 32, 37, 42, 47, 52, and 57), openness (items 3, 8, 13, 18, 23, 28, 33, 38, 43, 48, 53, and 58), agreeableness (items 4, 9, 14, 19, 24, 29, 34, 39, 44, 49, 54, and 59), and conscientiousness (items 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55, and 60). The items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranged from 0 = fully disagree to 4 = fully agree, except the items 1,

3, 8, 9, 12, 14, 15, 18, 23, 24, 27, 29, 30, 33, 38, 39, 46, 48, 54, 55, and 57 which are scored reversely. Costa and McCrae (1985) reported the reliability coefficients of the factors ranging from .75 to .83 using retest. Gerocy Farshchi (2001) reported that the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients of the factors ranged from .56 to .87. In the current research, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the entire score was calculated .78.

Neff's Self-Compassion Scale: This scale was developed by Neff (2003a) to evaluate overall self-compassion. The scale includes 6 subscales: Self-kindness (items 58, 12, 19, 23, and 26), self-judgment (items 1, 8, 11, 16, and 21), common humanity (items 3, 7, 10, and 15), isolation (items 4, 13, 18, and 25), mindfulness (items 9, 14, 17, and 22), and over-identification (items 2, 6, 20, and 24). The items are answered based on a 5-point Likert scale ranged from 1 = almost never to 5 = almost always. Neff (2003b) reported the reliability coefficient of the entire scale as .93 using retest methods. Abolqasemi, Taqipour, and Narimani (2012) reported Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of .81 for the entire scale. In the current research, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the entire scale was calculated .72.

Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale: The scale was developed by Ryff (1989) to evaluate psychological well-being. It includes 18 items and 6 subscales: Autonomy (items 9, 12, 18), environmental mastery (items 1, 4, 6), personal growth (items 7, 15, 18), positive relations with others (items 3, 11, 13), purpose in life (items 5, 14, 16), and self-acceptance (items 2, 8, 10). The answers range from 1 (fully disagree) to 6 (fully agree) except for the items 1, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 13, and 17 which are scored reversely. Khanjani, Shahidi, Fat'h Abadi, Mazaheri, and Shokri (2014) reported that the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients of the factors ranged from .51 to .76. In the current research, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the entire scale was calculated .95.

### 3. Findings

In this section, the research data are analyzed using quantitative methods, using scientific methods, but before data analysis, the data are pre-processed.

**Table 2.** The mean (SD) of the studied variables and their correlation coefficients with psychological well-being (n = 150)

	Variable	Mean (SD)	Psychological well-being
Personality traits	Neuroticism	23.24 (5.70)	-.400**
	Extraversion	28.09 (5.92)	.479**
	Openness	24.33 (4.4)	.155
	Agreeableness	27.67 (6.14)	.402**
	Conscientiousness	29.17 (5.73)	.429**
Self-compassion	Self-Kindness	16.92 (3.42)	.191*
	Self-Judgment	14.43 (3.45)	.081
	Common Humanity	13.18 (3.1)	.133
	Isolation	12.41 (2.99)	.230**
	Mindfulness	13.66 (2.9)	.304**
	Over-identified	12.05 (2.92)	.151
	Total score of self-compassion	82.68 (10.91)	.308**
	Psychological well-being	73.39 (10.17)	-

\*\* p < .01 \* p < .05

Table 2 shows that neuroticism was negatively correlated with psychological well-being ( $r = -.400$ ,  $p < .01$ ), while extraversion ( $r = .479$ ,  $p < .01$ ), agreeableness ( $r = .402$ ,  $p < .01$ ), self-kindness ( $r = .191$ ,  $p < .05$ ), isolation ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ ), mindfulness ( $r = .304$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and total score of self-compassion ( $r = .308$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were significantly, positively correlated with psychological well-being. However, no significant relationship was found between openness, self-judgment, common humanity, and over-identified with psychological well-being.

**Table 3.** The results of multiple regression analysis of predicting psychological well-being in terms of personality traits and self-compassion components

	Variable	MR	RS	F P	B	T	P
Personality traits	Intercept				43.118	4.445	.000
	Neuroticism				-.301	-2.039	.043*
	Extraversion				.495	3.452	.001**
	Openness				-.039	-.216	.830
	Agreeableness				.256	1.818	.071
Self-compassion	Conscientiousness				.380	2.749	.007**
	Self-Kindness	.623	.389	7.976 p < .001	.503	1.400	.164
	Self-Judgment				-.167	1.423	.157
	Common Humanity				.019	.058	.954
	Isolation				.092	.200	.842
	Mindfulness				.307	.707	.481
	Over-identified				.484	1.048	.296
	Total score of self-compassion				-.167	-.652	.516

\*\* p &lt; .01

\* p &lt; .05

A multiple regression was run to predict psychological well-being from personality traits and self-compassion components. The results showed that the prediction model was fitted and the variables statistically, significantly predicted psychological well-being,  $F(11, 138) = 7.976$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .389$ . Furthermore, the unstandardized coefficients (Bs) showed that neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness significantly predicted psychological well-being. However, openness, agreeableness, and self-compassion components failed to predict psychological well-being significantly. Also, the general form of the equation to predict psychological well-being from personality traits and self-compassion components, is:

$$\text{predicted psychological well-being} = 43.118 - (0.301 \times \text{neuroticism}) + (0.495 \times \text{extraversion}) + (0.380 \times \text{conscientiousness})$$

**Table 4.** The results of the independent-samples t-test of the studied variables in terms of gender

	Gender	Mean (SD)	T	Df	p	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Neuroticism	Male	23.40 (5.53)	.339	148	.735	.317	-1.529	2.164
	Female	23.08 (5.90)						
Extraversion	Male	27.16 (5.28)	1.996	148	.048*	-1.913	-3.807	-.019
	Female	29.07 (6.42)						
Openness	Male	24.13 (4.59)	-.545	148	.587	-.393	-1.820	1.033
	Female	24.53 (4.22)						
Agreeableness	Male	26.19 (6.10)	3.121	148	.002**	-3.045	-4.972	-1.117
	Female	29.23						

		(5.82)						
Conscientiousness	Male	27.69 (5.26)	-	148	.001**	-3.045	-4.835	-1.254
	Female	30.73 (5.83)	3.360					
Self-Kindness	Male	16.75 (3.28)		148	.524	-.358	-1.465	.749
	Female	17.11 (3.57)	-.639					
Self-Judgment	Male	14.25 (3.28)		148	.515	-.368	-1.484	.747
	Female	14.62 (3.62)	-.652					
Common Humanity	Male	13.22 (2.99)		148	.880	.076	-.927	1.081
	Female	13.14 (3.23)	.151					
Isolation	Male	11.91 (2.89)	-	148	.034*	-1.036	-1.991	-.080
	Female	12.94 (3.02)	2.143					
Mindfulness	Male	13.60 (2.74)		148	.808	-.115	-1.055	.823
	Female	13.72 (3.07)	-.244					
identification	Male	12.02 (2.65)		148	.909	-.054	-1.001	.891
	Female	12.08 (3.19)	-.115					
Over-identified	Male	81.77 (10.15)	-	148	.299	-1.857	-5.378	1.664
	female	83.63 (11.65)	1,042					
Total score of self-compassion	Male	70.49 (9.38)	-	148	.000**	-5.945	-9.096	-2.794
	female	76.44 (10.14)	3.728					

\*\* p &lt; .01

\* p &lt; .05

As table 4 shows, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the studied variables in terms of gender. The results showed that there was a significant difference in the extraversion scores for men ( $M = 27.16$ ,  $SD = 5.28$ ) and women ( $M = 29.07$ ,  $SD = 6.42$ ) conditions;  $t(148) = -1.996$ ,  $p < .05$ . These results suggest that women tend to be more extraversion than men do. Also, there was a significant difference in the agreeableness scores for men ( $M = 26.19$ ,  $SD = 6.10$ ) and women ( $M = 29.23$ ,  $SD = 5.82$ ) conditions;  $t(148) = -3.121$ ,  $p < .01$ . It means that women tend to be more agreeable than men do. Furthermore, there was a significant difference in the conscientiousness scores for men ( $M = 27.69$ ,  $SD = 5.26$ ) and women ( $M = 30.73$ ,  $SD = 5.83$ ) conditions;  $t(148) = -3.360$ ,  $p < .01$ . In other words, women are more conscientious than men are. Additionally, there was a significant difference in the isolation scores for men ( $M = 11.91$ ,  $SD = 2.89$ ) and women ( $M = 12.94$ ,  $SD = 3.02$ ) conditions;  $t(148) = -2.143$ ,  $p < .05$ . Meaning that in the current research, women were more isolated than men. Moreover, there was a significant difference in the total score of psychological well-being for men ( $M = 70.49$ ,  $SD = 9.38$ ) and women ( $M = 76.44$ ,  $SD = 10.14$ ) conditions;  $t(148) = -3.728$ ,  $p < .01$ . In other words, women enjoy more psychological well-being than men do.



#### 4. Discussion

Given that there are major differences between individualist and collectivist cultures, the current research aimed to investigate the relationship between personality traits and self-compassion with psychological well-being in a collectivist culture. As expected, the results showed that neuroticism was negatively associated with psychological well-being and extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were strongly, positively associated with psychological well-being. There are many researches in the literature supporting these findings (e.g., Othman, Bahri Yusof, Din, & Zakaria, 2016; Apostolou, 2016; Kokko, Tolvanen, & Pulkkinen, 2015; Singh, Singh, & Singh, 2012; Grant, et al., 2009; Chaturvedula & Joseph, 2007), however, our special interest is in those researches targeting collectivist cultures. Thus, in a study conducted on Iranian college students, Vakili Mobarakeh et al. (2015) found similar results and argued that in collectivist cultures, as in individualist ones, people who are less neurotic and more agreeable are more likely sociable and establish social relationships. Typically, these people are more vivacious and flexible which makes them more prone to cope with problems effectively. Gerocy Farshi and Soufiyani (2008) also mentioned that people higher in personality traits like extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness have more capacity to feel happiness, and they are less likely affected by events. However, we argue that since interpersonal relationships are highly valued in collectivist cultures, traits which improve relationship quality and cause stronger bonds, are welcomed. These traits produce much more social support from friends and significant others which, in turn, leads to higher levels of psychological well-being (Jelodari, Kohansal, & Zarifi, 2016).

In line with previous research, our findings showed that self-compassion was positively associated with psychological well-being (e.g., Sun, Chan, & Chan, 2016; Gunnel, Mosewich, McEwen, Eklund, & Crocker, 2016; Játiva & Cerezo, 2014; Neff & Costigan, 2014). In a study conducted in Iran, Shabani, Mahmudi, Bonab, Emamipur, and Sepah Mansur (2015) argued that compassion toward self and others is common in collectivist societies and the necessity of establishing and maintaining social relationships keeps people compassionate toward each other which, in turn, promotes compassion in people's lives to the extent that makes it a part of their life and further encompasses themselves. Being compassionate toward self means to not take hard on oneself and being flexible. In addition, self-compassion contributes to psychological well-being by making people calm and relax, (Gilbert, 2005), regulating their emotions (Neff, 2003a), and making people more susceptible to be nonjudgmental and more receptive of new experiences. Rajabi and Maqami (2014) suggested that Iranian culture which is mixed with tradition, family solidarity, religious believes, hospitality, helping others, and relying on supernatural powers like the Messengers or God, promotes compassion toward self and others.

Finally, the results of the independent-samples t-test showed that there are gender differences in the studied variables. Summarily, in compared to men, women had a better performance in extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and psychological well-being. Nevertheless, men were less isolated than women. In other words, in a society with high levels of gender segregation, deep gender roles, and patriarchy like Iran, boys and girls are taught that they are different in lots of areas and certain roles and tasks are specified for girls and others are for boys. In such circumstances, men are expected to be tough and deal with hard situations and to not exhibit any weakness. Also, social, political, and economical dissatisfaction which has become pervasive, especially among the younger generations, increasingly affect more and more people, especially men as they should assume much more responsibilities than women. Also, they are expected to be independent. On the other hand, women are raised inside home and family with certain limitations regarding their social responsibilities and relationships which makes them more isolated than men. However, because of the gender segregation there are upsides and downsides for each gender. For example, girls have more freedom to make friendship with other girls, distance keeping from

boys makes them establish more intimate relationships with other girls, not being in charge with making money or dealing with economic problems, or other dilemmas. On the other hand, they are more limited in mixed gender situations like coeducation or workplace. Also, boys have limitations in their opportunities for finding jobs, making money, conflict resolution, using professional or experienced help. All of these circumstance can contribute to the current findings. The current results are inconsistent with those of Shokri, Kadivar, and Daneshvarpur (2007) which found that girls had higher scores in neuroticism while boys had higher scores in extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness. One reason for this inconsistency could be the time interval between these two studies which is a decade, and given that Iranian society and culture is undergoing a transition from traditional to modern life style, it can be expected.

Finally, there were some limitations and strengths in the current research which should be noted. A major limitation of the current research was lack of another sample from an individualist culture to compare the results directly. Second, scarcity of studies of gender differences in the related area in Persian research literature did not provide a basis to compare the results. The current research was one of the first Iranian studies which addressed to the issues with a cultural point of view. Also, our research tried to direct attention to other social factors influencing gender differences (e.g., traditional socialization) as well which are not discussed in other similar studies.





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