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Reed M. Mueller
Concordia University - Portland, rmueller@cu-portland.edu

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Perspective Taking, Empathic Concern, and Personal Distress: A Meta-Analytic Study of Correlates with Self-Esteem and Self-Compassion

Reed M. Mueller • Concordia University • Portland, Oregon, U.S.A.
mueller@cu-portland.edu

Introduction

Hodges, Clark, and Myers (2011) have argued that perspective taking interventions can buffer common, problematic attitudes and behaviors, such as prejudice (Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003), stereotype expression and accessibility (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), and interpersonal aggression (Batana & Loukas, 2011). There also noted that “people behave better—more acceptably, more admirably, more prosocially—after perspective taking” in part because perspective taking increases one's empathic concern for another (2011, p. 194).

However, one barrier to perspective taking, and therefore empathic concern, is low self-esteem (Galinsky and Ku, 2004). That is, in a state of low self-esteem, individuals may attempt to boost their self-esteem via downward comparisons (Atchison- James & Tracy, 2012), or a willingness to “see the worst in others as a means of rating the self more favorably in comparison” (Neff, 2003, p. 86). Beyond this, self-focus may also be problematic when taking another’s perspective as it can lead to increased personal distress (Hodges et al., 2011). Given the potential outcomes of downward comparison on the one hand and personal distress on the other, might there be a better path?

Self-esteem is not the only form of self-evaluation to have been considered in relationship to these constructs. Self-compassion (Neff, 2003), which has been conceptualized as having three interrelated components (self-kindness; a sense of common, fallible humanity; and mindfulness), has also been assessed with regard to its relationship with elements of interpersonal reactivity such as empathic concern and personal distress. It is possible that self-compassion might better facilitate perspective taking and greater empathic concern in individuals, while minimizing personal distress.

Objective: Given the importance of perspective taking and the associated constructs of empathic concern and personal distress, together with the interest in the varying associations of these constructs with different forms of self-evaluation, an interrelated exploration of the correlates of self-esteem and self-compassion with elements of interpersonal reactivity is valuable. In this meta-analysis, I investigate the correlation of these constructs to both self-evaluation frameworks.

Method

Study Variables: Though trait self-esteem has been variously measured, Robins, Hendin, and Trzesniewski (2001) noted that the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) has received the greatest use and validation; thus, only studies using the RSE will be included in this meta-analysis. Trait self-compassion will be operationalized using either the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003) or the Self-Compassion Scale – Short Form (SCS-SF; Pommier, Neff, & Van Gucht, 2011), the only measures of Neff’s important construct. Perspective taking, empathic concern, and personal distress will be assessed using Davis’ (1983) well-known Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI).

Study Selection: The literature search for studies relevant to this meta-analysis was conducted using ProQuest, Gale, and Google Scholar databases. Search logic was as follows: “[“Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale” OR “Self-Compassion Scale” OR (“[Interpersonal Reactivity Index”]) AND “perspective taking”.”

Data Excluded: Studies included for this meta-analysis were conducted using a random-effects model, determined a priori (Field & Gillet, 2010) and pooled correlation effect sizes were calculated using Hedges and colleagues’ method. Significance was assessed at p < .05.

Results

Study Characteristics: Search of ProQuest, Gale, and Google Scholar databases resulted in 25, 3, and 251 records, respectively. After removal of duplicates and application of selection criteria, 24 studies were included in this meta-analysis, four of which were from unpublished thesis or dissertation works. All 24 studies, right reported correlation between the RSE and at least one subscale of the IRI, while 16 reported correlations between the RSE and at least one subscale of the IRI; no studies reported on both self-esteem and self-compassion as associated with any scale of the IRI. Included in these studies were adolescents (adolescent and community samples), secondary education participants (both undergraduate and graduate), and community and non-community (clinical and incarcerated) adult samples. Sample sizes across these studies ranged from 41 – 10782.

Analysis 1 - Correlations with Empathic Concern: As seen in Figure 1, eight studies contained reported correlates of self-compassion and empathic concern. The pooled correlation between self-compassion and empathic concern was small (p = .089). Fourteen studies contained reported correlates of global self-esteem and empathic concern (p = .147). A test of differences between these two effect sizes was not significant: Q[28] = .847; p = .357.

Analysis 2 - Correlations with Perspective Taking: Figure 2 displays results of the correlates of self-compassion and perspective taking. The pooled correlation between self-compassion and perspective taking was p = .314 (k = 7). Reported correlates of global self-esteem and perspective taking resulted in a smaller effect size (p = .168; k = 5). A test of differences between these two effect sizes was significant: Q[12] = 12.173; p = .001.

Analysis 3 - Correlations with Personal Distress: Correlates between the two self-evaluation frameworks and personal distress are displayed in Figure 3. Self-correlation was observed with personal distress at p = .353 (k = 5). Five studies contained reported correlates of global self-esteem and personal distress (p = .272). A test of differences between these two effect sizes was not significant: Q[5] = 2.936; p = .087.

Discussion

To my knowledge, this is the first meta-analysis assessing the strength of association between two alternative self-evaluation frameworks and three forms of interpersonal reactivity. As we live in a world fraught with conflict and need, it is important to consider whether or not self-evaluation frameworks differentially impact our responses to other human beings; it seems that at least one point, they do.

The only statistically significant difference observed in interpersonal reactivity and self-evaluation frameworks with perspective taking, which is “the tendency to spontaneously and spontaneously adopt the psychological point of view of others” (Davis, 1983, pp. 113-114). While both trait self-esteem and trait self-compassion were positively correlated with perspective taking, the effect was greater for self-compassion, reaching a moderate effect size.

The trends were different for the relationship between self-evaluation frameworks with empathic concern and personal distress. The effect sizes on empathic concern (i.e., IRI) were small (Pommier, Neff, & Van Gucht, 2011). The effect sizes on personal distress (i.e., self-oriented anxiety or unease; Davis, 1983) were both small, but leaned (ns) toward a stronger relationship with self-esteem than self-compassion. For personal distress (i.e., self-oriented anxiety or unease; Davis, 1983), both effect sizes were negative and moderate in strength, and leaned toward self-compassion as a better buffer against experiencing distress in the face of another’s experience; however, this observation only approximated statistical significance.

Though a strength of this study is measurement specificity, future studies could benefit from inclusion of additional measures of self-esteem. Furthermore, moderator analyses would be of considerable interest.

Conclusion

Given that perspective taking is an important tool in our effort to mitigate problematic attitudes and behaviors, and that compensatory mechanisms employed by those with low self-esteem might present barriers to effective perspective taking, might there be a better way to engender perspective taking for those with low self-esteem? In short, the answer is a qualified yes. At least with regard to trait self-esteem and trait self-compassion, it seems that the latter has the strongest positive relationship with perspective taking. Given this, and that perspective taking is a pathway to empathic concern, perhaps interventions designed to build self-compassion would be preferred to interventions designed to enhance self-esteem.