Original Article

Better Battles by a Self-Compassionate Partner?

The Mediating Role of Personal Conflict Resolution Styles in the Association Between Self-Compassion and Satisfaction in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract: Self-compassion entails being kind towards oneself when encountering uncontrollable life events, inadequacies, or failure. When in conflict with a romantic partner, we expected self-compassion to be associated positively with functional (positive problem solving) and negatively with dysfunctional styles (conflict engagement, withdrawal, compliance). Adult individuals (n = 163) involved in a serious romantic relationship for at least 2 years responded to a questionnaire that assessed self-compassion, personality factors, conflict resolution styles, and relationship satisfaction. High self-compassionate partners reported more functional and less dysfunctional styles when statistically controlling for demographics, neuroticism, and agreeableness. Conflict resolution styles fully mediated the significant path between self-compassion and relationship satisfaction.

Keywords: self-compassion, conflict resolution styles, relationship satisfaction

Conflicts in relationships are inevitable experiences. They constitute social interactions in which partners pursue incompatible goals and are related to relationship outcomes (Bradbury et al., 2001). In romantic relationships, the way spouses deal with relationship conflicts is predictive of relationship satisfaction (Herzberg & Sierau, 2010; Kurdek, 1994), which in turn is related to relationship stability (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Conflict resolution styles are considered more predictive of experiencing a satisfying relationship than the content of the conflict (Markman et al., 2001), which raises the question of what explains the use of particular conflict resolution styles. Among several contextual characteristics (e.g., power inequality, perceived support from relationship partners), the use of specific conflict resolution styles in response to interpersonal conflicts possibly reflects individual differences (Marchand, 2004). Correspondingly, previous findings show consistent associations with personality factors (Herzberg & Sierau, 2010; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Neff & Harter, 2003; Utley et al., 1989). Self-esteem and feeling accepted and being low in self-criticism are important characteristics for avoiding difficulties with intimate partners. Self-compassion is one personality characteristic that reflects these dimensions by fostering a nonjudgmental, kind, and understanding approach toward the self (Neff, 2003). Building on these findings, we wanted to examine the associations of self-compassion with functional (e.g., positive problem solving) and dysfunctional conflict resolution styles (e.g., conflict engagement, withdrawal). Thereby, we aspire to (a) control for likely associations with neuroticism and agreeableness, which are recognized as established personality predictors for romantic relationship outcomes (e.g., dissatisfaction, conflict, abuse; see Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006), and (b) analyze whether conflict resolution styles may serve as mediators for the association between self-compassion and romantic relationship satisfaction.

Conflict Resolution Styles and Self-Compassion

Conflict resolution styles have been intensively studied in behavioral observation studies and in self-report studies as well (Gottman, 1993, 1994; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Within the observational studies, distinct conflict resolution styles were identified (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) and were also included in an inventory by Kurdek (1994) to be used

in self-report surveys. Based on this research, conflict resolution styles can be classified into four styles, namely positive problem solving (i.e., compromise, exchange), conflict engagement (i.e., attacking the partner and losing control), withdrawal (i.e., no interest on problem solving and refusing to discuss further), and compliance (i.e., subordinate one's need and position; Kurdek, 1994). According to its positive associations with relationship satisfaction and negative associations with dissolution, positive problem solving has been classified as functional resolution style. Due to their negative relations with relationship satisfaction conflict engagement, withdrawal, and compliance have been interpreted as dysfunctional.

Self-compassion facilitates being kind and understanding toward the self while experiencing difficulties in life (Neff, 2003). When mistakes, failures, or critical circumstances occur, highly self-compassionate people attempt to display a sympathetic attitude toward themselves rather than being judgmental (self-kindness vs. self-judgment). They regard inadequacies as part of human life shared by all people instead of considering it as personal misery (common humanity vs. isolation) and are able to regulate their feelings evoked from difficult situations, they remain balanced and mindful instead of exaggerating or suppressing aspects linked to negative experiences (mindfulness vs. over-identification; Neff, 2003).

Growing evidence suggests that self-compassion promotes intrapersonal associations such as diminished anger (Fresnics & Borders, 2017) and reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol (Rockcliff et al., 2008). Further, self-compassion is positively related to other-focused concerns such as perspective taking and enhanced forgiveness (Neff & Pommier, 2013).

Several characteristics of self-compassion suggest associations with functional and dysfunctional conflict resolution styles according to the classification of Gottman (1994) and Kurdek (1994). To date there has been negligible research on this topic. Yarnell and Neff (2013) had individuals think of a real-life situation in which their interests conflicted with those of current or past romantic partners. To assess conflict resolution styles, participants were provided with single-items each representing a specific conflict style (compromising, self-subordinating, and self-prioritizing) and they were required to select within a forced-choice format for functional style (compromising) or one of the two dysfunctional styles (self-subordinating, self-prioritizing). The greater an individual's self-compassion the more likely participants chose a compromising conflict resolution style to solve relational conflict as opposed to self-subordination (comparable to compliance) or self-prioritization. Using a dyadic design, Neff and Beretvas (2012) explored the association of people's self-reported self-compassion with their spouses' report about participants' general relationship behavior. High self-compassionate individuals were described by their romantic partners as expressing more relatedness (affinity) and less detachment (Neff & Beretvas, 2012) that suggests that self-compassion is negatively associated with the conflict style withdrawal. High self-compassionate individuals were further described by romantic partners as less controlling and less verbally aggressive toward them and they self-reported less reactive jealousy (Tandler & Petersen, 2020) that implies that self-compassion is negatively associated with conflict engagement. Building on this, we examine the role of people's self-reported self-compassion for their reported use of several conflict styles when (a) in conflicts with romantic partners, (b) considering functional and dysfunctional conflict styles simultaneously and (c) by using rating scales. In this way it was possible to weigh up the value of self-compassion for the different conflict strategies simultaneously as well as controlling for other internal factors.

Conflict resolution styles in romantic relationships were found to be associated with internal psychological features such as attachment styles and personality dispositions (Wei, Liao, Ku, & Shaffer, 2011). Among the Big-Five personality traits, neuroticism and low agreeableness appeared as the most consistent predictors of negative relationship outcomes such as conflict, dissatisfaction, and dissolution (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006). For conflicts, neuroticism was consistently related to higher levels of dysfunctional conflict resolution styles (conflict engagement, withdrawal, compliance) and agreeableness to higher levels of compliance and lower levels of conflict engagement (Herzberg & Sierau, 2010). Moreover, previous researchers showed that self-compassion is negatively related to neuroticism and positively to agreeableness (Neff et al., 2007), whereas some argue that self-compassion's associations are entirely attributed to low neuroticism (Pfattheicher et al., 2017). Thus, a critical line of inquiry aims at investigating whether self-compassion's associations with conflict resolution styles remain predictive even when the potentially confounding effects of neuroticism and agreeableness are controlled for.

Conflict Resolution Styles as Mediator for the Link Between Self-Compassion and Relationship Satisfaction

We also wanted to examine the underlying mechanisms of the association between self-compassion and romantic relationship satisfaction by drawing on conflict resolution styles. Although previous research has demonstrated this association (Baker & McNulty, 2011; Neff & Beretvas, 2012), far less is known about the linking mechanisms. In an effort to narrow this gap in the literature, we examined

mediational effects of our functional (positive problem solving) and dysfunctional (withdrawal, compliance, conflict engagement) conflict resolution styles jointly to gain understanding of the factors that contribute to a harmonic relationship. Coping with problems in a constructive and functional way by including the needs of self and partner and by withdrawing less from discussions, rejecting partners less and thus remaining more attached to partners, and by asserting less control or engaging in less aggressive behaviors should lead to experiencing more harmonic and contented relationships. Theoretical perspectives support our joint consideration of self-compassion and conflict resolution styles to explain marital quality. According to the Vulnerability – Stress Adaptation Model of marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), self-compassion can serve as an individual disposition that people bring to a marriage and that may exert longitudinal influence on marital quality through its effects on adaptive processes. Spouses use adaptive processes to cope with marital disagreements, and conflict resolution styles reflect such interpersonal behaviors of coping with marital difficulties.

Aims of the Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to test the associations of self-compassion with romantic conflict resolution styles and to test the joint mediational role of the conflict resolution styles in explaining the link between self-compassion and romantic relationship satisfaction while statistically controlling for neuroticism and agreeableness.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Our sample consisted of 163 adults (67% female, 33% male) in long-term romantic relationships. Participants were on average 41.33 years old (SD = 7.95) with an age range of 30–55 years. About two-thirds were employed (69.2%), 16% reported being self-employed, 1.3% were unemployed, 1.8% retired, and the remaining 11.7% reported doing different things classified as "other". All participants were self-reported heterosexuals and had already been involved in the relationship of interest for at least 2 years (M = 15.53 years, SD = 10.09; range: 2–41 years) and 63.2% were married between 1 and 39 years (M = 15.02, SD = 9.83).

After informed consent was obtained, all participants completed an online survey (SoSci Survey; Leiner, 2014) with measures presented in the following order: neuroticism and agreeableness, self-compassion, relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution styles, sociodemographic questions, and additional questionnaires not relevant for the current analyses (perception of partner's self-compassion, measures for everyday conflict situations). The survey was anonymous and confidential. On average, the completion took 20 min. Participants received no compensation, and they were recruited via personal contacts of the authors.

Measures

Neuroticism and Agreeableness

Neuroticism and agreeableness were assessed by using the Big-Five-Inventory-25 (BFI-25; Gerlitz & Schupp, 2005), a German scale based on the Five-Factor model of personality. Each personality trait was measured via five items (e.g., neuroticism: "I am someone who worries often"; agreeableness: "I am someone who can forgive"). Responses were given on a 7-point Likert scale. Internal consistencies were .71 for neuroticism and .59 for agreeableness. These coefficients were similar to coefficients reported by Gerlitz and Schupp (2005; Cronbach's αs for neuroticism is .61 and agreeableness is .67).

Self-Compassion

Self-compassion was measured using a German version (Hupfeld & Ruffieux, 2011) of the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003). The scale consists of 26 items, for example, "I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering." to which participants had to respond on a 5-point Likert scale. Averaging all items created an index of self-compassion. We obtained high internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .90), which is comparable to the coefficients reported by Hupfeld and Ruffieux (2011) (Cronbach's α = .91) for the German version.

Relationship Satisfaction

The emotional component of relationship satisfaction was assessed via the German version (Sander & Böcker, 1993) of the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988) which consists of seven items (e.g., "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?"). Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale. Cronbach's α (.91) was similar to those reported in previous studies (cf. Hendrick, 1988; Cronbach's α = .86; Sander & Böcker, 1993; Cronbach's α = .81).

Conflict Resolution Styles

The conflict resolution styles were measured using the German self-report version (Herzberg & Sierau, 2010) of the Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (CRSI; Kurdek, 1994). This version consists of 16 items; each conflict style is assessed via four items. Responses were given after the following written introduction: "Please indicate on a scale

Table 1. Means (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*), and intercorrelations of study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Self-compassion	–									
2. Relationship Satisfaction	.26**	–								
3. Conflict Engagement	−.33***	−.42***	–							
4. Positive Problem Resolution	.35***	.41***	−.40***	–						
5. Withdrawal	−.14	−.35***	.39***	−.43***	–					
6. Compliance	−.17*	−.35***	.26**	−.27**	.30***	–				
7. Neuroticism	−.49***	−.17*	.33***	−.16*	.05	−.01	–			
8. Agreeableness	.24**	.06	−.24**	.04	−.06	.05	−.05	–		
9. Age	.28***	.08	−.14^{+}	−.06	.02	−.00	−.11	.18*	–	
10. Gender	−.07	−.22**	.16*	−.09	.06	.03	.33***	.14	−.08	–
M	3.31	4.12	2.39	3.80	2.21	2.37	4.41	5.55	41.33	0.67
SD	0.54	0.69	0.90	0.65	0.89	0.81	1.08	0.90	7.95	–

Note. $N = 163$. Self-compassion, relationship satisfaction, conflict engagement, positive problem resolution, withdrawal, and compliance values ranged from 1 to 5, for neuroticism and agreeableness values ranged from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating strong endorsement of the construct. Age in years, Gender: 0 = male, 1 = female. $^{+}p = .05$; $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

from 1 to 5 how often you show each of these behaviors provided you and your partner disagree." Cronbach's α was .86 for conflict engagement (e.g., "Launching personal attacks"), .79 for positive problem solving (e.g., "Focusing on the problem at hand"), .86 for withdrawal (e.g., "Remaining silent for long periods of time"), and .79 for compliance (e.g., "Not defending my position"). Herzberg and Sierau (2010) and Kurdek (1994) reported Cronbach's α coefficient between .69 and .80, Kurdek (1994) between .66 and .86.

In the present study, correlations among the conflict styles were significant and in the expected directions (Table 1), with positive problem resolution being inversely related to dysfunctional conflict styles, and the dysfunctional styles were positively interrelated.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables are reported in Table 1. An analysis of variance (ANOVA; $F(3, 160) = 97.55$, $p < .001$) yielded that participants reported more positive problem resolutions than conflict engagement ($d = 1.80$), withdrawal ($d = 2.05$), or compliance ($d = 1.95$; post hoc test: LSD). These findings are consistent with previous results (Neff & Harter, 2003; Utley et al., 1989).

Self-compassion correlated significantly positive with positive problem solving and negative with conflict management and compliance. Self-compassion further correlated with our controls, negatively with neuroticism and positively with agreeableness, which in turn were associated with some of the conflict resolution styles, partly confirming previous results (Herzberg & Sierau, 2010). Our gender and age differences were also consistent with previous results (Herzberg & Sierau, 2010). Women reported higher levels of conflict engagement than men and older participants tend to reported less conflict engagement than younger participants. We controlled for gender, age, neuroticism, and agreeableness when relating conflict resolution styles to self-compassion.

Regarding our mediational assumption, self-compassion and conflict styles were significantly related to relationship satisfaction. The latter associations support previous results (Herzberg & Sierau, 2010).

Self-Compassion and Conflict Resolution Styles

We performed separate hierarchical regression analyses for each conflict resolution style (Table 2). Age and gender were entered in step 1, neuroticism and agreeableness in step 2, and self-compassion in step 3. The analyses for conflict engagement revealed that self-compassion had a tendency to be related to lower levels of engagement, whereas the impact of the controls neuroticism and agreeableness remained significant. Self-compassion showed unique effects for positive problem resolution and compliance, whereas the personality traits had no impact on either outcome. In contrast, no significant association was found for withdrawal among our set of variables. In sum, two of four conflict resolution styles were uniquely associated with self-compassion, and we found no such consistency for other considered demographic or personality variables. We additionally ran our analyses using the self-compassion

Table 2. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting different romantic conflict resolution styles from age, gender, neuroticism, agreeableness, and self-compassion

	Conflict engagement	Positive problem Resolution	Withdrawal	Compliance
Model	β	β	β	β
Step 1				
Age	−.03	−.17*	.03	.04
Gender	.11	−.08	.07	.05
Step 2				
Neuroticism	.19*	.05	−.04	−.15
Agreeableness	−.19*	−.01	−.04	.09
Step 3				
Self-compassion	−.17^{+}	.42***	−.15	−.27**
ΔR^2	.02	.11	.01	.05
Total R^2	.19	.15	.02	.05
F	7.26***	5.73***	.78	1.78

Note. N = 163. Self-compassion, conflict engagement, positive problem resolution, withdrawal, and compliance values ranged from 1 to 5, for neuroticism and agreeableness values ranged from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating strong endorsement of the construct. Age in years, Gender: 0 = male, 1 = female. ^{+}p = .07; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

subscales. We report these results in the electronic supplement (https://osf.io/hc8gw/).

Self-Compassion, Conflict Resolution Styles, and Relationship Satisfaction

To test whether the association between self-compassion and relationship satisfaction is transferred via conflict resolution styles, we used the PROCESS script by Hayes (2013) and ran a parallel mediational analysis including all four conflict resolution styles simultaneously to control for their intercorrelations (model 4; 10,000 bootstrap samples). Again, we included our covariates (age, gender, neuroticism, and agreeableness) in this analysis.

Results are presented in Figure 1. The indirect effects of self-compassion on relationship satisfaction via conflict resolution styles were ab = .05 (SE = .03; BootCI: .01 to .13) for conflict engagement, ab = .11 (SE = .06; BootCI: .01 to .24) for positive resolution, ab = .02 (SE = .02; BootCI: −.01 to .10) for withdrawal, and ab = .07 (SE = .04; BootCI: .01 to .18) for compliance. Thus, positive resolution, compliance, and conflict engagement significantly mediated the relationship between self-compassion and relationship satisfaction because their bootstrap intervals did not include zero. The indirect effects of conflict engagement and compliance were small and no significant indirect effect was found for withdrawal. In sum, the relation of self-compassion and relationship satisfaction (c = .33, p < .01) was completely mediated by our set of conflict resolution styles, resulting in a nonsignificant direct path (c' = .09, p > .05). These findings suggest that high self-compassionate people are more satisfied with their relationships, which could be mainly due to solving conflicts more positively such as being more compromising and less compliant and conflict engaged.

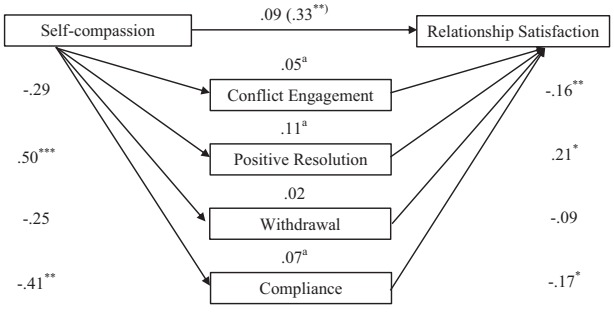

Figure 1. Total, direct, and indirect effects of self-compassion on relationship satisfaction via the mediators conflict engagement, positive resolution, withdrawal, and compliance. Age, gender, neuroticism, and agreeableness were statistically controlled. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001. [a]Significant point estimates (p < .05).

Discussion

The obtained results are predominantly consistent with our assumptions. First, in terms of romantic relationship conflicts, individuals' self-compassion was positively related to positive problem resolutions and negatively to compliance. These associations persisted independently from the Big-Five personality traits neuroticism and agreeableness, which are known to explain romantic conflict behaviors and relationship outcomes (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006), and contradict previous arguments by Pfattheicher and colleagues (2017) claiming that self-compassion is heavily influenced by neuroticism. Of course, causality cannot be concluded from our analyses, nor can other working

mechanisms be identified (e.g., those with more functional conflict resolution styles with spouses find it easier to be kind and understanding toward the self). Second, we observed that both functional (positive problem solving) and dysfunctional conflict resolution styles (compliance, conflict engagement) fully explain the association between self-compassion and romantic relationship satisfaction. The findings suggest that for relationship satisfaction, an adaptive way of solving romantic conflicts includes compromising, less personal attacks on the spouse, and less giving in.

Implications for Conflict Resolution Styles, Self-Compassion, and Relationship Satisfaction

This study provides an in depth analysis for the association between self-compassion and various conflict resolution styles in the context of romantic relationships. When arguing with their spouse, high self-compassionate people report focusing more on the problem at hand and negotiate with the spouse aiming at resolving conflicts in a more constructive way. Our results augment previous findings where self-compassionate people are more inclined to report elevated compromise than subordinate or prioritize their needs when in conflicts with their romantic partners (Yarnell & Neff, 2013) and are described by their partners in a comparable constructive way (Neff & Beretvas, 2012). Given that prior findings used different assessment methods (e.g., preferred conflict style was chosen out of two options within a forced-choice format, partner reports only), the relation of self-compassion with conflict resolution styles can be interpreted as a relatively robust finding obtainable across various operationalizations.

Another important finding is that conflict engagement, positive problem resolution, and compliance fully explain the link of self-compassion and relationship satisfaction. This suggests that for positive relationship functioning, subordinating one's need and position is not expedient. Continuously asserting one's needs and interests in an adaptive way is related to more strength (Ringenbach, 2009) and to healthy and sustainable social interactions (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). High self-compassionate individuals reported feeling more authentic when resolving conflicts with romantic partners (Yarnell & Neff, 2013). That is, self-compassionate people act in accordance with their true self, inner thoughts, and values which could prevent them from giving in and from not defending their ideas and positions in romantic conflicts. This conclusion supports the idea that denying or sacrificing one's needs is not related to healthy relationship outcomes (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Further, the link between self-compassion and relationship satisfaction is mediated by conflict engagement. That is, the more peacefully conflicts are solved the higher one's relationship satisfaction.

An important note to stress is that the obtained link of self-compassion and relationship satisfaction via conflict resolution styles remains significant when controlling for neuroticism and agreeableness. This finding suggests that in the context of romantic relationships, self-compassion's share of the variance is not depending on established personality traits as argued previously (Pfattheicher et al., 2017) and that self-compassion may insert a unique share in explaining well-being in romantic relationship. This interpretation corresponds well with previous results on the unique share of the variance in self-compassion in explaining positive functioning when controlling for the Big-Five personality traits (Neff et al., 2007). Correspondingly, our data show that among the conflict styles, self-compassion's relation was particularly high with functional conflicts styles (positive problem resolution) compared to dysfunctional styles.

Limitations

The present study has at least two major limitations that need to be carefully considered. First, the current results rely solely on the self-reports of only one person about a romantic couple. Future research should recruit both partners of a relationship, using an actor-partner interdependence model (Kenny, 1996). This method could gain more detailed results about relationship outcomes by simultaneously examining the associations of one partner's self-compassion with conflict styles and relationship satisfaction (actor effect) and with the corresponding outcome of the other partner (partner effect). For example, previous research on the reciprocity of conflict resolution styles across both partners of a couple has demonstrated a significant positive association for only positive problem resolution ($r = .21$, $p < .01$; Herzberg & Sierau, 2010) but not for withdrawal, compliance, and conflict engagement. In our suggested method, using an actor-partner interdependence approach could help to understand the extent that partners' self-compassion and conflict styles affect their relationship well-being.

Second, the study's correlational cross-sectional design limits conclusions about the direction of causality. Nonetheless, our research design offers an opportunity to control for additional variables such as negative affectivity (Robins et al., 2002) by including neuroticism. This enables us to elaborate on underlying explanatory mechanisms. Though our mediational analyses are grounded in theoretical models and are based on previous empirical results,

their interpretation must be proceeded with caution. Future research should employ longitudinal data to establish the assumed direction of causation. We recommend a method that incorporates an experimental design in which self-compassion and the mediators (conflict resolution styles) are successively trained. The intervention of training could reveal the causal role of the mediators (e.g., using testing-a-process-hypothesis-by-an-interaction-strategy; Jacoby & Sassenberg, 2011).

Conclusion

The current study extends previous knowledge on healthy relationship functioning by providing a more in depth test of the associations between self-compassion and conflict resolution styles in romantic couples by simultaneously assessing their mediating role on relationship satisfaction and by controlling for associations with neuroticism and agreeableness. These findings have implications for marriage or couple counseling. Self-compassion-based interventions (Mindful Self-Compassion Program; Germer & Neff, 2013) may present a promising addition to conflict and communications trainings because they simultaneously target various conflict resolution styles in both partners and might therefore function as an enduring factor fostering romantic relationship quality in light of relationship conflicts.

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