Compassion, Forgiveness and Subjective Well-Being among Filipino Counseling Professionals

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Abstract

This study examined a research model depicting forgiveness (forgiveness of others, forgiveness of self) as a mediator in the association between compassion (compassion for others, self-compassion) and subjective well-being in a sample of 231 Filipino counseling professionals. The model was tested through path analysis using the structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. Data were collected using a self-report questionnaire administered to the participants. Results of the path analysis revealed an acceptable fit for the model. A test of indirect effects indicates that forgiveness of others mediated the association between compassion for others and subjective well-being, and between self-compassion and subjective well-being. Theoretical and practical implications especially for Filipino counseling professionals are discussed.

Keywords Compassion for others · Self-compassion · Forgiveness of others · Forgiveness of self · Subjective well-being · Filipino counselors

Introduction

Counselors contribute to society by promoting psychological wellness and preventing psychological problems from further developing among their clients. Clients' safety, wellness, and self-improvement are some of the things that are given high importance in counseling practice. However, counselors are humans too. They may also experience burnout, dissatisfaction, distress, and negative emotions themselves. While they might have the advantage of possessing better knowledge about dealing with professional and personal problems, counselors are not immune from various threats to their well-being. Moreover, the professional practice of counselors in itself can be a source of challenges that may have psychological costs.

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For instance, mental health professionals who lack control of their workplace and are over-exposed to clients with serious trauma tend to show symptoms of compassion fatigue (McKim and Smith-Adcock 2014), and, similarly, counselors with maladaptive coping strategies and negative perceptions of their work tend to experience burnout (Thompson et al. 2014). While studies on subjective well-being are ubiquitous, there is a dearth of studies that particularly focus on some of the important factors that contribute to counselors' subjective well-being. The present study aims to contribute to this discussion by looking at how forgiveness mediates the relationship between compassion and subjective well-being among Filipino counselors and other professionals who provide counseling services.

Subjective well-being (SWB) refers to people's emotional and cognitive evaluation of how satisfying and fulfilling their lives are (Diener et al. 2003; Diener and Seligman 2004). One of the important constructs that has been demonstrated to contribute to greater subjective well-being is compassion (MacBeth and Gumley 2012; Zessin et al. 2015). Compassion may be directed to self or others. Self-compassion refers to acceptance and openness to one's own suffering and possessing a constructive attitude towards one's self (Neff 2003b). Compassion for others, on the other hand, includes recognition and understanding of the human suffering of others and recognition of the pain it brings as part of the human experience (Wispe 1991). Evidence from the extant literature on compassion suggests that compassionate individuals tend to have a higher sense of well-being (Baer et al. 2012; Neff et al. 2007a), relational well-being (Neff and Beretvas 2013; Neff and Pommier 2013; Yarnell and Neff 2013), and happiness (Neff et al. 2007a, b; Neff and Vonk 2009). A recent meta-analysis showed that people who are low in self-compassion tend to be more susceptible to psychopathology, which is manifested in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress (MacBeth and Gumley 2012).

A substantial number of studies have looked into compassion and its influence on well-being in different age groups, such as adolescents (Bluth and Blanton 2015; Lockard et al. 2014; Neff et al. 2007a, b; Wei et al. 2011), adults (Wei et al. 2011), older adults (Allen et al. 2011), special populations such as meditators and nonmeditators (Baer et al. 2012), university counseling clients (Lockard et al. 2014) and parents of children with autism (Neff 2014; Neff and Faso 2014). However, not much is known about the association of compassion and subjective well-being among counselors or counseling professionals. Furthermore, there seems to be a need to explain the mechanism in which compassion can lead to subjective well-being. The present study proposes that forgiveness can serve as one mechanism whereby compassion can contribute in explaining subjective well-being.

Forgiveness has received substantial interest in the field of positive psychology. Research on forgiveness seems to have a general consensus that the construct has two components: forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others (Ross et al. 2007). Forgiveness of self is when the person is the offender, aware of his or her wrongdoings and stops blaming themselves for their mistakes. The lack of self-forgiveness involves an intro-punitive style and tends to lead people to viewing the self as damaged and unworthy of acceptance (Maltby et al. 2001). Similarly, Lamb and Murphy (2012) pointed out that people who are less forgiving of themselves often feel rejected, lonely and unstable. On the other hand, forgiveness of others refers to a person choosing to forgive transgressors who have behaved unjustly towards them (Stralen and Covic 2006). Individuals who usually sympathize with others tend to be more willing to forgive (Ross et al. 2004). The lack of ability to forgive others reflects an extra-punitive style, where the person seeks revenge, holds grudges and continually blames others (Maltby et al. 2001). In terms of the link between forgiveness and compassion, previous research (Roxas et al. 2014)

revealed that self-compassion positively predicted forgiveness of others and self, whereas compassion for others positively predicted forgiveness of others only.

In terms of forgiveness and well-being, previous studies have focused on adolescents (Bono et al. 2008; Datu 2014; Hall and Fincham 2005; Wohl et al. 2008), adults (Allemand et al. 2012), older people (Krause and Ellison 2003), and psychotherapy outpatients (Toussaint and Friedman 2008). Individuals who forgive benefit by gaining a greater sense of subjective well-being (Witvliet et al. 2001; Witvliet and McCullough 2007; Worthington 2005), psychological well-being (Krause and Ellison 2003), and happiness (Maltby et al. 2004, 2005), where both forgiveness of others and forgiveness of self correlated positively with positive affect and correlated negatively with rumination, vengeance and hostility (Ross et al. 2004). Moreover, forgiveness was observed to be more closely linked to well-being when the person was relationally close to the transgressor before the occurrence of the transgression (Bono et al. 2008).

These findings seem to indicate that like compassion, forgiveness is also an important element in optimizing subjective well-being. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of studies that simultaneously examine the predictive association of the two types of forgiveness (of self and others) with subjective well-being. A review of the literature also indicates that the association of compassion, forgiveness, and subjective well-being have not been examined together.

Research on compassion and forgiveness has focused on various populations due to the awareness that people's experiences are unique to their respective situations, contexts, and stages of life. Hence, the presence of these peculiarities can facilitate or hinder the process of attaining their optimal well-being and psychological functioning. People in any situation in life need a certain level of compassion and forgiveness in order to be contented, happy, and satisfied. This is especially true among counseling clients who reach out for help due to the emotional distress that they experience (Lockard et al. 2014; Toussaint and Friedman 2008). Therefore, examining the associations of compassion (for self and others), forgiveness (of self and others), and subjective well-being (SWB) is meaningful in the counseling context.

Determining the association of compassion, forgiveness, and SWB could specifically be important for Filipino counselling professionals. In general, Filipinos are believed to have interdependent self-construal (Aruta 2016; Ishii et al. 2003). People with interdependent self-construal define the self as interconnected with other people, are highly sensitive to others, and prioritize maintenance of social harmony. On the other hand, people with independent self-construal (usually Western individuals) typically view the self as unique and autonomous, and express themselves independent of the situational context. Aside from an emphasis towards sensitivity to other people's feelings and situations in their professional training and practice, Filipino counseling professionals are likely to have a great inclination to be attuned to the needs of other people in order to maintain social harmony because of their interdependent cultural orientation (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

The Present Study

The present study proposed that forgiveness (of self and others) would have mediating effects on the association between compassion (for self and others) and SWB. More importantly, since Filipino counselors belong to an interdependent culture that has high affordance and expectation to be sensitive to the situation of others, and that their professional training puts high premium on interpersonal sensitivity, we hypothesized that forgiveness of others would have a

stronger mediating effect on the relationship between compassion (for self and for others) and SWB than does forgiveness of self. The present study aims to contribute to the existing body of literature by studying how positive resources such as compassion for self and others, and forgiveness of self and others, operate in order to optimize subjective well-being for Filipino counseling professionals. More specifically, we put-forward the proposition that like many psychological constructs, compassion, forgiveness, SWB and their interaction can be malleable to the socio-cultural contexts that Filipino counseling professionals have to constantly navigate.

The present study contributes to the theoretical discussion by: (1) demonstrating how compassion can optimize SWB through forgiveness as a mechanism that operates as a mediating factor; (2) looking into a lens that is aware of how culture could play a role on how compassion, forgiveness, and SWB operate; and, (3) testing how the said constructs are experienced by counseling professionals who encounter challenges that are unique to their professional practice. The research also has potential implications for counseling practice. Counselors and other mental health professionals could benefit from the results as it might potentially inform them to be aware about their own psychological responses from the challenges and setbacks experienced in the contexts of counseling work. As any counselor may know, reduced well-being as an individual may affect the way the person facilitates counseling engagement and interventions with clients—and worse, might compromise client welfare. Moreover, the recognition of how clients from interdependent cultures experience compassion and forgiveness can potentially assist counselors in conceptualizing, treatment planning, and facilitation of counseling interventions towards clients' optimal sense of well-being and psychological functioning.

The present study proposed a research model (see dynamics in Fig. 1) illustrating a conceptual process where both compassion for others and self-compassion predict forgiveness of others and forgiveness of self, which in turn predict subjective well-being. The research model was empirically tested through path analysis using the structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. Specifically, the paths from compassion (compassion for others, self-compassion) to forgiveness (forgiveness of others, forgiveness of self) and from forgiveness

Fig. 1 Proposed research model dynamic

to subjective well-being were tested and the overall model fit was assessed. Although some studies suggest that for some people forgiveness by God is an important element in forgiveness studies (e.g., Krause and Ellison 2003), the present study focused only on forgiveness of self and others.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants in the study involved a total of 231 school counselors, counseling psychologists and counselors-in-training currently enrolled in graduate programs in various colleges and universities in the National Capital Region in the Philippines. There were 58 males and 173 female participants (Mean age = 30.78 years, SD = 4.46, $N = 50$ did not indicate their age). After soliciting the participants' informed consent for the study, they were asked to respond to a self-report questionnaire consisting of measures of compassion, forgiveness and subjective well-being. Most of the participants responded to print copies of the questionnaire, while others responded to the online version made available by the researchers through a web link.

Measures

Compassion Scale (CS; Pommier 2010)

This scale was used to measure the participants' compassion for others. The scale has 24 items that correspond to the three components of compassion for others. Participants had to indicate the frequency of their experiences in relation to each item using a scale from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always). Half of the items are negatively-stated and were reverse-scored prior to data analysis. Sample items are: "If I see someone going through a difficult time, I try to be caring toward that person" (kindness), "Everyone feels down sometimes, it is part of being human" (common humanity), and "I pay careful attention when other people talk to me" (mindfulness). The items were combined to form a compassion scale ($\alpha = .82$), and the means were computed to obtain the participants' compassion for others scores.

Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff 2003a)

This scale was used to measure the participants' self-compassion. It has 26 items that correspond to the three components of self-compassion. Participants also had to indicate the frequency of their experiences in relation to each item using a scale from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always). Thirteen items are negatively-stated and were reverse-scored prior to data analysis. Sample items are: "I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain" (self-kindness), "When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through" (common humanity), and "When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance" (mindfulness). The items were combined to form a self-compassion scale ($\alpha = .85$) and the means were computed to obtain the participants' self-compassion scores.

Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS; Thompson et al. 2005)

This is a 12-item scale that was used to measure the participants' level of forgiveness of others and forgiveness of self (6 items for each subscale). The items refer to statements about forgiveness that the participants need to respond to based on their personal experiences. Participants had to indicate whether each item was true or false using a scale from 1 (Almost always false of me) to 7 (Almost always true of me). Six of the twelve items were negatively stated and were reverse-scored prior to data analysis. The mean of all the responses in each of the two subscales was computed to obtain the participants' forgiveness of others and forgiveness of self scores. Sample items are: "When someone disappoints me, I can eventually move past it" (forgiveness of others; $\alpha = .64$) and "Learning from bad things that I've done helps me get over them" (forgiveness of self; $\alpha = .75$).

Subjective Well-Being Scale for Filipinos- Short Form (SWBSF-SF; Hernandez 2010)

This is an 11-item scale used to measure the participants' subjective well-being. Participants had to indicate their agreement and disagreement in relation to each item using a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). Sample items are: "I feel good about myself" and "I am satisfied with the decisions I made in the past." The items were combined to form a subjective well-being scale ($\alpha = .84$), and the means were computed to obtain the participants' subjective well-being scores.

Results

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis) are shown in Table 1. Bivariate correlations among the variables in the study ranged from .10 to .63 and all were significant ($p < .01$), except for the correlations between compassion for others and forgiveness of self, and between forgiveness of self and subjective well-being. For the path analysis, several indices of goodness-of-fit for the research model were considered in consonance with the need to consider multiple criteria in evaluating model fit (Schermele-Engel et al. 2003). These were Chi square (χ^2), ratio of chi square to degrees of freedom (χ^2/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and the root mean square of approximation (RMSEA). The following criteria were used to determine fit: CFI and TLI should at least be .90 (Browne and Cudeck 1993); RMSEA should not be higher than .08 (Browne and Cudeck 1993); χ^2 should not be significant; and χ^2/df should be 3.0 or less (Hoe 2008).

The results of the path analysis suggested that the research model did not fit the data well, as only the CFI met the criteria for a good fitting model: χ^2 (3, $N = 231$) = 11.783, $p < 0.008$; $\chi^2/df = 3.93$; CFI = .96, RMSEA = 0.113. The results of the path analysis show that the

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the variables in the study

Variable	Possible Range	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
1 Compassion for Others	1.00–5.00	3.90	.39	−.60	.13
2 Self-Compassion	1.00–5.00	3.54	.43	.59	.57
3 Forgiveness of Others	1.00–7.00	5.08	.86	−.13	−.99
4 Forgiveness of Self	1.00–7.00	5.36	.78	−.50	.42

following paths were significant: compassion for others and self-compassion to forgiveness of others; self-compassion to forgiveness of self; forgiveness of others to subjective well-being. The paths from compassion for others to forgiveness of self and from forgiveness of self to subjective well-being were not significant. Since the fit of the path model was far from adequate, the model was revised by removing the non-significant paths. The revised research model was then re-analyzed. The path analysis of the revised model results showed an improved fit ($\chi^2 [5, N = 231] = 14.716, p < 0.012; \chi^2/df = 2.943; CFI = .96, TLI = .92, RMSEA = 0.092$). The significant paths obtained are similar to the results of the original model: compassion for others predicted forgiveness of others ($\beta = .35; p < .001$), self-compassion predicted forgiveness of self ($\beta = .62; p < .001$) and forgiveness of others ($\beta = .33; p < .001$), and forgiveness of others predicted subjective well-being ($\beta = .29; p < .001$).

To examine whether forgiveness of others mediated the association between self-compassion and subjective well-being and between compassion for others and subjective well-being, a bootstrap procedure was performed. Shrout and Bolger (2002) recommended such a procedure to test the significance level of indirect effects. This statistical method allows estimation of the sampling distribution. Using this method, a total of 1000 bootstrap estimates were used to calculate the indirect effects. Results indicated that the mean indirect effects were significant based on the 95% level of confidence interval. The hypotheses that forgiveness of others mediates the association of compassion for others with subjective well-being (indirect effect = .093; CI = .048, .158) and the association of self-compassion with subjective well-being (indirect effect = .082; CI = .052, .143) were confirmed by the results of the bootstrap procedure.

Discussion

The main objective of the present study was to determine the mediating effects of each type of forgiveness (of self and others) on the association between compassion (for self and for others) and SWB. We hypothesized that forgiveness (of self and others) would have significant mediating effects on the said association, but predicted that forgiveness of others would be a stronger mediator. Consistent with previous research on the association between compassion and forgiveness (McCullough and Witvliet 2002; Roxas et al. 2014), self-compassion was found to significantly predict self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others. This implies that people who view themselves kindly are more inclined to forgive ones' self and other people. On the other hand, forgiveness of others was only associated with compassion for others. Although the findings support the notion that compassion for others and self-compassion go hand-in-hand, a person who is compassionate to others may not be compassionate to one's self. There are people who seem to easily show kindness and forgiveness to others but are critical of themselves (Mistler 2010).

The results also corroborated previous studies showing that forgiveness predicts subjective well-being (c.f., Hill and Allemand 2011; Bono et al. 2008; Maltby et al. 2004, 2005; Toussaint and Friedman 2008; Witvliet et al. 2001; Witvliet and McCullough 2007; Wohl et al. 2008; Worthington 2005). More specifically, the results imply that forgiving others is associated with higher SWB because forgiveness provides a person a sense of peace and restores relationships with others (Karremans et al. 2003). Inversely, failure to forgive might bring about psychological costs to oneself, which is likely to involve a substantial decline in one's well-being. For a counseling professional, providing counseling services while

experiencing dissatisfaction in one's own well-being might turn out to be harmful not only to oneself but also to the clients that they handle. The results of the present study serve as a reminder to counselors to consider self-care by being more forgiving, because of its potential to facilitate optimal sense of well-being. This is not only important for them, but more importantly for client welfare.

The results that self-compassion and compassion for others predict SWB through forgiveness of others are consistent with previous empirical evidences indicating the association between compassion and SWB (c.f., Allen et al. 2011; Baer et al. 2012; Bluth and Blanton 2014, 2015; Neff 2011; Neff and Faso 2014; Neff et al. 2007a, b; Wei et al. 2011; Zessin et al. 2015). The present study extended the results of these previous studies by providing evidence that compassion and self-compassion have indirect effects on SWB through forgiveness of others. This indicates that among the Filipino counseling professionals who participated in the study, being compassionate about or having a positive attitude towards one's own and others' suffering contribute to being more forgiving of others, which in turn contribute to a greater sense of subjective well-being. This is consistent with our previous argument that the typical interdependent self-construal of Filipino counselors affords them to be more sensitive to others and to give importance to social harmony when interacting with other people. Thus, being compassionate of others and self allows them to be more forgiving of other people. And since the experience of being forgiving is in congruence with the Filipino counselors' interdependent cultural orientation, being forgiving leads to a more optimal sense of well-being.

Contrary to our earlier hypothesis, forgiveness of self by Filipino counseling professionals did not mediate the associations of compassion for self and for others with subjective well-being. Nevertheless, the results remain consistent with the framework that the present study has put forward. As the results suggest that forgiveness of others is a more viable path from compassion to forgiveness, we argue that this is a clear demonstration that forgiveness of others is given greater cultural affordance among Filipino counseling professionals, who are believed to have interdependent self-construal (Legaspi 2017; Markus and Kitayama 1991). We emphasize that this should not be interpreted that self-forgiveness is not important to Filipino counselors. The findings elucidated that while self-forgiveness is important, forgiving others may receive greater social approval and cultural affordance, which strongly contributes to Filipino counselors sense of well-being. One possible explanation is that since individuals with interdependent self-construal define the self as part of a social entity (Diener et al. 2003; Markus and Kitayama 1991), forgiving others may also directly implicate the self where the person experiences the same psychological benefits of self-forgiveness—which involves greater subjective well-being, in the case of the present study. Maintaining social harmony, preserving, and restoring interpersonal relationships are the benefits of forgiving others (Karremans et al. 2003), which are known to be a cultural priority in interdependent cultures (Markus and Kitayama 1991) like the Philippines. This remains true even among people with specific social roles such as professional counselors. Consistent with the findings of Diener et al. (2003), results of this study suggest that Filipino counselors derive more resources from healthy social relationships in optimizing their sense of subjective well-being.

The limitations of the present study offers opportunities for future research: 1) Since the study targetted counseling professionals, we suggest that future researchers consider testing the hypotheses with other mental health professionals (e.g., psychologists and psychiatrists) or other professions that provide human services (e.g., nurses and teachers) where the experience of compassion, forgiveness, and subjective well-being are important in the practice of their profession. Since experience, challenges, and setbacks can be peculiar depending on one's social role, this may provide additional insights on how the variables operate in individuals

from other type of professions. 2) The present research was conducted among Filipino counseling professionals. Although the findings confirmed the cultural argument of the study, it may be imperative to conduct cross-cultural comparisons (e.g., counselors from Western versus non-Western countries) in order to demonstrate cultural differences. 3) Given that the study used a non-experimental design, cause and effect cannot be established. Future researchers may design experiments that will demonstrate how forgiveness operates as a mechanism that explains the association between compassion and subjective well-being.

In spite of the aforementioned limitations, the present study contributes to the extant literature in several ways. Firstly, by demonstrating that forgiveness of others can be an explanatory mechanism that could, at least partly, shed light on how compassion enhances the sense of well-being among Filipino counsellors and other counseling professionals. This suggests that when an individual is compassionate for their own self and for other people, it is likely that they would develop a greater sense of well-being, because being compassionate to self and others would enable them to forgive others who might have committed transgressions towards them. The recognition that one's pain and the pain that others experience are part of human life is beneficial to one's mental health. This may lead to better understanding of ones' self and the condition of other people, which increases one's inclination to forgive others' faults and transgressions. Secondly, the present study provided evidence on how culture might affect the explanatory mechanisms such as forgiveness that operate to optimize well-being among individuals who belong in an interdependent culture like the Philippines. In our findings, we found that forgiveness of others, but not forgiveness of self mediated the relationship between compassion (for self and others) and subjective well-being. Since forgiving others manifests interpersonal sensitivity and promotes social harmony, which is of highest cultural priority in an interdependent culture, such experiences of forgiveness are likely to lead to a higher sense of subjective well-being. Thirdly, the present study advanced the discussion in the literature by testing the relationships among compassion, forgiveness, and SWB among counseling professionals. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to test the mediating effects of forgiveness on the relationship between compassion and subjective well-being among counseling professionals.

The findings of the study suggest important implications to the practice of counseling, providing meaningful information in optimizing the wellness of counseling professionals. Given that self-compassion and compassion for others predict subjective well-being, practicing counsellors, counseling psychologists, and other counseling professionals are encouraged to capitalize on designing and implementing interventions that enhance compassion both for themselves and for clients. Since the findings were derived from counselors as participants, utilizing the same interventions that promote compassion for self and others among practicing counselors seem imperative. By doing this, the practice of counseling can be more efficient and effective without compromising counselor wellness and client welfare and safety. Moreover, counseling professionals are also recommended to integrate compassion into implementing treatments for clients who experience depression, anxiety, and other related mental health issues. In addition, the insight that forgiving others explains how subjective well-being is optimized among people from interdependent cultures can serve as the basis for designing and implementing counseling and other psychological interventions. Placing forgiveness at the core of the intervention or treatment and highlighting its importance in preserving and restoring relationships can potentially enhance the sense of well-being of distressed clients. This is especially true among clients with forgiveness issues.

The present study also recognizes the important role of culture in the development and treatment of mental health or psychological issues. Counseling professionals are encouraged to incorporate culture in the conceptualization, planning, and treatment of mental health or psychological issues. These implications may guide counselors in promoting and accessing counselors and clients' optimal sense of subjective well-being.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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