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Research Article

Structural Relationship between Parental Attachment Recognition and Fear of Compassion: The Mediating Role of the Cognitive Triad

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Abstract

Background: Fear of compassion is a psychological construct that hinders individuals from receiving, expressing, or directing compassion toward themselves, thereby increasing vulnerability to distress.

Objectives: Given the role of early attachment and cognitive processes in emotional functioning, this study examined the mediating role of the cognitive triad in the relationship between parental attachment and fear of compassion.

Methods: This cross-sectional study employed structural equation modeling (SEM) among 310 students at Salman Farsi University of Kazeroon (2022–2023), selected via convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Fear of Compassion Scale (FCS), Parental Attachment Recognition Scale (PARS), and Cognitive Triad Inventory (CTI), and analyzed using SPSS 22 and AMOS 24.

Results: The findings showed that parental attachment significantly predicted both the cognitive triad and fear of compassion. In addition, the cognitive triad was significantly associated with fear of compassion. Bootstrap analyses further indicated that the cognitive triad significantly mediated the relationship between parental attachment and fear of compassion. The proposed model accounted for approximately 50% of the variance in fear of compassion, highlighting the substantial contribution of cognitive processes to this relationship.

Conclusion: The findings support the mediating role of the cognitive triad in the relationship between parental attachment and fear of compassion. These results suggest that maladaptive cognitive beliefs constitute an important psychological mechanism through which early attachment experiences influence fear of compassion. Accordingly, interventions targeting dysfunctional cognitive schemas while strengthening secure attachment representations may help reduce fear of compassion and promote psychological well-being.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Compassion has long been regarded as a fundamental virtue across religious, philosophical, and psychological traditions. In recent decades, it has received increasing empirical attention because of its substantial contribution to psychological well-being, emotion regulation, resilience, interpersonal functioning, and overall mental health. Compassion refers to sensitivity to one's own and others' suffering, accompanied by a genuine commitment to alleviate or prevent that suffering. Despite its adaptive nature, compassion is not experienced positively by everyone. Some individuals perceive giving, receiving, or directing compassion toward themselves as threatening, a phenomenon conceptualized by Gilbert as fear of compassion. Fear of compassion has been linked to depression, anxiety, shame, self-criticism, emotion dysregulation, and various forms of psychopathology. Attachment theory proposes that early caregiving experiences shape internal working models that influence individuals' perceptions of themselves, others, and interpersonal relationships. Secure attachment provides a foundation for trust, emotional security, and openness to receiving care, whereas insecure attachment increases vulnerability, interpersonal distrust, and defensive responses to compassion. Previous research has consistently identified attachment as an important antecedent of fear of compassion; however, the psychological mechanisms underlying this relationship remain insufficiently understood. From a cognitive perspective, early attachment experiences contribute to the development of fundamental beliefs about the self, the world, and the future. According to Beck's cognitive theory, these beliefs constitute the cognitive triad, which plays a central role in emotional functioning and psychological vulnerability. Individuals with insecure attachment are more likely to develop maladaptive cognitive schemas, increasing their tendency to perceive compassion as unsafe or undeserved. Therefore, this study investigated whether the cognitive triad mediates the relationship between parental attachment and fear of compassion among university students.

Method

This correlational study employed structural equation modeling (SEM). The study population comprised students enrolled at Salman Farsi University of Kazeroon during the 2022–2023 academic year. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling using an online survey, and 310 completed questionnaires were included in the final analysis. Data were collected using the Fear of Compassion Scale (FCS), the Parental Attachment Recognition Scale (PARS), and the Cognitive Triad Inventory (CTI). In the proposed structural model, parental attachment was specified as the exogenous latent variable, fear of compassion as the endogenous latent variable, and the negative cognitive triad as the mediating variable. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 22 and AMOS version 24. Prior to hypothesis testing, assumptions including normality, multicollinearity, and overall model fit were examined. Indirect effects were assessed using bootstrap procedures with 95% confidence intervals.

Results

The proposed structural model demonstrated satisfactory fit, indicating that it adequately

represented the observed data. Structural equation modeling revealed that parental attachment significantly predicted both the cognitive triad and fear of compassion. Furthermore, the cognitive triad was positively associated with fear of compassion. Bootstrap analyses confirmed that the indirect effect of parental attachment on fear of compassion through the cognitive triad was statistically significant, supporting the proposed mediation model. Overall, the structural model explained approximately 50% of the variance in fear of compassion, suggesting that cognitive processes represent an important mechanism through which attachment experiences influence emotional responses to compassion.

Discussion

The findings provide strong evidence that the negative cognitive triad serves as a key psychological mechanism linking parental attachment to fear of compassion. These results are consistent with previous research demonstrating the enduring influence of early attachment experiences on later emotional functioning. Specifically, insecure attachment appears to foster persistent negative beliefs about the self, others, and the future, thereby increasing vulnerability to fear of compassion. Individuals with negative self-beliefs may experience excessive self-criticism and perceive themselves as undeserving of kindness. Similarly, negative beliefs about others may lead individuals to interpret compassionate behavior as intrusive, manipulative, or conditional. A pessimistic view of the future may further reinforce the belief that compassion is ineffective or ultimately disappointing. These findings have important clinical implications. Interventions aimed at modifying dysfunctional cognitive schemas, particularly negative core beliefs about the self, others, and the future, may help reduce fear of compassion and enhance psychological well-being. Such interventions may be especially beneficial for individuals who have experienced cold, neglectful, or abusive parenting. Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, while the use of convenience sampling and self-report measures may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs and more diverse, representative samples to further clarify the causal mechanisms underlying these relationships. Despite these limitations, the present study advances the theoretical understanding of fear of compassion by identifying the cognitive triad as a significant mediating mechanism linking parental attachment to fear of compassion. The findings also provide valuable implications for the development of cognitive and attachment-based interventions designed to reduce fear of compassion and promote psychological well-being.

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