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Self-compassion in Chinese Young Adults: Specific Features of the Construct from a Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

Objectives Recentresearch has suggested that Chinese individuals from a collectivist culture may have a different understanding of self-compassion, which could differentially contribute to mental health. This study aimed to obtain an in-depth insight into Chinese adults' understanding of self-compassion.

Methods Four online focus groups in Chinese undergraduates discussed the construct of self-compassion based on self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Results Chinese participants valued benign self-criticism and self-reflection when contemplating their understanding of self-compassion. Similarly, participants' view of self-compassion dimensions can be described as dialectical in that they reflected both negative and positive perceptions in each factor rather than suggesting separate and purely negative or purely positive dimensions. There was also an overlap in the interpretation of the negative dimensions (self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification).

Conclusions The findings highlight particularities in the understanding of self-compassion in these Chinese students, which may be influenced by philosophical traditions promoting dialecticism and the dual focus on the transformation of the self and social participation. This suggests the importance of a cultural perspective when studying self-compassion and interpreting relevant research findings.

Keyword Self-compassion · Collectivist culture · Dialecticism · Confucianism · Chinese culture

Self-compassion has beneficial effects on mental health (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012) and can be cultivated in mental health interventions (Barnard & Curry, 2011). However, several psychometric studies of self-compassion have failed to replicate the original factor structure in Chinese samples (Neff et al., 2019; Tóth-Király & Neff, 2020), which suggests that participants from different cultural backgrounds may perceive this construct differently (Montero-Marin et al., 2018; Neff et al., 2008). Additionally, there is a lack of qualitative research that explores how participants from a specific population view self-compassion to help understand the views of Chinese young adults about self-compassion that might explain these psychometric findings.

Self-compassion is defined as a kind and compassionate attitude towards oneself in relation to challenge and inadequacy (Gilbert et al., 2017; Neff, 2003; Strauss et al., 2016) and is a multidimensional construct (Neff, 2016). Self-compassionate individuals can meet challenges with kindness and understanding (self-kindness) rather than harshly judging or blaming oneself (self-judgment). Additionally, individuals understand their difficulties, failure, or inadequacies as a shared experience with other human beings (common humanity) rather than feeling the difficulties only happen to them (isolation). Furthermore, to process a difficult situation, self-compassionate individuals use a mindful and balanced way (mindfulness) rather than being carried away by their emotions (over-identification). This definition is reflected in the six subscales

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of the self-compassion scale (SCS; Neff, 2003), currently the most widely used measure of self-compassion across cultures (Neff et al., 2019).

Despite the wide use of the SCS, the originally proposed six-factor structure was not replicated in samples from several countries (Neff et al., 2019), including Japan and several studies from China (Neff et al., 2019; Tsai, 2015; Zeng et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2021). Chinese studies supported a novel 4-factor structure of self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness, and a single negative factor, rather than separate factors for self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification (Tsai, 2015). Even when successfully replicating the six-factor structure, Chen et al. (2011) reported low internal consistency ($\alpha < 0.60$) for the self-kindness, self-judgment, and over-identification subscales in a group of undergraduate students using the Chinese version of the self-compassion scale (SCS-C). The findings suggest a possible cultural difference in the understanding of self-compassion among Chinese young adults.

Self-construal theory (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) has proven useful for understanding cultural differences in psychological constructs. A self-construal is the extent to which a person's self-definition is determined by their relatedness to others. This theory proposes that an interdependent self-construal, accompanied by a focus on social harmony and interpersonal connectedness, is dominant when relating to self and others for individuals in collectivistic cultures such as in China. In contrast, individuals in individualistic cultures (e.g. USA) highly value personal goals and autonomy and prioritize personal needs as part of an independent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Given the importance of how individuals relate to themselves and others for self-compassion, culturally shaped social norms could influence how individuals view self-compassion and how they complete the self-compassion scale.

Little research has been conducted on self-construal theory in relation to the self-compassion construct. Neff et al. (2008) used a survey design to assess the association between different self-construals (independence vs interdependence) and self-compassion to explore cultural differences in undergraduate samples from Taiwan, Thailand (both collectivist), and the USA (individualist). USA undergraduates reported a high level of self-compassion, and in line with the self-construal theory, the total score of self-compassion and the scores of several subscales were associated with higher levels of independence. Thai students reported the highest levels of self-compassion, but these were only associated with levels of interdependence. In contrast, Taiwanese students had the lowest levels of self-compassion, while interestingly their subscale scores were associated with both independence and interdependence.

These findings suggest cultural differences in self-compassion that may extend beyond the simple collectivist/individualist dimensions.

Long-term orientation (Hofstede, 2011; also referred to as Confucian dynamism, Hofstede & Bond, 1988) is a term used to describe cultures which tend to focus on long-term outcomes, and individuals in such a culture value "perseverance, thrift, ordering relationships by status, and having a sense of shame" (Hofstede, 2011, p.13), which share similarities with Confucianism. The regions heavily influenced by Confucianism ranked highly in the long-term orientation list, such as mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Thus, long-term orientation may be a unique cultural factor contributing to views of self-compassion in Chinese samples. Montero-Marin et al. (2018) found that long-term orientation may influence the understanding of the items from the positive subscales of the SCS (i.e. self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) in young adult samples from eleven countries. They interpreted this finding by suggesting that participants from long-term orientation cultures were more likely to analyse and learn from negative experiences and seek to build resilience from failure. Although there were no Chinese samples included in the study of Montero-Marin et al. (2018), their conclusion suggests that being heavily influenced by Confucianism might contribute to cultural differences in the understanding of self-compassion in Chinese samples.

Despite the need for qualitative research on the perception of self-compassion, which has been highlighted recently (Tóth-Király & Neff, 2020), there are few studies available and these have predominantly investigated how clients perceive therapeutic change (Gilmour, 2014) or how clinical practitioners who use the approach in their therapeutic work understand self-compassion (Wiklund Gustin & Wagner, 2013). There is also limited research focusing on the understanding of different dimensions of self-compassion. An in-depth understanding of self-compassion from the perspective of collectivist cultures, such as China, is currently lacking. Assuming that participants' preconceptions about self-compassion and familiarity with the concept will influence how they understand the items and answer the questionnaire, qualitative approaches that explore participants' understanding of self-compassion could help explain previous findings from SCS validation studies (Neff et al., 2019; Tsai, 2015; Zeng et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2021).

This study, therefore, aimed to explore how Chinese young adults understand the different dimensions of the self-compassion scale–Chinese version (SCS-C) using focus groups that selected participants with low or high levels of self-compassion from a quantitative study (Zhao et al., 2021).

Method

Participants

The participants were sampled from a larger psychometric study (Zhao et al., 2021) in which participants completed the self-compassion scale on two separate occasions. To be included in the sample frame, participants were required to have attended both assessments ($n = 187$), to score in the highest or lowest 27% (Kelley, 1939), and ideally to have a small difference in scores across time points (e.g. less than 10).

In order to follow guidelines for conducting focus groups which require homogeneity to encourage participants discuss the topic (Morgan, 1996; Smithson, 2019), we set focus groups by gender and by the levels of self-compassion. This also created comparative groups and allowed us to check potential group differences in later data analyses (Morgan, 1996). We targeted four groups: female high scorers, male high scorers, female low scorers, and male low scorers, which is in line with recommendations by Smithson (2019) that 4–6 homogenous groups are deemed sufficient to explore a narrow research topic. Out of 32 invitees, 27 participants agreed and joined the sequential group discussion: low-score male group ($N = 7$, $M_{age} = 18.86$, $SD_{age} = 0.69$; group 1), low-score female group ($N = 7$, $M_{age} = 18.71$, $SD_{age} = 0.95$; group 2), high-score male group ($N = 5$, $M_{age} = 19.00$, $SD_{age} = 0.71$; group 3), and high-score female group ($N = 8$, $M_{age} = 19.13$, $SD_{age} = 0.83$; group 4). It should be noted that 7 participants had a score difference higher than 10 but were included in order to recruit enough participants. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University (UK, eCLESPsy000574 v4.1), and participants gave written informed consent.

Procedure

Before initiating the online focus group discussion, participants received the participant information sheet and informed consent form. Demographic data, including age and gender, had been collected in the initial psychometric study. Due to the geographical distance between participants and moderator, we conducted synchronous online focus groups, which are similar to traditional focus groups (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). Specifically, we used Chinese online social media (QQ) and the group discussions were led and moderated by the first author (MZ) and lasted approximately 1 h. During the online discussion, participants joined the corresponding online chat group and the moderator posted the questions in the group and steered the conversation. All participants typed their answers to ensure confidentiality given shared accommodation at their universities. For each question, each participant gave their thoughts and they also interacted with each other. To facilitate more openness and anonymity in online groups (Smithson, 2019), participants used pseudonyms.

Measures

Focus Group Discussion Schedule The focus group discussion schedule was a translated version of the schedule used in previous research (Gilmour, 2014), developed to explore each of the six factors from the self-compassion scale (Neff, 2003): self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness, self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification. At the beginning, a general instruction was given: "Take a few moments to think about something important to you but you failed or did not do as well as you had expected in the past, try to remember what was going through your mind and what your 'inner voice' was saying." After that, we asked participants to discuss how they felt and thought about six statements. Gilmour (2014) selected one statement for each dimension from SCS to provide a specific example (i.e. When you failed in the important thing, …) to help participants to discuss their thoughts and opinion of the dimensions of self-compassion (e.g. common humanity, "When you failed in the important thing, I try to remind myself that failures are shared by most people"; specific statement can be seen in the supplementary material Table S1). The Chinese version was translated by the first author (MZ) and reviewed by a native Chinese speaker whose research area is mindfulness (DZ).

Data Analyses

All data were analysed using thematic analysis (TA): a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We took a realistic approach in that we interpreted participants' responses to be indicative of their actual experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Groups were treated as the unit of analysis, with the following steps: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report.

The first four steps were completed in Chinese, while the theme maps were translated into English. In order to increase reliability, two coders generated the initial codes for all the focus groups (MZ and NYBW), which were double-checked by another two native Chinses speakers (YL and NS), after resolving initial discrepancies. After this initial coding, MZ searched and reviewed themes, and NYBW double-checked the themes and assisted with

the translation of the themes into English. Once MZ and NYBW agreed on the themes, a psychological therapist working in the USA (Chinese native speaker, JL) double-checked their translation, which was reviewed by an experienced qualitative researcher and native English speaker (JS) and an experienced self-compassion researcher (AK). (Please review Table S2 for TA steps.)

Results

Table 1 illustrates the themes identified for each of the factors (i.e. self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness, self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification) from the focus group discussions.

Understanding of Self-kindness

Self-comfort Giving oneself the caring one needs was identified as a way to soothe negative emotions (e.g. frustration, self-doubt) after failure and was mentioned by all groups. Various methods of self-comfort were identified, such as

leisure activities (e.g. "I would try to do something I enjoy, like shopping and singing, to soothe my mood", group 2), positive self-talk (e.g. "I can do better next time", group 2), and reflecting on the failure in order to solve the problem (e.g. "Normally, I would identify my weaknesses…", group 4). Groups 1, 2, and 4 mentioned that self-kindness shows self-confidence in dealing with the next challenge, as mentioned by group 1: "Self-caring is the rebuilding of self-confidence, which was damaged by failure. This process requires courage."

Self-pity All groups reported that they struggled to be kind to themselves. Groups 1 and 2 mentioned that they tended to get carried away with their emotional responses to failure and that they needed care from others in these situations. For example, "I don't feel this statement make sense. After failing in something, I am always wallowing in failure. The care I need has to come from others, and I cannot give myself the care I need." (group 1).

All groups also mentioned that their ability to be kind to themselves depended on the situation. For example, one failed after not putting in sufficient effort and therefore felt it would not be appropriate to comfort oneself with positive

Table 1 Themes

Components of self-compassion	Global themes	Specific themes (groups)
Self-kindness	Self-pity	Excuses for failure (1,2, 4); Rumination on failure (1, 2); Excessive self-kindness is pessimism (1, 4);
	Self-comfort	Leisure activities (2, 3, 4); Emotion regulation (1, 2, 3, 4); Self-confidence (1, 3, 4); Problem solving (1, 2, 3, 4); Self-encouragement (1, 2, 3, 4)
Common humanity	Self-comfort	Universality (1, 2, 3, 4); Emotion regulation (1, 2, 3, 4); Avoid rumination on failure (4)
	Coping strategies	Self-deception (1, 4); Problem solving (1, 3, 4); Successful cases as a motivator (2, 3, 4); Needing a positive self-adjustment (3, 4); Excuses for failure (1, 2, 4)
	Individuality	Self-focused (1,2); Variability in failure experiences (1,4)
Mindfulness	Emotion regulation	Emotion stability (1, 2, 3, 4); Avoid wallowing in negative emotions (1, 2, 3, 4); Emotion awareness and acceptance (2, 3, 4)
	Decision making	Analysing the causes (1, 4); Problem solving (1, 2, 4)
	Self-image management	Avoid affecting others (1, 2, 3, 4); Saving faces (1, 2, 3, 4); A sign of maturity (1, 2)
	Emotion suppression	Need to release emotion (1, 2, 3, 4); Wallow in a low mood (1, 2, 4); Superficially calm (1, 2, 4)
Self-judgment	Self-criticism as an adaptive strategy	Improvement (1, 2, 3, 4); Self-knowledge (1, 2, 3, 4); Habit (1, 2, 3, 4); Problem solving (1, 4); Guilt (1)
	Self-criticism as undermining	Self-blame (1, 3, 4); Inferiority (1, 4); Guilt (1)
Isolation	Social comparison	Social comparison (1, 2, 4)
	Negative thoughts	Exaggeration (1); Pessimism (1, 2, 3); Vicious cycle (1, 2)
	Self-undermining	Self-blame (1, 2, 3, 4); Self-denial (1, 4); Inferiority (1, 2, 3, 4)
Over-Identification	Common phenomenon	Common phenomenon (1,2,3,4)
	Negative outcomes	Rumination (1, 2, 3, 4); Negative emotions (1, 2, 3, 4); Vicious cycle (1, 2, 4)
	Self-undermining	Self-dissatisfaction (2, 4); Self-blame (2, 4); Inferiority (2)
	Benefits	Helpful for reflection, as a reminder (3, 4); Motivation (3, 4); Easier to seek support (1);

1, group 1 (low-score male); 2, group 2 (low-score female); 3, group 3 (high-score female); 4, group 4 (high-score female)

self-talk. Instead, they believed that self-criticism was appropriate in this context, and that self-kindness was akin to making excuses for one's mistake. They expressed that self-kindness could lead to self-pity and hindered people from progress and success. Groups 1 and 4 explicitly stated that excessive self-kindness is the same as pessimism, as mentioned in the quotation: "So it depends on different circumstances. Sometimes, it is understandable to take care of oneself to soothe internal frustration, but we cannot engage in self-pity. It is important to reflect on your problems and then give appropriate self-comfort or self-encouragement". (group 4).

In brief, self-kindness was described as different ways to deal with negative emotions when experiencing failure (e.g. engaging in some leisure activities, positive self-talk, analysis of the situation, and reflection). This confirmed the definition of self-kindness as "being gentle, supportive, and understanding toward oneself" (Neff, 2016, p. 265), and as a compassionate emotional response to failure (Neff, 2016). However, inappropriate or excessive self-kindness was perceived as a form of self-pity. All groups highlighted that giving self-kindness should depend on the situation.

Understanding of Common Humanity

Self-comfort All groups agreed that everyone experiences failure, which in itself is a form of self-comfort, as group 4 said "Life is never going smoothly, and everyone, more or less, goes through failure". This form of self-comfort can prevent rumination about failures, as indicated by participants from group 4 who mentioned that this self-comfort can help people to "avoid wallowing in the failure" and "get out of failure quickly". Therefore, all groups agreed that self-comfort assisted in regulating negative emotions. Remembering that failure affects everyone helps to "get rid of negative emotions" (group 3), reduce negative thoughts, "face failure calmly" (group 1), and "motivate to move forward" (group 2). For example, group 4 mentioned: "When we make mistakes, we tend to think of ourselves as worthless. At that time, if we thought about the fact that other people make mistakes too, we would bring ourselves to their level to reduce the negative self-suggestions".

Coping Strategies All groups stated that, rather than reminding oneself that failure affects everyone, they tend to use a more positive way to adjust themselves (e.g. "I don't believe it as a common thing that happens to everyone. Instead, I should think that we have weaknesses, and we should analyse and improve ourselves", group 3) because they perceived self-comfort as excusing the failure instead of facing

and reflecting on it (e.g. "This would just be making unnecessary excuses for my own failure", group 1). More specifically, they wanted to reflect on the failure to learn from their mistakes in order to solve problems or succeed next time (e.g. "we should reflect on ourselves", group 4). Groups 2, 3, and 4 mentioned that they would rather learn from or be motivated by successful cases than from the reminder that failure is universal because success is also universal (e.g. "I will think of how successful people deal with their failure rather than focusing on failure itself", group 3).

Individuality Groups 1 and 2 mentioned that they are more likely to focus on themselves rather than connecting their experiences to others (e.g. "After experiencing failure, I would focus on myself instead of comparing myself with my peers or others", group 1). Secondly, because of variability in failure experiences (e.g. "it is impossible to say that everyone's experience is the same", group 4), groups 1 and 4 stated that reminding oneself that failures are shared by most people is an escape from facing the failure.

In summary, participants agreed that everyone experiences failure as indicated by the theme "universality", which is consistent with the definition, "acknowledge the shared nature of imperfection" (Neff, 2016, p. 270). At the same time, participants from these all groups regarded this as a potentially negative coping strategy, which can lead to making excuses for one's own failures and self-deception, which is in contrast to the definition, "cognitively understand their suffering with a sense of common humanity" (Neff, 2016, p. 269). Furthermore, participants from these four groups mentioned that they tended not to choose this way to adjust themselves, which might explain the low internal consistency of common humanity in previous studies (e.g. Chen et al., 2011).

Understanding of Mindfulness

Emotion Regulation Emotion regulation was one of the key themes that emerged. For all groups, they described that keeping their emotions in balance helped to regulate their emotions in order to avoid going to extremes (e.g. "If one doesn't keep the emotion in balance, their behavior might get affected by negative emotions, and they do something they would later regret", group 1). The groups also mentioned that emotion regulation is important to avoid negative emotions. Three participants from groups 2, 3, and 4 mentioned that this helps them to be objectively aware of and calmly accept their emotions (e.g. "It is difficult to be aware of the emotion that the one is going through, and it is even more difficult than analyzing one's emotion", group 3).

Decision Making Secondly, keeping emotionally balanced was considered important for making safe and sound decisions (e.g. "one must keep the emotions in balance in order to think calmly and make the right decision", group 1). Specifically, several participants from groups 1, 2, and 4 mentioned that keeping their emotions balanced helps them to think calmly, analyse their failures, and select appropriate solutions or plans (e.g. "It can help you to calmly analyse the cause of failure and be ready for the next attempt", group 1).

Self-image Management Keeping one's emotions in balance was perceived to assist in the management of self-image by all four focus groups. Several participants from groups 1 and 2 mentioned that "this is a sign of maturity" and showed that a person had high emotional intelligence. All groups mentioned that this could help individuals to save face and avoid exerting a negative influence on others (e.g. "At the very least, I believe not allowing myself to burst out crying at the point. I think that keeping my emotions in check is a sign of being mature in crucial moments", group 2).

Emotion Suppression In contrast, some participants argued that emotional regulation can be a form of emotion suppression. Several participants from groups 1, 2, and 4 stated that although some people may appear emotionally stable, superficial calmness may hide negative emotions inside. Participants from groups 1, 2, and 4 admitted that they have a tendency to wallow in a low mood (e.g. "Because whenever I experience failure, I do not want other people to see my sadness, I tend to present superficial calmness to others. On the other hand, because I am too sad inside, kind of losing hope, I would also reach a calm state of mind", group 4).

All focus groups stated that releasing emotions is necessary in situations when it does not affect others, to enable coping (e.g. "return to normal life and continue to do something else", group 4). From this perspective, this may be related to the theme, "self-image management".

In summary, participants' views indicated emotional awareness and acceptance. The opinions expressed that one should avoid wallowing in negative emotions and instead analyse problems. This partially reflects the definition by Neff (2016), e.g. "being aware of one's present moment experience of suffering and treating it with clarity and balance" (p. 265). However, some participants understood this statement to indicate emotion suppression, maybe due to the differences in the expression "balance in emotion" between the English and Chinese language. In Chinese, the word "balance" is not typically used in combination with the word "emotion", whereas "make emotion stable" is widely used in Chinese, which refers to both keeping emotion in a balanced way as well "emotion stability". This language

discrepancy could result in the misunderstanding of mindfulness items as "emotion suppression", and this might contribute to the low internal consistency of this SCS subscale when participants answer these items (e.g. Chen et al., 2011).

Understanding of Self-judgment

Half of the participants from all focus groups considered self-judgment as undermining, whereas the other half perceived self-judgment as an adaptive strategy.

Self-criticism as Undermining All groups thought self-judgment could cause feelings of inferiority, guilt, and exaggerated self-blame. What they needed was self-reflection to help them critically reflect on failures to learn from their flaws and inadequacies to make progress (e.g. "For me, I would blame myself after failure, but I would also find my flaws and correct them. However, there should be a limit of self-blame. If we blindly blamed ourselves for our shortcomings and weaknesses, this would not be beneficial but only lead to feelings of inferiority", group 1).

Self-criticism as an Adaptive Strategy All groups suggested that self-judgment could be adaptive and argued that it was habitual, and assisted them in correcting their mistakes and addressing weaknesses. Thus, they considered self-criticism as helpful for making improvements, self-reflection, and problem-solving (e.g. "Firstly, one should be strict with oneself, and self-criticism is necessary, which would push one to make a plan to improve. Without being strict with oneself, one wouldn't improve on one's flaws", group 4).

All focus groups mentioned that the appropriate level of self-criticism should depend on the situations and personalities. If something minor has occurred, or the person is feeling positive and mentally strong, criticizing themselves is perceived as appropriate in order to avoid self-pity or self-indulgence (e.g. "I will criticize myself and find out my weaknesses. I might wallow in self-blame for a while. But I would also find motivations from my weaknesses", group 2).

In brief, all focus groups agreed that self-judgment can be a cold, harsh, and undermining way to treat oneself, consistent with Neff's definition (2003, 2016); however, some participants from all groups argued that being self-judgmental is beneficial to self-improvement and problem-solving. Some proponents of both views shared the same theme, "self-reflection", for some participants. These different views of self-judgment may lead participants to respond differently, which might explain the lower internal consistency reported in several studies (e.g. Chen et al., 2011).

Understanding of Isolation

Negative Thoughts, Self-undermining, and Social Comparison All focus groups agreed that this is a form of negative thought and self-undermining. They perceived this response to cause harsh self-blame, self-denial, and feelings of inferiority (e.g. "this is a sign of inferiority and excessive self-pity. It's an exaggeration of one's flaws and completely self-denial", group 4). Two participants from groups 1 and 2 mentioned that holding this view might lead people into a vicious cycle (e.g. "This is a kind of pessimistic, negative emotion. It is an exaggeration of the failure and the underestimation of one's performance. This will only fall into a vicious circle, becoming more and more inferior, and finally unable to cheer up", group 1). Groups 1, 2, and 4 mentioned that this view was generated from social comparison with others (e.g. "If most people all succeeded […] I would have this thought", group 2).

In brief, initial findings supported that Chinese young adults treat isolation similarly to the definition, "an egocentric response to suffering" (Neff, 2016, p. 269), indicated by the theme of "self-undermining". However, three focus groups mentioned that this egocentric response is usually generated by social comparison, which is not consistent with the previous argument of adolescent egocentrism that "one's personal experience is unique and unrelated to that of others" (Neff, 2016, p. 269). This inconsistent finding may be explained by self-construal theory (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) that self cannot be separated from social experiences in some collectivist cultures, such as Chinese culture.

Understanding of Over-identification

Common Phenomenon All groups stated that obsessing and fixating on everything that is wrong is very normal and common, and they would tend to react in this way. Although they were aware that this could be harmful, they could not easily avoid it (e.g. "I always find that this emotion is very negative, but hard to get rid of it", group 2).

Negative Outcomes and Self-undermining All focus groups acknowledged that this would cause wallowing in negative emotions (e.g. stress) and rumination on the failure or other negative events (e.g. "but one shouldn't ruminate on it, or else the negativity would be overwhelming to handle…", group 4). Groups 1, 2, and 4 mentioned that this is a vicious cycle; for example, the rumination on everything that is wrong could cause something bad, and something bad would aggravate rumination, thus maintaining a vicious cycle (e.g. "…I think if one is always thinking in this way, then they would be ill. And the illness would enhance this kind of

thought, and this would cause one to ruminate even more. I'm just like that. This can lead to a vicious cycle", group 2). Groups 2 and 4 also mentioned that this reflected self-undermining, such as self-dissatisfaction, self-blame, and inferiority (e.g. "…this is an excessive criticism of oneself, which means that one is very dissatisfied with oneself", group 4).

Benefits Interestingly, groups 1, 3, and 4 mentioned that it was beneficial to focus on everything that is wrong. Groups 3 and 4 argued that negative outcomes (ruminations or negative emotions) caused by focusing on everything that is wrong helped them to reflect upon themselves thoroughly, and this could be a reminder for avoiding similar mistakes in the future. Also, it could be a motivation to move forward (e.g. "…remembering my own failure and treating it as a motivation to avoid similar mistakes", group 4).

In brief, most participants admitted that they tended to ruminate on negative experiences and emotions from where they risked stepping into a vicious cycle, which is consistent with the definition of over-identification that one is "caught up in an exaggerated storyline about negative aspects of oneself or one's life experience" (Neff, 2016, p. 265). However, all groups agreed that this reaction was normal, and three groups even mentioned the potential benefits of over-identification, such as reflecting upon themselves thoroughly, serving as a reminder for avoiding similar mistakes in the future and easier to seek support.

Discussion

Applying focus group discussions to Chinese young adults, this study aimed to explore the understanding of the construct of self-compassion based on the self-compassion scale. In summary, although there were similarities shared by the three positive dimensions of self-compassion, Chinese young adults perceived three distinct positive dimensions. Specifically, focus groups understood self-kindness as being a way to comfort oneself, although all focus groups considered it as a form of self-pity. All focus groups considered common humanity as a coping strategy, although three groups did not perceive difficulties as a shared universal experience because everyone's challenges differ. Also, all focus groups wanted a more positive way to cope with their difficulties. The dimension of mindfulness was considered by all focus groups as a way to regulate emotion, make wise decisions, and manage one's self-image for others; meanwhile, all focus groups also saw this dimension as a form of emotion suppression. In contrast to the three distinct positive dimensions, there was an overlap between themes for the negative dimensions of self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification.

This suggests that from the perspective of Chinese young adults, these are not distinct dimensions as conceptualized by Neff (2003). These results could explain the previous 4-factor structure that was proposed by Tsai (2015) and confirmed in previous study (Zhao et al., 2021). Due to cultural differences, Chinese young adults may interpret and respond to some items differently from individuals answering the original SCS (Neff, 2003), which might explain some of the low internal consistency findings for some subscales in previous studies (e.g. Chen et al., 2011).

The results revealed that overall, Chinese participants showed dialectical views when reflecting on the different facets of self-compassion in that they reported both negative and positive perceptions for each factor. This diverges from the original definition as Neff (2016) stated that "self-compassion entails three main components, each of which has a positive and negative pole that represents compassionate versus uncompassionate behavior" (p. 265). Additionally, study participants tended to emphasize the importance of self-reflection or benign self-criticism across all dimensions.

The first difference observed was that Chinese young adults presented a more dialectical understanding of the different factors. Higher levels of dialectical thinking in Chinese young adults are consistent with previous research (Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Zhang et al., 2015). Peng and Nisbett (1999) found that Chinese undergraduates equally weighted two contradictory statements, whereas American undergraduates tended to choose one statement over the other. There are two philosophical traditions that explain why Chinese young adults may engage more in dialectical thinking. Every Chinese student in senior high school and university is taught Marxist Dialecticism (Zhang et al., 2015). Also, Taoism, one of the three main Chinese philosophies, teaches the mutual dependency of two opposites and contradictions in active harmony (Lao-zi, BC 570—490), which may contribute to the phenomenon that Chinese individuals are more likely to engage in this flexible, dialectical thinking (Peng et al., 2006).

Second, participants valued self-reflection or a form of benign self-criticism, represented by repetitive themes with similar meaning, "problem-solving" from self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness, "self-reflection" from self-judgment and "helpful for reflection" from over-identification. In a collectivist culture, people are relatively more self-critical than people in an individualist culture (Kitayama et al., 1997). Confucianism stresses that *Xin* (mind-heart), which means self-cultivation, and *Si* (reflection) as a cognitive element of *Xin* (self-cultivation) (Wei et al., 2016) serve a vital role for one's development (Cheng, 2004). Hence, Confucianism guides people to pursue self-cultivation via self-reflection. This idea influences individuals' tendency to engage in self-reflection and benign self-criticism. Participants of the current study mentioned that focussing on the things that had gone wrong or negative emotions facilitated improved self-reflection. This is consistent with previous research, which found that when feeling unhappy, US undergraduate students tend to experience anger and aggression whereas Japanese undergraduate students tend to associate it with self-improvement and transcendental reappraisal (Uchida & Kitayama, 2009).

The finding about benign self-criticism and self-reflection may provide a different perspective for understanding self-compassion in relation to culture. Self-criticism of one's flaws is redefined as self-judgment (Neff, 2003), and self-judgment has been considered as a maladaptive trait of those with a lower level of self-compassion (Neff et al., 2008). In the current Chinese sample, it was observed that self-judgment had two sides, maladaptive and benign. Benign self-criticism is similar to self-reflection, which can be considered as a constructive habit of problem-solving, whereas maladaptive self-criticism is associated with a threatening form of self-judgment (Gilbert & Irons, 2008; Neff, 2003). Maladaptive self-criticism is related to shame and has been linked to self-damning and self-undermining (Gilbert & Irons, 2008). In contrast to this, shame has moral significance in the Confucian philosophy (Seok, 2015) which stresses the facilitating effect of shame on self-reflection to achieve growth or self-criticism in order to improve oneself, e.g. "Be aware of shame then go forward" ("知耻而后勇", Mencius, 372BC-289BC). Thus, in China, shame is a motivation for self-improvement via benign self-criticisms or self-reflection.

Additionally, this motivation for self-improvement in a collectivist culture stems from a desire to achieve social harmony, i.e. the notion of a balanced positive state within an organization or society, which is an important concept in China (Fu et al., 2004). Specifically, benign self-criticism about one's shortcomings or flaws can be considered as an adaptive strategy to improve oneself when aiming to achieve social harmony (Kitayama et al., 1997). This could be understood within self-construal theory (Markus & Kitayama, 1991); in individualist cultures, people tend to develop self-views as independent and more separated from the social context. However, in collectivist cultures, people are more likely to develop an interdependent self-construal in which a person views their self solely through the lens of social context and relationships. Thus, the Confucian philosophy with great emphasis on shame, self-reflection, and social harmony as the desired pathway to positive character development, may influence how Chinese young adults interpret the self-judgment factor when answering the SCS-C.

Limitations and Future Research

Caution is required when generalizing the findings to the Chinese population as well as other populations. The current sample only included university students, and the

understanding of self-compassion may be different in other groups, such as clinical populations (Gilmour, 2014). Further, the sample size of the groups was small. This is common for qualitative studies that aim to capture the breadth of experience within the population rather than to be representative (Smithson, 2019). Four focus groups with different characteristics (i.e. gender and levels of self-compassion) should be sufficient for tentative conclusions and suggestions for further research. Although organizing focus groups in this way provides the opportunity to check for potential group differences (Morgan, 1996), no such group differences were found. There is previous evidence from quantitative studies for gender differences with males being more likely to have higher scores of self-compassion compared to females (Yarnell et al., 2015), and individuals with high self-compassion scores being more likely to have better mental wellbeing (Zessin et al., 2015). Given these group differences in the existing literature, future studies should account for this when designing studies. Last, although using synchronized online group chat as the method for the focus groups may ensure anonymity of the participants (Smithson, 2019), this may limit the strength of focus groups and interactions in the focus group, and the amount of information may be limited compared to traditional face-to-face focus groups. Future studies should be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of different focus groups.

Time constraints meant that only one question relating to each factor was asked, following a previous focus group protocol for studying self-compassion (Gilmour, 2014). The choice of the questions may have influenced the current findings, such as misunderstanding of the statement: "keep emotion in balance". Keeping emotion in balance is the core concept from the SCS mindfulness subscale. However, from a perspective of Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness definition, the core concept should be "receptive" and "non-judgmental" (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). The example item for mindfulness, as used in the focus groups, may orient participants towards emotion regulation rather than mindfulness. Future studies could have more than one question regarding different dimensions.

Furthermore, the finding that self-criticism may not be exclusively maladaptive is in line with Confucianism and suggests that self-criticism could be potentially beneficial for personal growth. In the same vein, self-compassion may not be perceived as being exclusively beneficial in Chinese samples. This could be important when understanding the role of self-compassion for mental health and wellbeing in Chinese samples as compared to Western samples. In the absence of measurements of growth or mental wellbeing in the current study, this conclusion is speculative and further research is needed. In addition, future qualitative research could explore the understanding of different definitions and theories of self-compassion among different cultures, for example, the two-component theory from Gilbert et al.

(2017) or the five-component definition from Strauss et al. (2016).

Mixed-methods research is needed to further explore the construct validity of the SCS in the Chinese population. Future qualitative studies should continue to explore the understanding and meaning of the main components of self-compassion and the understanding of specific items. This may suggest the need for the self-compassion scale to be revised/adapted for collectivist cultures, which would require psychometric validation.

Future studies could draft qualitative study protocols based on the relevant cultural theories, thus moving beyond the dimensions of national cultures into Collectivism verse Individualism. For example, Indulgence versus Restraint from Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, which is related to the attitudes towards enjoying life (Hofstede, 2011), has previously been associated with the construct of self-compassion (Montero-Marin et al., 2018).

Author Contribution MZ designed and executed the study, analysed data, interpreted results interpretation, and wrote and edited the manuscript. JS designed the study, collaborated with the data analysis in English, and edited the manuscript. TF edited the manuscript. PW collaborated with recruitment and edited the manuscript. NYBW collaborated with data analysis and quotation translation. AK designed the study, collaborated with the data analysis in English, interpreted results and edited the manuscript.

Data Availability All raw data of focus groups are available upon request from the first author, and other materials can be found from osf.io/u3tb7

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics Approval The study was approved by the Psychology Ethics Committee of the University of Exeter (UK, reference number, eCLESPsy000574 v4.1).

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