A Comparative Study of Self-Compassion, Character Strength, and Psychological Capital between Working Women Heads of Households and Housewives

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Quantitative Study

Abstract

Background: The employment rates of women are on the rise in numerous countries worldwide. Likewise, the level of self-compassion, personality capacity, and psychological capital that women possess might play a significant role in determining their status in today's society. Thus, the present study was conducted to compare self-compassion, character strength, and psychological capital between working women heads of households and housewives.

Methods: The research was a causal-comparative study. The study population included all working women who were heads of households and housewives in Tehran City, Iran, from July to September 2023. Purposive sampling was used to select 116 samples. The data collection tools included Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form (SCS-SF), the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ), and Values in Action-Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS). Data analysis was performed using an independent t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) by SPSS software.

Results: The difference between groups for the self-compassion variable was significant (P < 0.001) and the F value was equal to 79.261. Likewise, the difference in the average character strength variable of the two groups was significant (P < 0.001) and the F value was equal to 135.650. Moreover, the observed difference in the mean of the psychological capital variable of the two groups was significant (P < 0.001) and the F value was equal to 79.875.

Conclusion: The research showed that women could conquer their obstacles by employing three factors: self-compassion, personal qualities, and psychological resources. In addition, relevant professionals should teach and strengthen women's psychological abilities, including self-compassion, character strength, and psychological capital.

Introduction

Female heads of households are women who take care of the family without the presence or regular support of adult men and manage the family's economic activities and important decisions (Sharma, 2023). Female heads of household include widows, divorced women, wives of drug addicts, wives of imprisoned men, wives of immigrant men, self-reliant women, and wives of disabled men (Zare, Manshaei, & Keshti Arai, 2023). The number of female heads of a household has increased significantly over the past half-century, especially in developing countries. This group represents nearly a quarter of global households (Atefi Hanzani, Shokrbeigi, & Ahmadi, 2023). The statistical data in Iran indicate a rise in the number of housewives. Based on the census, 12% of Iranian households are led by this group of women (Tabrizikahou, Salehi, Keshavarz Afshar, & Madani, 2023).

Research shows that self-compassion is a healthy way of establishing a relationship with oneself, which has a positive relationship with positive mental health and a negative relationship with negative mental health (Yaghoobi, Toozandehjani, & Zendedel, 2021). Various studies have shown that people who are self-compassionate experience more mental health than people who have less self-compassion, because the experience of pain and failure through self-condemnation, feeling isolated, and magnifying thoughts and feelings is strengthened (Shahbeik, Moazedian, Sabahi, & Otaghsara, 2022). In a previous research, authors concluded that self-compassion was a three-component construct including: self-love versus self-judgment, human commonality versus isolation, and mindfulness versus extreme assimilation. The combination of these three related components characterizes a person who has self-compassion (Aledeh, Sokan-Adeaga, Adam, Aledeh, & Kotera, 2024). Hence, earlier research has revealed that women who work and those who are head of households exhibit greater levels of self-compassion (Azizmohammadi, Rakebi, Kamran Koochesfehani, & Asadi, 2019; Khedmati, 2020). Keshavarz Mohammadi (2018) also suggested self-compassion as an effective method to increase distress tolerance and emotional regulation and reduce anxiety sensitivity in divorced women (Keshavarz Mohammadi, 2018). Self-compassion is an adaptive means of relating to the self during times of distress. Character strengths include a set of traits and values that ultimately uplift the self and others (Booker & Perlin, 2021).

One way to increase character strength may be through self-compassion. Stevenson and Allen (2017) investigated the relation of self-compassion, manipulated self-compassion, and their interaction with character strength. A significant positive relationship was found between self-compassion and character strength. However, manipulated self-compassion was not significantly related to character strength. These findings suggested that self-compassion and character strength were strongly related, but using a short-term self-compassion intervention might not be strong enough to influence empowerment. Character strength-based practitioners may find that empowerment increases more easily in women who are self-compassionate (Stevenson & Allen, 2017). Character strengths are positive qualities in thinking, emotions, and behavior that help people improve their quality of life (QOL) and work performance (Blanchard, McGrath, & Jayawickreme, 2021). Considering the important role of women in the family's health and society, providing the necessary foundations for the development and benefits of society from the empowerment and participation of women in different scientific, social, economic, and cultural fields as well as eliminating obstacles and problems is very important (Cheek & Corbett, 2024). Character strengths are classified into six types, which are: wisdom and

knowledge, courage, justice, humanity, temperance, and spirituality (Aghdasi, Omidi Najafabadi, & Farajollah Hosseini, 2022). Research has shown that human character strengths are positively correlated with reduced physical and mental stress symptoms, and this strength also has a positive impact on mental health (Weziak-Bialowolska, Lee, Bialowolski, Chen, VanderWeele, & McNeely, 2023). In this regard, Amonoo et al. (2019) concluded that character strength was a type of self-confidence that improved a person's attitude toward their abilities and motivated the pursuit of one's best efforts to achieve desired goals (Amonoo, Barclay, El-Jawahri, Traeger, Lee, & Huffman, 2019). Research results also show that character strengths components are directly related to the life satisfaction of working women (Bayat Rizi, Salimi, Farahbakhsh, & Ali Farokhi, 2020). In another study, it was also demonstrated that there was a significant and negative relationship between the character strengths variable, emotional exhaustion, and work-family conflict (Hemmatabadi, Mesgar, Yekta, & Nasrollahi, 2022).

A qualitative study was conducted among female-headed households in Kermanshah, West of Iran, in 2019. Positive outcomes were obtained as follows: positive self-concept and social maturity (Yoosefi Lebni, Mohammadi Gharehghani, Soofizad, Khosravi, Ziapour, & Irandoost, 2020). Character strengths are durable positive attributes that contribute to well-being in life and at work and are correlated to psychological capital (McGrath, 2023). Behroz et al. (2023) suggested that by improving psychological capital, female household heads would be able to cope with the stress caused by daily problems (Behroz, Marashian, & Alizadeh, 2023). Furthermore, a study conducted under the title of investigating the mediating role of workplace spirituality in the relationship between psychological capital and work fatigue among female household heads in the city of Marvdasht, Iran, concluded that there was a negative and significant relationship between psychological capital, work fatigue, and mental fatigue (Abedi, 2022). Up to now, there have been many studies on working female heads of households, but few studies compared female heads of households and housewives. Additionally, strength of character is often a desired outcome of health programs; however, it is rarely evaluated. Collectively, compassion, strength of character, and psychological capital have a huge impact on the lives of these women. We hope that the findings of this study can expand our understanding of female household heads in Iranian society.

Methods

Design of study and participants: This was a causal-comparative study. The study's statistical population included all female heads of households and housewives in Tehran City, Iran, from July to September 2023. The research sampling method was the purposeful (female heads of households) and convenience method (housewives). The inclusion criteria included: the age range of 18-60 years, working at home service companies located in the 7th district in Tehran, and willingness to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria also included: not completing the questionnaire with over 10 questions and declining to take part in research. After cooperating with work at home service companies located in the 7th district of Tehran City, acquiring their contentment to take part in the development of this paper, and explaining the research objectives, the researchers asked the sample to have their favorite questionnaire. Then, in case the female heads of households elaborated on the research objectives and second, obtained written participation consents. They were then provided with the questionnaires. The time of conducting the interviews and

completing the questionnaires was about 30 hours.

Sample size: The participants were selected using a purposive sampling method. In order to determine the sample size for this causal-comparative and experimental research, G*Power software was utilized. The sample size consisted of 140 individuals in each group, with an effect size of 0.50, alpha of 0.05, and test power of 0.90 (Fidell & Tabachnick, 2003). The sampling process identified 70 working women heads of household and 70 housewives, resulting in a total of 113 individuals (56 working women and 57 housewives) after removing distorted and incomplete questionnaires.

Instruments and variable

Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form (SCS-SF): The original Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) was created in 2011 by Raes et al. for measuring and studying self-compassion (Raes, Pommier, Neff, & Van Gucht, 2011). The 12-item short SCS or a long version of this scale was created in 2003 with 26 items. This questionnaire has 6 elements, which are: kindness to yourself, self-judgment, a sense of human community, isolation, attention, and enhanced replication. Finally, the scores are added together and the total score for each individual is calculated. This questionnaire is scored based on a 5-point Likert scale. It has 26 questions and its options range from not at all (score 1) to always (score 5). Higher scores indicate that respondents have more self-compassion, and conversely, lower scores indicate that respondents have less self-compassion. The range of people's scores on this questionnaire is from 26 to 130. The reliability of this scale using Cronbach's alpha test was 0.71 (Abedini, Akbari, Sadeghi, & Asadi Majreh, 2022). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.72 for this questionnaire.

The Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ): This questionnaire compiled by Larson and Luthans (2007) is the most commonly used tool globally to measure psychological capital (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007). The four traits of self-efficacy, hope, perseverance, and optimism are among the 24 items that make up the questionnaire. All items are rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). A score from 1 to 2 shows a low level of psychological capital, from 3 to 4 shows a medium level of psychological capital, and above 4 shows a high level of psychological capital, and the total score is from 24 to 144 (Luthans et al., 2007). Based on a study conducted with Iranian participants, the reliability of this instrument was shown with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82 (Fatehi, Kachooei, & Gholami-Hosnaroudi, 2021). The researcher also examined the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale in this study, and the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the instrument in the present study was 0.76.

Values in Action-Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS): This questionnaire was created by Patterson and Seligman in 2004 to measure people's personality abilities (Ruch, Proyer, Harzer, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2010). The purpose of this scale is to measure six universal virtues, including wisdom, charity, courage, justice, piety, and excellence, mentioned in all religions. Subjects had to express their agreement or disagreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale. Due to the large number of items, a short form of 24 items of this scale was developed.

Questions 1 to 5 are for the component of knowledge and wisdom, questions 6 to 9 are for the component of courage, questions 10 to 12 are for the component of humanity, questions 13 to 15 are for the component of justice, questions 16 to 19 are for the component of piety, and questions 20 to 24 are for the component of excellence. Researchers have reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient on this scale of 0.80 (Khodabakhash, Khosravi, & Shahangian, 2015). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.87 for this questionnaire.

Analysis: Ultimately, after questionnaires were completed in work at home service centers, the officials were appreciated and the questionnaires were inserted into SPSS software (version 27, IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA) in order to be statistically analyzed. Besides using descriptive indicators, an independent t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was utilized so as to compare the scores of the two groups. It should be noted that the assumptions necessary to perform the analysis were checked first. The outliers were examined and the analysis did not reveal many outliers. Likewise, the two groups were independent of each other. The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test were also not significant, which indicates the normality of the score distribution. Furthermore, the equality of variances of the groups was tested and the Levene's test for equality of error variances of the variables was significant. Therefore, the researcher used Welch's t-test method.

Ethics: Regarding the research ethical considerations, research objectives were clarified and participants were ensured that their information would remain confidential. Moreover, participants were allowed to leave the research anytime; hence, the study was carried out based on respecting participant's preferences, anonymousness, and confidentiality. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Saveh University of Medical Sciences, Saveh, Iran (code: IR.IAU.SAVEH.REC.1402.165).

Results

The participants of this study included 113 participants, 60 working women heads (51.7%) and 56 housewives (48.2%). The mean age of participants was 35.34 years [standard deviation (SD) = 14.03]. The sample was balanced by gender and age. Regarding the highest level of education achieved, 35.3% (n = 41) (academic university) and 64.6% (n = 75) of the participants had a lower level of education (elementary and high school) which means a less educated sample. Regarding marital status, 38.7% (n = 45) of the study subjects had a husband who was addicted to drugs and had a disability and 11.2% (n = 13) were divorced. Regarding socioeconomic status (SES), the sample was divided into low SES (0.23.3%), low mean SES (30.3%), mean SES (30.7%), intermediate SES (14.8)%, and high SES (0.9%). Most participants had two children (n = 87, 75%). Table 1 presents descriptive statistics related to study variables by group.

In order to test the significance of the differences between the two groups of working women heads of households and housewives, the researcher performed the independent samples t-test. It should be noted that first the necessary presuppositions for the implementation of the analysis were examined. Outliers were checked and the analysis did not have much outliers. Similarly, both groups were independent from each other. The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test were also not significant, which indicated the normality of the distribution of scores. Besides, the equality of variance of the groups was checked and Levene's test of equality of error variance of self-compassion and psychological capital variables was significant. Therefore, the researcher used Welch's t-test method.

According to table 2, the observed difference in the mean value of the compassion variable in the two groups, working female heads of households and housewives, was significant (P < 0.001). Similarly, the observed difference in the mean of character strength variable of the two groups, was significant (P < 0.001). Moreover, the observed difference in the mean value of the psychological capital variable of the two groups was significant (P < 0.001).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the variables

Variables	Groups	N	Mean ± SD	Min	Max
Self-compassion	Working women heads of households	56	98.76 ± 4.20	54	105
	Housewives	57	71.20 ± 15.20		
	Total	113	84.70 ± 17.80		
Character strength	Working women heads of households	56	93.50 ± 5.80	50	102
	Housewives	57	66.40 ± 10.30		
	Total	113	79.73 ± 15.90		
Psychological capital	Working women heads of households	56	112.90 ± 18.30	40	134
	Housewives	57	63.80 ± 21.40		
	Total	113	87.96 ± 31.70		
Knowledge	Working women heads of households	56	15.80 ± 1.30	10	18
	Housewives	57	13.29 ± 2.60		
	Total	113	14.52 ± 2.40		
Courage	Working women heads of households	56	14.00 ± 1.60	10	6
	Housewives	57	12.74 ± 2.10		
	Total	113	13.35 ± 1.90		
Humanity	Working women heads of households	56	9.65 ± 1.30	7	12
	Housewives	57	9.03 ± 1.50		
	Total	113	9.33 ± 1.40		
Justice	Working women heads of households	56	10.42 ± 0.80	7	12
	Housewives	57	8.88 ± 1.40		
	Total	113	9.64 ± 1.40		
Abstinence	Working women heads of households	56	15.07 ± 1.20	**16**	10
	Housewives	57	12.59 ± 2.18		
	Total	113	13.81 ± 2.10		
Excellence	Working women heads of households	56	14.84 ± 1.90	18	10
	Housewives	57	15.18 ± 2.00		
	Total	113	15.01 ± 1.90		

SD: Standard deviation; Min: Minimum; Max: Maximum

Likewise, the researcher used one-way ANOVA to examine the differences between the groups. In order to check the ANOVA test, the researcher first checked the homogeneity of variance between the groups using Levene's test. Therefore, the results of the test were not significant and, as a result, tests of homogeneity of variances were confirmed.

Based on the ANOVA results in table 3, the difference between the two groups for the self-compassion variable was significant (P < 0.001) and the F value was equal to 79.261. Likewise, the difference in the average character strength variable of the two groups was significant (P < 0.001) and the F value was equal to 135.650. Moreover, the observed difference in the mean of the psychological capital variable of the two groups was significant (P < 0.001) and the F value was equal to 79.875. Similarly, among the components of character abilities, the components of knowledge, courage, justice, and abstinence were significantly different between the groups (P < 0.05), but there was no significant difference between the two groups of women in the components of excellence and humanity (P > 0.05).

Table 2. Independent samples t-test to check the difference between groups

Variables	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means				
	F	P-value	t	df	P-value	Mean difference	Effect size
Self-compassion	17.687	< 0.001	9.051	30.093	< 0.001	27.547	2.446
Character strength	0.438	0.511	11.647	51.000	< 0.001	27.018	3.200
Psychological capital	8.987	0.004	8.963	50.351	< 0.001	49.072	2.456

df: Degree of freedom

Table 3. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)

Variables		SS	df	MS	F	P-value
Self-compassion	Between groups	10051.020	1	10051.020	79.261	< 0.001
	Total	16518.302	52			< 0.001
Character strength	Between groups	9669.061	1	9669.061	135.650	< 0.001
	Total	13304.302	52			< 0.001
Psychological capital	Between groups	31896.296	1	31896.296	79.875	< 0.001
	Total	52261.925	52			
Knowledge	Between groups	83.539	1	83.539	18.233	< 0.001
	Total	317.208	52			
Courage	Between groups	21.003	1	21.003	5.848	0.019
	Total	204.189	52			
Humanity	Between groups	5.039	1	5.039	2.361	0.131
	Total	113.887	52			
Justice	Between groups	31.176	1	31.176	22.390	< 0.001
	Total	102.189	52			
Abstinence	Between groups	81.749	1	81.749	25.060	< 0.001
	Total	248.113	52			
Excellence	Between groups	1.522	1	1.522	0.389	0.535
	Total	200.981	52			

SS: Sum of squares; df: Degree of freedom; MS: Mean squares

Discussion

The present study focuses on the comparative study of self-compassion, character strength, and psychological capital among working women heads of households and housewives. Based on the results of comparing these groups with each other in this study, the three variables of self-compassion, character strength, and psychological capital have significant differences between female workers who are heads of families and housewives. The results of this comparison show that the level of self-compassion, character strength, and psychological capital of working female heads of households is higher than that of housewives. The results of this study were in line with previous studies including Azizmohammadi et al. (2019), Khedmati (2020), Mansoryjalilian et al. (2022), and Weliangan (2023). The research results indicated that by promoting self-compassion and the ability to endure suffering, it is possible to lay the foundations for improving the social health of female heads of family (Azizmohammadi et al., 2019). In another study, it was shown that promoting self-compassion led to a reduction in nurses' burnout, and there was a significant relationship between self-compassion and burnout (Keshavarz Mohammadi, 2018). Similarly, in another research, it was concluded that the variables of positive dimensions of self-compassion had a direct and positive effect on the QOL (Mansoryjalilian, Momeni, & Karami, 2022). Research findings also showed that self-compassion had a significant relationship with the psychological well-being of housewives (Weliangan, 2023).

The underlying reason for this is that working women heads of households are more likely to be driven by intrinsic motivation and have a greater sense of self-compassion. Those with intrinsic motivation experience a decrease in fear of failing under challenging and important problems. Additionally, the importance of self-compassion in maintaining emotional balance implies that it fosters a sense of personal responsibility, awareness, and acceptance of one's shortcomings and failures. Thus, the female head of the family's health can be impacted by this reason (Azizmohammadi et al., 2019). Self-compassion helps people have good health, reduce psychological disorders, and create a good, positive lifestyle for themselves

(Sarempour, Ghobari Bonab, & Bagheri, 2021). Furthermore, self-compassion cultivates a caring attitude combined with curiosity, satisfaction, and gratitude to the creator of the universe through the development of each person's consciousness in every moment of life. The regulation of positive and negative emotions through a healthy mindset and self-concept leads to a heightened sense of connection between oneself and others (Sarempour, Ghobari, & Bagheri, 2020). Female heads of households have less developed support systems, which are not easily developed, and they have a highly active threat system. Consequently, self-compassion produces an automatic adjustment to emotional balance and improves psychological health by expanding the relief system and controlling the threat system (Monemiyan, Mardanirad, Ghanbari Panah, & Omidi, 2021). Increasing self-compassion reduces secondary traumatic stress and burnout. Working women who demonstrate great self-compassion comfort themselves when face with difficult working conditions and can move forward stronger, more stable, and more resilient. Developing self-compassion in difficult environments provides the emotional resources needed to care for others, and people with higher self-compassion are more confident and less emotionally distressed. Since compassion increases the release of oxytocin in the body, this factor leads to greater activity in the safety and rescue system. Increasing self-compassion plays an important role in the emotional regulation system. In this way, by activating the safety and rescue system, working women can face their difficult emotions with more acceptance, and understand and manage them better (Darvehi, Zoghi Paidar, Yarmohammadi Vasel, & Imani, 2019).

This study supports previous research by showing that working female household heads have a higher level of character strength compared to housewives (Bayat Rizi et al., 2020; Khodayarifard, Hejazi, Helmi, & Moghadamzadeh, 2021). Another study revealed that a greater amount of personality strengths acted as a significant moderator in the connection between stress and well-being (Umucu, Tansey, Brooks, & Lee, 2021). Moreover, one investigation found that an intensive intervention program and the teaching of character strength components were effective in improving the life satisfaction of working women (Bayat Rizi et al., 2020).To explain this finding, it can be said that emphasizing positive emotions and cultivating character strengths in female heads of household will lead to mental health and strengthening mental abilities with this spirit, the ability to endure suffering will increase in women. Building character strength can have a positive impact on women's distress tolerance and QOL, reducing negative emotions and helping them use adaptive coping strategies. In fact, developing character strengths will improve people's health and happiness**.** Character strengths are often chosen as a starting point for positive psychology interventions aimed at improving well-being (Khodayarifard et al., 2021). These abilities exist in humans as a potential for growth and improvement, and if they increase, human resilience can be increased. In general, focusing on character strengths reduces depression and increases aspects of an enjoyable, engaged, and meaningful life in people (Khodabakhash et al., 2015). It is worth mentioning that the strength of character helps create positive communication in the workplace; in addition to meeting the communication and connection needs of working women, enhancing the positive aspect of communication also helps increase their happiness levels. Additionally, continued use of character strengths can lead to favorable outcomes such as prosperity, progress, employment, creativity, and meaning (Moradi, Khanjani, & Asgari, 2021).

Furthermore, regarding the other finding of this study, namely, that psychological capital is higher in female household heads than in housewives, this study is

consistent with previous research (Zareh, Manshaee, & Keshtiaray, 2021; Shirzad, Koushki, Farzad, & Ghanbari Panah, 2020; Gashghaei, Delavar, Khalatbari, & Shaeiabadi, 2022). Research results also show that there is a difference in psychological capital between the two groups of housewives and working women; the psychological capital score of working women is higher than that of housewives (Behroz et al., 2023). According to a study conducted by Khodabakhshi-Koolaee (2020), it was found that employed female heads of households exhibited a higher prevalence of resilience, an important aspect of psychological capital, compared to unemployed female heads. To explain this result, it can be said that psychological capital plays an important role in human adaptation by creating resilience and successful resistance when facing difficult situations. Psychological capital is considered an important factor in solving and overcoming difficulties and is the basis for empowering female heads of families (Pour Shirazi & Ghaderi, 2022). These people experience more positive emotions with high self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism. Thanks to that, they have a better sense of restraint and control over stress, and their ability and level of satisfaction with life will also be higher (Behroz et al., 2023). In fact, psychological capital, which represents productive and positive abilities such as tolerance, problem-solving, optimism, and flexibility in dealing with problems, can be an important indicator for evaluating women's performance in the family. This means that effective use of these skills can improve the quality of family interactions (Pour Shirazi & Ghaderi, 2022). Additionally, because psychological capital increases psychological adaptability, working women can use this capacity to resolve conflicts peacefully and feel more satisfied with themselves (Ghaemi, Zomorodi, & Bazzazian, 2022).

The current study, like other studies, faces limitations. Among them, it was difficult to justify women heads of households accurately completing the questionnaires. Collecting complete questionnaires in different sections was made difficult due to different working hours. In addition, the large number of questions led to the length of the answers, and therefore the length of their collection. Conducting a cross-sectional study is also another limitation of this study.

Conclusion

The results indicate a comparative study of compassion, character strength, and psychological capital among working women heads of households and housewives. Three variables including compassion, strength of character, and psychological capital can be important factors in overcoming problems in women. Therefore, it is recommended that relevant experts examine the impact of various psychological variables on the relationship between working female heads of households and housewives, in order to strengthen their psychological state and mental health and enhance their psychological abilities, including self-compassion to promote health.

Conflict of Interests

Authors have no conflict of interests.

Acknowledgements

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