

Analysis and Critique of Kristin Neff's Self-Compassion Theory Based on Nahj al-Balagha

Author: Fatemeh Taheri

Affiliation: University of Isfahan

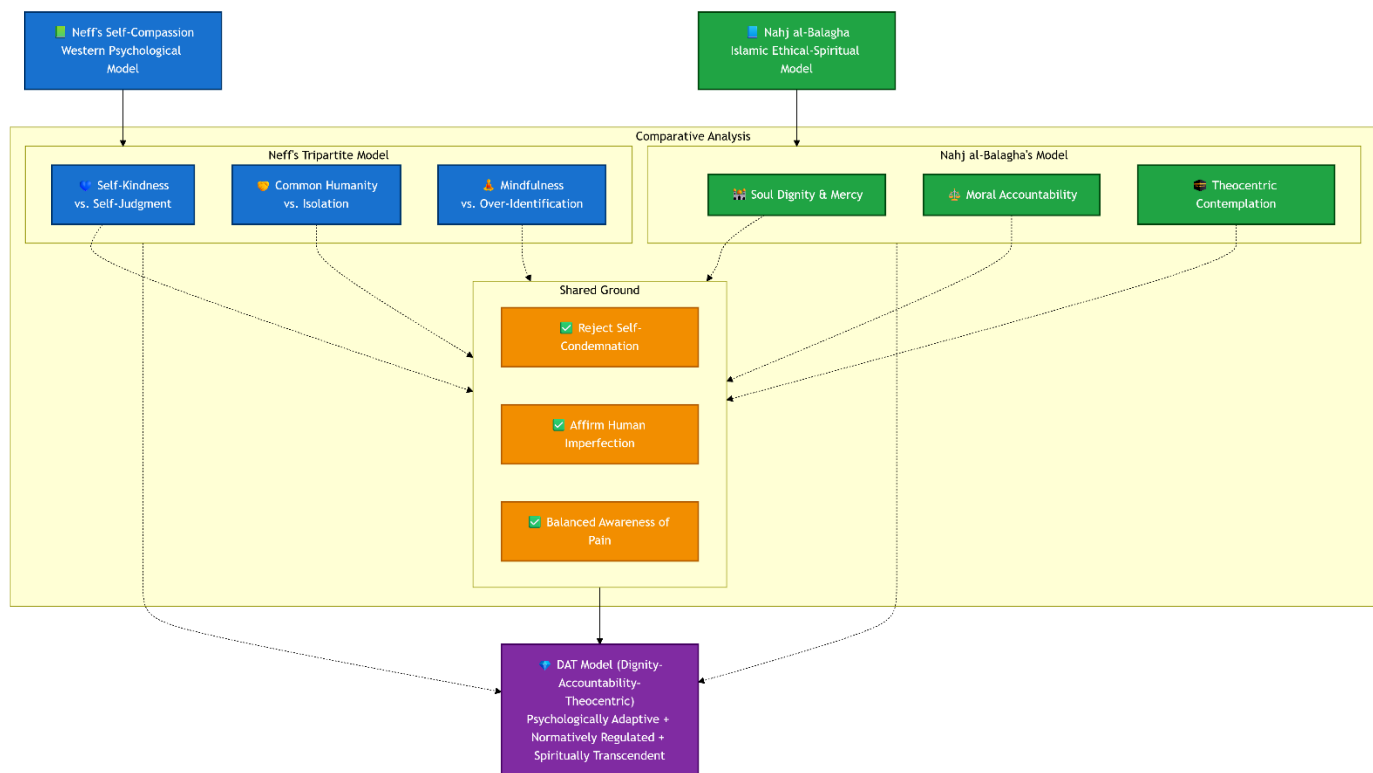
Email:taherif910@gmail.cim

Abstract

Self-compassion has recently gained popularity in positive psychology as an antidote for shame, self-criticism, and difficult emotional states. Kristin Neff defines it in three dimensions as self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, but remains deontologically light and therapeutic. The research critically examines Neff's conceptualization in situ through a comparative study of Nahj al-Balagha to determine whether the teachings of Imam Ali present an ethically and spiritually rich picture of compassionate self-relating. Employing a comparative-conceptual study design, the authors compared Neff's seminal works with a selection of Imam Ali's sermons, letters, and sayings in Nahj al-Balagha. A directed content analysis and comparative hermeneutics were used to discern parallels and differences in the nature, goal, and limitations of self-compassion. The results suggest a strong convergence in avoiding a vicious cycle of self-condemnation, affirming imperfection, and cultivating a healthy attitude towards pain. Yet the models part routes in fundamentals and purpose. While Neff's theory mainly underscores emotional regulation, resilience, and well-being, Nahj al-Balagha conceives a practice of self-care within a virtuous imitationist and theocentric account of humans that invites preserving the dignity of the soul and practicing self-control, repentance, moderation, and closeness to God. This analysis shows Neff's model may be psychologically adaptive but is normatively thin from an Islamic point of view. Nahj al-Balagha does not reject Neff's model; instead, it reformulates it in terms of compassion, including moral responsibility, transcendence, and human responsibility. The research proposes a culturally expandable model of self-compassion that is psychologically adaptive, normatively regulated, and spiritually transcendent. This expansion also provides a cultural lens for developing

theories, psychotherapeutic applications, and future in-depth cross-cultural studies of self-compassion across various religious communities worldwide.

Keywords: Self-compassion; Nahj al-Balagha; Kristin Neff; Islamic psychology; Moral-spiritual anthropology



Graphical Abstract: The left panel (blue) represents Kristin Neff's psychological model, structured around self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, with emotional regulation and well-being as its primary goal. The right panel (green) presents the ethical-spiritual model drawn from Nahj al-Balagha, centred on soul dignity, moral accountability, and theocentric contemplation, aimed at purification and nearness to God. The central overlap (gold) identifies

key convergences: rejecting harsh self-condemnation, accepting universal imperfection, and cultivating a balanced awareness of suffering. The bottom panel (purple) integrates both traditions into the proposed Dignity–Accountability–Theocentric (DAT) model of self-compassion, a framework that is psychologically adaptive, normatively regulated, and spiritually transcendent.

Introduction

The demands of contemporary living, with its complexity, stress, and anxiety, result in a need for enhancing mental well-being. In researching what constitutes the good life, positive psychology has come to see self-compassion as a valuable resource for resilience. Neff (2003) asserts that self-compassion has three components: self-kindness (being forgiving and understanding toward oneself in situations of personal failure), common humanity (seeing one's experiences as part of the larger human experience), and mindfulness (taking a balanced approach to painful feelings and thoughts in the present moment) [1]. As an "emotionally positive self-attitude", self-compassion can protect against self-criticism, loneliness, and rumination, and counter negative actions such as narcissism or social comparisons [1]. Emphasizing the development of self-compassion (rather than high self-esteem) has been shown to increase resilience and well-being [1, 2]. From a positive psychology perspective, the goal is to help individuals achieve mental well-being, or "self-actualization" [3].

Neff's model, however, was established in a Western, secular society. Some argue this view prioritizes the individual and individual success, potentially at the expense of spiritual and ethical development [2]. This view of self-compassion, which seems primarily an emotional-cognitive ability, can overlook its deeper meaning. By contrast, Islamic teachings, as found in Imam Ali's Nahj al-Balagha, view self-care in a theistic moral context. Islamic approaches consider the Islamic virtues of divine mercy (rahmah), forgiveness (maghfirah), gratitude (shukr), moderation (wasatiyyah), and trust in God (tawakkul) as underpinning of healthy self-esteem [2, 3]. For instance, Islamic positive psychology focuses on belief in human goodness and God's mercy, gratitude, and trusting in God's knowledge; it considers well-being vis-à-vis the Divine and the human community [3]. According to a review, "the Islamic approach is very optimistic about human nature and its capacity for growth," as well as the human-God relationship [3]. Overall, while Neff suggests we be kind to ourselves, the Islamic approach is to humble ourselves before God and be kind to others.

The book of sermons, letters, and treatises of Imam Ali (AS), known as Nahj al-Balagha, openly discusses the development of moral and spiritual character. It is a "spiritual and practical guide for life [4]. Nahj is full of references to taqwa (piety or God-consciousness) as a source of spiritual

power: Ali (AS) describes taqwa as a "mighty fortress" that cuts off the "tentacles" of sin and sets the soul free from chaining itself to its passions [5]. Thus, moral qualities and faults are literally interpreted as the symptoms of a soul's health [6]: prophets and imams are considered spiritual physicians, and their ethical teachings are medicines that cure the neglect and confusion of the heart [5, 6]. Nahj further emphasizes qualities such as patience, humility, justice, and service to others as healing qualities. These highlights suggest that self-compassion in Islam involves accountability to God and ethical responsibility toward others.

Key perspectives:

- Western Self-Compassion (Neff): Emphasizes self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness as personal methods of coping with emotions [1]. A psychology-focused, secular approach to reappraisal of suffering.
- Islamic (Nahj al-Balagha) Ethics: Focuses on taqwa (God-consciousness) and past, present, and future-oriented virtues as starting points and indicators of inner well-being [5, 6]. Stresses the importance of the mercy, forgiveness, and social responsibility (e.g., family, community) of God for one's identity [2, 3].
- Similarity vs. Distinctiveness: Recognize human limitations and the value of compassion. But Neff's, as a "human-based" (human and social well-being from a secular perspective) model, has been compared to the "God-based" model of Nahj, with an emphasis on spiritual perfection and responsibility [7]. That is, Neff stresses self-soothing, but Imam Ali (AS) elevates individual compassion to a larger goal: achieving Godly mercy and humanity-loving service [2, 7].

This model shows that Neff's model lacks a moral/spiritual basis. Through Nahj al-Balagha, we learn that self-compassion can be derived from moral accountability and recognizing God's blessings. For example, Islamic teachings prioritize accepting forgiveness, grounded in the belief in Divine mercy, and acknowledge that all calamities carry lessons [2]. This integration implies a holistic approach to self-compassion that includes the personal, spiritual, and social levels.

As such, this article employs an analytic-descriptive method to explore Neff's theory with reference to Nahj al-Balagha (via library and content analysis). We strive to discern the convergences and divergences among the models and to advance the notion of self-compassion through moral and social ethics. The preliminary results show that Neff's three-part model of self-compassion (self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness) is helpful but lacks recognition of responsibility to God and others [1, 5]. Drawing on positive psychology and Islam, we offer a new definition of self-compassion that combines humanistic principles, spiritual purpose, and belonging; that is, the integration of human, divine, and communal dimensions of well-being.

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine Kristin Neff's work on self-compassion through a comparative and interpretive analysis of Nahj al-Balagha, focusing on the ideals of self-

kindness, common humanity, mindfulness, moral responsibility, and spiritual self-regulation. Beyond merely noting the trivial convergences between contemporary psychology and Islamic teachings, the article aims to determine whether Imam Ali's teachings bear on a more comprehensive understanding of the ethical and spiritual nature of compassionate self-relating. In particular, the research explores the conceptual overlaps and gaps between the two perspectives, assesses the psychological merits and moral deficiencies of Neff's approach, and offers a more holistic conceptualization of self-compassion based on human dignity, accountability, and transcendent love. By doing so, the article seeks to contribute to self-compassion research and Islamic psychology with a culturally and spiritually nuanced model of self-compassion for use in current theoretical and clinical settings.

Methods

Study design

This was a qualitative comparative-constructive study that used the ethical-spiritual perspective of Nahj al-Balagha to critically examine Kristin Neff's model of self-compassion. Given that the research question focused on the conceptual, normative, and anthropological underpinnings of self-compassion rather than its psychometric or therapeutic effects, the text-based approach was deemed most suitable. The study used directed content analysis, thematic analysis, and comparative hermeneutic reading to identify the main elements of Neff's self-compassion model and to compare and contrast them with Imam Ali's teachings in Nahj al-Balagha.

Sources and corpus selection

The main corpus comprised two sets of texts. The first comprised Neff's seminal articles on self-compassion, in particular, those in which she defines self-compassion, discusses the three-component model, compares it with self-esteem, and outlines its psychological correlates and origins. The second was a collection of sermons, letters, and aphorisms from Nahj al-Balagha that contained themes that were in some way relevant to self-compassion, such as mercy, self-knowledge, dignity of the self, moderation, self-accounting, moral responsibility, repentance, endurance of suffering, and the relationship between the self and God.

We adopted a purposive theoretical sampling technique. The units of the text were selected if they fulfilled at least one of the following criteria: (1) directly mentioned the manner of relating to oneself in the face of failure, suffering, moral conflict, or weakness; (2) referred to evaluating, regulating or caring for oneself; (3) assert a sense of human frailty, shared vulnerability or moral weakness; and (4) made statements relevant to the ethical or spiritual telos of relating to oneself.

Unit of analysis

Our unit of analysis was not the entire document but the meaning-bearing piece of text (definitional statement, idea, quote, sermon excerpt, or paragraph). These were examined both at the semantic level (content) and the latent level (underlying assumptions about human nature, suffering, moral action, and well-being).

Analytical procedure

The analysis was done in four phases:

1. In the first stage, the chosen texts were read exhaustively to get a conceptual handle on the texts and to spot keywords, key phrases, narratives, and themes. At this point, some preliminary notes were recorded about definitions of self-compassion, its constituents, causes, effects, and moral limits.
2. In the second stage, an interpretive analytic framework was developed using Neff's tripartite definition of self-compassion (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) as a starting point. However, analysis was not weighed down by the latter and was open to producing categories that did not fall under Neff's rubric, such as those at the center of Islamic ethical anthropology, namely accounting, dignity of the soul, divine mercy, moral discipline, and teleological purification.
3. In the third stage, constant comparison of the codes within and across the two corpora was performed to group the codes into themes. These were recombined, conceptual overlap was differentiated, and axial relations were established between categories. This produced a series of broader themes that represent overlaps and differences between the two traditions.
4. In the fourth stage, a comparative critical synthesis was conducted. The higher-order themes were considered with respect to three questions:
 - A. How is the self-configured in each framework?
 - B. What are the purposes of self-compassion?
 - C. What is the moral, psychological, and spiritual constraints on compassionate modes of self-relating?

This process allowed the study to go beyond mere description to a critical engagement with Neff's self-compassion model from the perspective of Nahj al-Balagha.

Trustworthiness

To improve the interpretive validity of this research, it involved iterative reading, constant comparison, and an audit trail of the analytic decision-making process (coding and theme development). Each category was continually refined until no significant themes were generated from the chosen corpus. The analytic rigor and trustworthiness of our analyses were enriched by employing triangulation through comparison of the primary texts with secondary research on self-

compassion and Islamic psychology, keeping the primary texts as primary in the analytic process and final interpretation.

Results

Overview of the findings

We found six broad themes in the analysis. First, Neff posits self-compassion as a psychologically adaptive mode of self-relating, which involves three dimensions: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Second, Nahj al-Balagha offers a rich yet nonidentical formulation of self-compassion in terms of mercy, dignity, moderation, and self-accounting. Third, they converge in opposing uncompromising self-condemnation and accounting for the human need for a balanced, non-destructive, self-related. Fourth, they show considerable ontological, moral, and teleological differences in the ultimate purpose of self-compassion. Fifth, the account of self-compassion in Nahj al-Balagha is transposed into a theocentric, virtuous anthropology rather than a therapeutic one. Finally, the comparative analysis suggests the Neff theory is psychologically relevant but morally deficient from an Islamic ethical perspective.

Theme 1: Neff's theory defines self-compassion as a non-pathological alternative to self-criticism

The first key finding was that Neff's theory uniformly conceptualizes self-compassion as a healthy response rather than as a system of self-criticism, shame, and over-identification with personal failure. Across all of the critical texts, self-compassion was not linked with self-indulgence, narcissism, or passivity. Instead, it was offered as a tempered response to distress, entailing the acceptance of one's pain without self-criticism. The model consisted of three interrelated subscales: Self-kindness (instead of self-criticism), common humanity (instead of isolation), and mindfulness (instead of over-identification). Using this framework, self-compassion emerges as an emotional-regulation, resilience, and stability mechanism.

Another subfinding was that Neff differentiated self-compassion from self-esteem. Self-esteem was linked to social comparison, achieving success, or obtaining external "approval" - whereas self-compassion was seen as more non-contingent, less defensive, and less prone to inflating one's sense of superiority. This was a solid part of Neff's work.

Theme 2: Nahj al-Balagha has a spiritual-moral model of compassionate self-relating

Second, we found that Nahj al-Balagha supports a compassionate form of self-relating, but this relating stems from an ethic-theological framework. Nahj al-Balagha passages did not create self-compassion as a unified psychological construct as it is understood today; rather, they spread its content across a few ethically laden terms. Such concepts include mercy towards the self, a dignified existence, avoiding disgrace towards the self, balanced treatment of the self, self-accounting, and confidence in the mercy of God.

According to compassionate treatment here did not involve the unconditional approval of any inner state. It meant safeguarding the self from humiliation, despair, excessive self-blame, moral neglect, and damnation. The self was deemed to be precious, dignified, and important. So, instead of offering sustenance to soothe emotions, self-care became a moral obligation to preserve the soul and promote its character.

Theme 3: Strong similarities are evident in Rejecting Self-Criticism

A third theme was the significant overlap at the level of practical psychology. Neff and the chosen passages from Nahj al-Balagha condemn forms of self-relatedness that are punishing, humiliating, or that have a deranging emotional effect on the person. Both traditions conceive human beings as always prone to sin, weakness, and imperfection; they consider unadulterated condemnatory self-evaluation as counterproductive.

There was sufficient overlap in three key areas. First, both disavow excessive self-criticism. Second, both see imperfection and suffering as something to be expected and expectedly imperfect as something to be expected. Third, both recommend a state of mind in which the mind observes its distress, distancing itself from it. While the term used by Neff is mindfulness, and by the Islamic corpus, self-awareness or self-accounting, they serve the same purpose.

Theme 4: The pivotal distinction - the telos of self-compassion

Despite these apparent similarities, the most important difference was that they are built on different ends. Neff's approach to self-compassion has a therapeutic telos that involves psychological well-being, reduction of distress and other emotions, new ways of coping, and emotional resilience. Even when terms are used to convey an ethical dimension, this too has a therapeutic focus and is oriented toward the person.

But the telos of self-compassion in the term of Nahj al-Balagha is moral purification. Self-compassion is only permissible inasmuch as it helps purify the self, maintain dignity, enact repentance, avoid excess, and be close to God. The self is not an independent value-grounding vis-à-vis transcendence but a responsible moral individual whose well-being culminates in the rightly ordered relation to God, truth, and others.

This influenced the definition of analogous ideas. For instance, in Neff's treatment, self-compassion ameliorates shame and emotional dysregulation. In Nahj al-Balagha, kindness toward oneself is related to slander (vigilance) and cultivating one's morality. Similarly, acceptance of one's imperfections in Neff's theory is an antidote to feelings of loneliness, whereas in the Islamic tradition, recognition of weakness is connected to humility, penitence, and following channels of inner training.

Theme 5: Nahj al-Balagha harmonizes compassion with responsibility

The fifth key finding was that Nahj al-Balagha provides an important corrective to a potential misinterpretation of self-compassion as simply emotional comforting. The passages examined endowed mercy with a sense of responsibility, introspection, and moral constraints. Self-compassion was thus not lenient. It didn't suspend evaluation; it revolutionized it, making it constructive.

This is theoretically important because it answers a question sometimes raised in contemporary accounts of self-compassion: is "being kind to ourselves" soft or lenient toward us and therefore insufficiently motivating, disciplined, or accountable? In the Nahj al-Balagha view, this is not the case. There is no compassion without demands for self-improvement, although it is compassionately extinguished if it dispenses hope. So, self-accounting and self-compassion could not be reduced to opposites; rather, they were complementary aspects of a developed moral personality.

Theme 6: Neff's theory does well in psychology but appears to lack Islamic clarity

The last and most overarching finding was that Neff's theory is highly valuable for psychological insight but appears significantly under-specified from the perspective of Nahj al-Balagha. The theory provides a clear description of pathological outcomes of self-derision, a highly detailed model of emotional response, and an intriguing comparison between self-compassion and contingent self-esteem. This renders it particularly valuable for the study of anxiety, shame, rumination, and depression.

But the analysis also revealed a few shortcomings. First, Neff does not offer a stronger account of the self's purpose. Second, it pays relatively little heed to God, the moral demands of divinity, and the individual's eventual destiny in relation to God. Third, notwithstanding, it appeals to common humanity; it is more individualistic than the moral account of humanity in Nahj al-Balagha. Fourth, its idea of acceptance may be read as making moral struggles blander unless tempered by a robust sense of responsibility.

In this regard, the framework of Nahj al-Balagha calls for expanding self-compassion. It should include an appreciation of the sanctity of the soul, persistent self-reflection, confidence in God's mercy, and the pursuit of moral improvement.

Comprehensive models recommended by the comparison

Overall, the results indicate that self-compassion can be reconceptualized as a multidimensionally cross-traditionally and intra-traditionally rich phenomenon. The common elements are being kind to oneself, common humanity, and balanced awareness of one's pain. The unique contribution of Nahj al-Balagha is as follows: moral responsibility, spiritual teleology, dignity-centered self-esteem, and transcendentally stabilized compassion.

As such, the comparative analysis suggests that the Islamic model does not oppose Neff's theory but rather integrates, recasts, and adds moral depth to it. Neff's theory helps explain how people can mitigate inner hostility and control emotional suffering, whereas Nahj al-Balagha explains why compassionate self-relating should be geared toward spiritual/ethical well-being rather than psychological well-being alone.

Overall, the findings reveal that Neff's theory and Nahj al-Balagha agree on eschewing denigrating self-condemnation and affirming a compassionate, non-hostile self-relating. But they differ in their views of the person, the purpose of self-compassion, and the combination of acceptance and accountability. The study's findings, therefore, endorse a critical point: Neff's theory is an important psychological account of self-compassion, but the lessons of Imam Ali yield a more holistic moral-spiritual account that balances it with dignity, self-reform, and a relationship with the Sacred.

Discussion

The key finding of the study is that there is overlap, but only to a certain extent, between Neff and Nahj al-Balagha. The confluence is greatest at the level of regulatory processes. Neff understands self-compassion as the openness to oneself in the context of one's own suffering, the utterance of compassion for the self (not self-criticism), the awareness of inadequacy as shared by the human condition, and the reflection of difficult thoughts and feelings with balanced attention to their content (without being overwhelmed by them). In the chosen passages from Nahj al-Balagha, we find a similar ethic when Imam Ali urges the reader to "make yourself the measure" in their relationships with others, not to oppress oneself, and not to oversolicit one's own self. In both approaches, the self is not "put to the whip". Rather, there is a disciplined kindness that facilitates repair and not brooding [1, 8, 9].

A second issue that emerges from the comparison is that it challenges the problematic caricature of self-compassion as morally weak. Neff's own work does not lend credence to this. Her first paper makes clear that self-compassion is not inaction, and also motivates behaviors required for health and well-being. And her more recent review points out that self-compassion is associated with healthy coping strategies, motivates change for the better, and does not imply acceptance of immorality. Indeed, the studies reviewed show that greater self-compassion is associated with less acceptance of immoral behavior and more making amends and apologizing. This is relevant to our comparison, as the chosen passages from Nahj al-Balagha also link mercy to sobriety, humility, and vigilance regarding moral accountability [1, 8, 9].

A third conclusion is that the most significant difference concerns suffering. In Neff's operational theory, suffering is human and requires a middle and compassionate response; the goal is to

diminish shame and self-criticism and to achieve better regulation and more sustainable well-being. For the select teachings of Imam Ali, suffering is human and psychologically significant, but it can be spiritual too. It can be a place for self-understanding, humility towards God, and concerted ethical re-creation. In Letter 31, the self is not denied, nor absolutized, but is conceived as a trust which must not be insulted or tyrannical. In Sermon 193, the self is extolled, but it is done in terms of humility retarding God rather than despair-induced self-hatred [10].

There is a fourth - methodological as well as material - point to note: a psychological construct and a spiritual text should not be compared as if they belonged to the same genre. A structural rather than a lexical comparison is the most defensible. Structurally, both speak of a response to the self's recognition of its shortcomings. But it has a different response in depth and direction. Neff offers a form of psychological self-regulation, interpersonal. The above readings in Nahj al-Balagha offer a spiritual anthropology where self-relation is implicated with relation to God, moral order, and virtue. The recent critical edition and translation of Nahj al-Balagha by Tahera Qutbuddin [11] emphasizes the textually salient point that it should not be read simply as an inspirational hodgepodge from which isolated connections can be drawn [12].

Comparison with contemporary literature

The results are most consistent with Neff's pioneering and review papers. The 2003 conceptual article positioned self-compassion as an alternative to relative (contingent) self-evaluation, and the 2011 review claimed that self-compassion produces many of the advantages of self-esteem while avoiding many of its pitfalls (ego defensiveness, self-enhancement). This study confirms this benefit but also suggests that juxtaposing it with Nahj al-Balagha adds a further twist: an ethic of self-kindness may be normatively reinforced when framed in terms of dignity and accountability rather than affect (regulation) [1, 8, 9].

Our findings also align with the laboratory-experimental literature, including Mark Leary [13] and others. They showed that self-compassion reduces the negative response to aversive, self-relevant events and, in some contexts, is a superior predictor of resistance to dysregulated shame and distress. This bolsters the present article's argument that being compassionate toward the self is not a pleasant, benign trait; rather, it is a specific regulatory strategy. But it is possible that regulation can become ethically hollow in the absence of self-oversight, repair, and, by extension, when necessary, repentance and reparation [14-16].

A third set of studies bolsters the study's clinical relevance. Meta-analyses by MacBeth and Gumley [24] have shown a large negative association between self-compassion and psychopathology, and by Zessin and colleagues [33] a large positive association between self-compassion and well-being. Neff's recent review solidifies these reports and adds that treatments increase self-compassion and reduce distress with medium to large effect sizes. These positive effects are not denied by the current study. Instead, it suggests that for faithful believers,

particularly Muslims who are less likely to separate spiritual from moral meanings (i.e., "dignity, accountability, transcendence") in the psychic domain, regular self-compassion might be more fully amenable and potentially more effective with a dignity, accountability, and transcendence component added [17].

Comparisons to compassion-focused therapies are most relevant. Paul Gilbert [11] and others developed compassionate mind training and compassion-focused therapy, in part to address shame and very self-critical people, by highlighting the need to activate a soothing and affiliative system and to overcome compassion fears. Gilbert (2010) situates compassion-focused therapy within evolutionary, motivational, and social-rank domains, including the roles of threat and protection, and of competition and shame. This research complements this article in two respects. First, compassion-based therapy already has a sophisticated account of discipline, threat, and motivation. Second, it makes clear that a concept of self-compassion that is controlled by the threat of accountability need not be punitive: self-criticism overactivates threat; what's required is a non-punitive way to correct [18].

The research literature on interventions developed by Christopher Germer [1, 8, 9] is also relevant. Neff and Germer's study of their Mindful Self-Compassion program found its effects on self-compassion, mindfulness, and well-being sustained at six-month and one-year follow-ups. Germer and Neff also suggested that explicit self-compassion training is not redundant with mindfulness training and may be tailored to life skills. This study concurs but adds a cultural qualification: for some Muslim or devout individuals, mindfulness may need to be reconceptualized as morally and theologically infused reflection, rather than as value-neutral mindfulness [11].

This makes sense of the meaning and spiritual literature. Paul T. P. Wong's [11] work suggests that meaning and self-transcendence manifest a spiritual aspect of humanity and are vital to well-being and healing. Similarly, recent Islamic psychology research by Abdallah Rothman [9] and colleagues proposes that Islamic psychology should start with an Islamic model of the person, rather than incorporating Islamic terms into pre-scientific models. Ayca's integrated well-being model for Islam also critiques the status quo of Eurocentric models of well-being. These studies clearly support my claim in the present article that the exclusion of explicit reference to transcendence is not an innocent blind spot in all situations; in some, it is a theoretical dead-end [19].

The explicitly religious work on self-compassion among Muslims, although still sparse, suggests the same. Ghorbani and others found that, among Iranian Muslims, self-compassion was associated with a positive integrative view of self and intrinsic religiousness, and they explicitly suggested that a genuine faith in a benevolent God might facilitate the application of compassion to the self. This is one of the key empirical lightweight bridges for the current study, as it indicates that theocentric orientation need not be seen as the new kid on the block in the field of self-

compassion; it may be a culturally relevant pivot for the development and impact of the construct [20].

And cross-cultural studies support the contextualization of the present study. Neff and colleagues' study, which examined the United States, Thailand, and Taiwan, showed that self-compassion was calibrated by specific cultural traits rather than by East versus West, despite self-compassion being associated with well-being in each country. Montero-Marin and colleagues subsequently demonstrated that self-compassion scales vary across countries, depending on cultural values, in terms of the contributions of positive and negative aspects and facets of self-compassion. More recently, Viren Swami [11] and associates confirmed measurement invariance of the short form in 65 cultures, 40 languages, men and women, as well as across age groups, which is good for cross-cultural comparisons, but it does not rule out the need to check whether the standard form lacks spiritually relevant elements. The context of other cultural psychology work, such as that led by Steven Heine, also remains relevant, as it reminds us that the purposes of self-enhancement, self-criticism, and self-improvement tend to vary across different cultural ecologies. This is important because, as a rival to Western self-esteem culture, Neff's model partly reflects a reaction against it, whereas Nahj al-Balagha offers an alternative to the modern Western self-esteem crisis rather than a crisis of moral-spiritual self-formation [21].

Convergence and divergence in theory

At the point of convergence, the most significant shared claim is about not chiding the self with contempt. Neff and the selected sayings of Imam Ali oppose the idea that learning involves such a self-beat-down. They also deny the dichotomy of mercy and severity. Compassion for the self does not preclude the truth, responsibility, and reparation. This is supported by Neff's findings that self-compassion fosters change following moral transgressions, and by the Nahj al-Balagha statements that link humility to struggle rather than resignation [1, 8, 9].

Onto-theologically, we part ways. Neff's theory, as operationalized in self-compassion science, is psychologically fleshed out but ontologically thin: neither does it affirm nor denigrate transcendence, nor does it require belief in the soul, the divine source, or karmic results. It speaks the language of humanistic psychology and finds its way to empirical science. The Islamic psychology models of interest, on the other hand, involve a representation of the person as nafs, qalb, and ruh, with the heart's connection to God as a pivot point of psychological well-being. This entails that the same behaviors - such as treating oneself with kindness or avoiding excessive self-criticism - have different foundations in the different models of the self [1, 8, 9].

Regarding telos, Neff's model focuses primarily on resilience, reduced suffering, coping, and well-being. Nahj al-Balagha encompasses these benefits too but subordinates them to a higher telos - moral purity, justice, humility, and closeness to God. This is more than just a trimming.

The telos of a theory determines its measure of success. Success has a different meaning in Neff's theory: moderate self-regard in times of adversity and psychopathology.

Success in the selected teachings of Imam Ali also means true self-knowledge, avoiding self-degradation, meeting obligations, and attaining a transcendently defined flourishing. The work of Wing on the psychology of transcendence suggests a telos like this may offer independent psychological value, rather than theological fluff [11].

On the front of moral responsibility, there are consistencies but with varying degrees of emphasis. Neff does not sanctify the nonjudgment that seems to excuse immoral actions; her review confirms that after failure, our motivation to re-establish moral balance is enhanced. However, moral accountability is less significant within the key explanatory framework of self-kindness, common humanity, and balanced awareness. In Imam Ali's quotations, accounting is fundamental. Not only is it necessary to recognize the suffering, but it is also necessary to check whether some part of it is associated with inattention, unfairness, and laxity. Hence, an apparent synthesis of mercy and severity can be found. The curative moment is not self-hatred but moral awareness [9].

The mindfulness/ta'ammul or self-accounting dynamic is important. Neff's mindfulness is a balanced awareness of painful thoughts and feelings, rather than being identified with them. Such attention is essential and certainly not to be overlooked. But the above passages from Nahj al-Balagha suggest an evaluative form of mindfulness: the self is to be observed, measured, restrained, encouraged, and corrected before God. In short, the Islamic parallel is not attentional but contemplative, focused on moral meaning. This interpretation is consistent with recent works on Islamic psychotherapy that contribute reflection, purification of the heart, and reconnecting with the Divine to the process of healing [1, 8, 9].

Lastly, transcendence of the Divine is the most significant difference. In Neff's theory, transcendence is a historical category that developed from Buddhist thought but is a non-operational feature. The scale/intervention literature has no explicit engagement with God. In selecting the teachings of Imam Ali, in contrast, the triangle of the Self, Other, and God is integral. Self-compassion is not an autarchic circuit of psychology-for-the-self, but mediated through a God of mercy, justice, and an apocalyptic finality. The contribution of the present article is to suggest that this is not a case of reasonably remorseful "Islamic flavor". It is a change in the conceptual structure [1, 8, 9].

Table 1. Comparative attributes of self-compassion.

Core attribute	Neff	Nahj al-Balagha	Integrative proposal
Ontology	Psychological-relational self-capable of treating itself with kindness; no	Morally responsible self before God; dignity is discovered	Dignity is bestowed, not earned; compassionate self-relation is

	explicit requirement	theistic	within a divine moral order	inseparable from accountable agency
Primary human problem	Self-criticism, isolation, over-identification, contingent self-worth		Self-oppression, moral helplessness, spiritual forgetfulness, imbalance between humility and self- regard	Shame and dysregulation plus alienation from moral meaning and transcendent worth
Core processes	Self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness		Mercy toward self, measured self-regard, humility, reflective self-accounting, trust in God	Compassionate acceptance, dignity appraisal, accountable reflection, behavioral repair, transcendent meaning
Telos	Resilience, well-being, lower psychopathology, adaptive coping		Moral purification, justice, nearness to God, spiritually meaningful flourishing	Psychologically resilient, morally regulated, spiritually interpretable flourishing
View of failure	A universal human experience that should not trigger self- condemnation		A test, a disclosure of limits, and often an occasion for repentance and reform	Normalize pain, preserve agency, and convert failure into repair rather than identity collapse
Motivation	Encouragement over self-attack; lower fear of failure		Mercy joined to duty, discipline, and truthful self-appraisal	Warmth without indulgence; correction without humiliation
Contemplative stance	Balanced awareness without fusion		Reflective, morally evaluative contemplation before God	Dual process: non-fused awareness plus value- guided moral accounting
Relational horizon	Self in continuity with common humanity		Self in relation to community and God	Triadic model of self, others, and transcendence

Table 1 assimilates Neff's key model and review articles, and the selected excerpts from Letter 31 and Sermon 193, the recent critical edition of Nahj al-Balagha, and recent Islamic psychology theory [1, 8, 9].

Implications for theory, practice, and cultural studies

Theoretically, to start, compassion and accountability needn't be seen as enemies. Part of the reason contemporary self-compassion literature struggles to gain traction is that readers think a softening of self-criticism will decrease accountability. Based on the comparison, it's possible and theologically supported to work in the opposite direction: that is, to boost accountability by making the self-sufficiently stable to avoid protective shame, denial, and dysfunction. This makes sense for compassion science, as well as these teachings of Imam Ali [9].

For clinical care, the comparison suggests that scripts for self-compassion interventions may need cultural and theological translation before they are automatically applied. Some Muslim clients, particularly those whose distress includes shame, scrupulosity, moral injury, grief, or identity confusion, might find their secularly formulated self-kindness to be insufficient or normatively unresolved. A modified intervention can retain the most established elements of compassion-based therapy and Mindful Self-Compassion while glossing them in a language of dignity as bestowed by God, accurate but merciful self-accounting, and reparative practices. The effects of compassion-based interventions in reducing self-criticism and fears of compassion are well established in the intervention literature; the point here is that the fit between religious congruence and acceptability and the mechanism may be better for some [11].

The study has implications for cross-cultural researchers regarding the concept of stratified universality. Regulation against self-attack may be universal; cultural and spiritual interpretations associated with it are not. Cross-cultural research demonstrates the association of self-compassion and well-being in a wide range of countries, but also differences in average levels, item functioning, and correlates with cultural orientation. So, it makes no scientific sense to ask, "Is self-compassion universal?" Rather, it is which aspect of the construct, functional, narrative, motivational, or metaphysical, is universal [21].

Integrative model and empirical agenda

The analysis justifies a new synthetic construct that can be called the Dignity-Accountability-Theocentric (DAT) model of Self-Compassion. It argues not that all self-compassion must be religious, but that a more complete model, more easily exportable to other cultures, emerges when three overlooked dimensions are added to the standard model.

The first is dignity-based reasons. Here, the self is kind to itself, not due to success, nor because everyone is a failure, but because it has inherent worth, which is not undone by failure. This is not confabulatory self-esteem but more an ethics of the value of each human person. The second

aspect is accountability regulation. Failure awareness leads to accurate evaluation, proportionate self-responsibility, and remedial action, but not to self-loathing. The last dimension is theocentric orientation. Life and suffering are seen within a horizon of divine promise, purpose, and meaning, as much as in psychological homeostasis. These dimensions build on the comparative findings and the Islamic psychology discussion, which argue that human subjectivity transcends secular psychological characterizations [1, 8, 9].

An intervention model inspired by this approach would retain the proven compassion exercises of modern therapies and reframe them in a different sequence. Rather than taking the participant directly from distress to soothing, the therapist (or an adaptation of this model for a program) directs the client to: name the suffering; declare non-contingent dignity; hold oneself to a compassionate account that clarifies responsibility from self-condemnation; and select a form of repair, patience, surrender, or service (as the case may be). With regard to Muslims, this sequence could be supported with optional religiously congruent practices such as dignity priming (performing rituals of reading scriptural stories with focus on self-dignity), breath-based compassion exercises focusing on the dhikr practice, daily journaling of muhasaba, and explicitly redepositing restitution money following morally significant failures [12]. This is not to say that it does not rely on the empirical evidence of MSC and CFT [11].

Model generates concrete hypotheses

1. Among Muslim adults with high shame, self-criticism, and moral injury, an MSC variant enhanced with dignity-accountability-theocentrism will significantly reduce shame, fear of compassion, and moral injury compared to standard MSC, and lead to at least as great an increase in their self-compassion and well-being. This hypothesis is consistent with the MSC efficacy scores, Gilbert's taxonomy of shame and fear of compassion, and evidence that intrinsic religious orientation boosts the benefits of self-compassion-related adjustment [11].
2. Following experimentally evinced moral transgression, the ability to self-compassion with accountability as a moderator will lead to greater repair than normative self-compassion scripts that express kindness more generally. This stems from Neff's review of studies on moral transgression and the relative argument that commitment to mercy and responsibility can be simultaneously heightened [9].
3. The link between self-compassion and well-being will be partially mediated by meaning and transcendence in religious samples, beyond common mindfulness and humanity. This is a model for capturing the contributions of Wong's theory and recent Islamic psychological models [19].
4. A modified scale that adds dignity, considered reflection, and higher meaning items to the standard dimensions of self-compassion will have higher construct validity in highly

religious samples than the unmodified "short" form, requiring formal invariance testing across countries and languages [22, 23].

Limitations and future research

This study has limitations: it is qualitative and comparative-conceptual, not empirical, so it can't demonstrate causal superiority; analysis is selective (focused mainly on Letter 31 and Sermon 193 of Nahj al-Balagha) and should be broadened in future research (preferably using the new critical edition); there is inherent danger of anachronism in comparing a contemporary psychometric construct with a pre-modern religious text, suggesting disciplined analogical reasoning rather than equivalence claims in future work; future empirical research needs to focus on measurement issues (including differential effects and possible under-measurement of spiritual/moral qualities); future culturally adapted interventions should avoid two symmetric excesses - secularizing until empty or morality-inflating until scrupulosity and perfectionism. The best future program will include the following: further textual analysis, participatory theory-building with Muslim stakeholders, scales to measure dignity and theocentric meaning, pilot testing of adapted protocols, and randomized trials comparing adapted protocols with current interventions (MSC, CFT). Trans-cultural studies also need research on whether the proposed factors are applicable across different religious and spiritually oriented samples.

Conclusion

This study highlights that the best account of the comparison between Kristin Neff's conception of self-compassion and Imam Ali's Islamic ethical tradition is neither a naively prescriptive parallel nor an adversarial opposition between "modern psychology" and "religion". The two share not only the rejection of self-suppression, the recognition of the universality of human suffering, and the pursuit of balance, repair, and humane realism, but also the rejection of the polarities of shame. Recent self-compassion research provides robust support for the psychological value of such an insight.

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