

Supplementary information for: Compassionate love: Theory, measurement, and application

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1. Compassionate love for friends and acquaintances: Socio-demographic and personality correlates and well-being outcomes

An updated version of this information will also be presented as a conference paper, and can be obtained by emailing: sprecher@ilstu.edu. The presentation can be referenced as: Sprecher, S., & Fehr, B. (2026). Compassionate love for friends and acquaintances: Socio-demographic and personality correlations and well-being outcomes. Paper presented at the Midwest Psychology Association Annual Conference, April, Chicago.

2. Abstract

Data from a survey study conducted in the fall of 2024 ($N = 768$) were analyzed to examine how scores on a brief version of the Sprecher and Fehr (2005) Compassionate Love Scale completed with respect to “friends and acquaintances” were associated with several sociodemographic variables, personality variables, and well-being outcomes. Compassionate love (for friends/acquaintances) was found to be associated with being female, but not with age or subjective social class. Of the Big 5 personality characteristics, openness and agreeableness were most highly correlated with experiencing compassionate love in this context. The more compassionate love the participants reported experiencing for their friends/acquaintances, the higher their score on a well-being index and on a happiness item. The findings contribute to knowledge of this type of love, generally defined as giving of oneself for the good of another, and supplements past research that has generally focused on compassionate love for a partner or all of humanity.

3. Introduction

Although love is most often studied in the context of romantic relationships, love can be experienced for many other close others. One type of love in particular – compassionate love – can be experienced for people beyond an inner circle of intimates, even extending to strangers and all of humanity (Hwang et al., 2008; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). Sprecher and Fehr (2005) introduced a Compassionate Love Scale (CLS) that can be used to measure compassionate love for various targets. In their research, they compared compassionate love experienced for a romantic partner, “close others” (as a group), and humanity/strangers. Since the introduction of the scale, research on compassionate love has proliferated in various disciplines, the scale has been translated into multiple languages, and various brief derivatives of the scale have been created (e.g., Hwang et al., 2008; Neto & Neto, 2022).

One focus of research on compassionate love has been to examine individual characteristics (e.g., gender, personality) in who loves more compassionately. Another recent focus has been on the outcomes of experiencing compassionate love for others, particularly for one's well-being. For a review of this literature, see Author Citation.

The current research is focused on extending the past research by examining socio-demographic and personality correlates and well-being outcomes of compassionate love experienced for the specific target group of "friends and acquaintances". Friends, and especially acquaintances, have been understudied types of relationships, and yet can be very important for people's lives (Fehr & Sprecher, in press; Sprecher, 2022).

4. Method

4.1 Overview of data

The data were collected in fall of 2024 by one of the authors to examine multiple issues about people's social connections, particularly about friends and weak ties. Because a brief form of the Compassionate Love Scale (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005) was included in the survey, we analyzed the data to supplement our main paper in the *International Journal of Wellbeing*.

4.2 Sample

The sample for these analyses consisted of 768 U.S. participants. The sample included college students from two locations (a public university in Illinois and a public university in New York State), as well as data collected from various online research platforms including Prolific, the Social Psychology Network, and SurveyCircle. An attempt was made to obtain a diverse sample in the U.S., including by targeting (for the Prolific sample) states in the U.S. south. For more detail on the sample, including exclusions, see Author.

Of the sample analyzed here, 66.0% were women, 31.6% were men, and 2.3% selected one of the other options for gender (e.g., non-binary). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 86, with a mean age of 31.32 ($SD = 15.10$). About two-thirds of the sample (68.7%) reported that they were White/Caucasian, 13.6% said Black or African American, 7.8% identified as Hispanic or Latino/a/x, with the remainder identifying as Asian, Middle Eastern, or other.

4.3 Procedure

The Qualtrics survey received IRB approval from the author's university and began with consent information that stated the purpose of the study, participation was voluntary, participants could skip any questions, and the data would remain anonymous.

4.4 Measures

The measures analyzed for this ancillary document are described below (other measures were in the survey but are not included here).

4.4.1 Compassionate love

Participants received five items from the Sprecher and Fehr (2005) Compassionate Love scale. The items were written with the target of "friends and acquaintances" (e.g., "I tend to feel compassion for my friends and acquaintances"). Participants responded to each item with a 1 (*not at all true of me*) to 7 (*very true of me*) response scale. Cronbach's alpha for the 5-item scale was .86.

4.4.2 Subjective social class

Social class was measured by the MacArthur scale of Subjective social status (Adler et al., 2000), which assesses where people report that they belong in society relative to others, in terms of money, education, jobs, etc. Because there were many college students in our sample, we also added the following instructions: "If you are a young adult in college, please think of your entire life (including your family of origin and your own potential for the future)".

4.4.3 Personality (Big 5)

Participants completed Gosling et al.'s (2003) 10-item Personality Inventory (TIPI) to measure the Big 5 personality characteristics (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience). The scale includes two items to measure each of the Big 5 personality characteristics. Participants responded to each item on a 7-point scale with the anchors: 1 = *disagree strongly*; 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*; and 7 = *agree strongly*. Each reverse-scored item was recoded and the mean of the two items for each personality characteristic represented its score. As noted by Gosling et al. (2003), the items chosen for the TIPI emphasized content validity rather than optimizing high internal consistency. The Cronbach alpha coefficients in this study for the five indices were similar in magnitude to those reported by Gosling et al.: Extraversion (.76), Agreeableness (.31), Conscientiousness (.53), Emotional Stability (.69), and Openness (.41). As noted by Gosling et al., other evidence for the reliability of the scales included high test-retest correlations provided in their research.

4.4.4 Well-being and happiness

Participants were asked to respond to several self-descriptions on a 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*) response scale, prefaced by the question: "When you think about your life overall, how often do you feel (or are) the following?" Items that referred to health and well-being were used to create a total index of Health and Well-being, namely: depressed (reverse coded), healthy, positive about myself, energetic, joyful, optimistic, and anxious (reverse scored). Cronbach's alpha for this 7-item index was .89.

Participants also were asked, "Taking all things together, how happy would you say that you have been in the last month?" (1 = *not at all*; to 10 = *extremely*).

5. Results

5.1 Overall scores of compassionate love

The mean response on the brief CLS-Friends & Acquaintances was 5.73 ($SD = 1.03$), which indicates that the participants experienced high levels of compassionate love for their friends and acquaintances as a group.

5.2 Socio-demographic differences in compassionate love

When comparing men and women in the degree to which they experienced compassionate love for their friends and acquaintances, a gender difference was found. Women had significantly higher scores ($M = 5.85$, $SD = .98$) than did men ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.07$; $t [709] = 4.86$, $p < .001$, $d = .39$).

The bivariate correlation between age (18 to 86) and the total compassionate love score was not significant ($r = -.03$, $p = .37$). In addition, we compared three age groups: (1) emerging adults (ages 18 to 29; $n = 417$); middle adults (ages 30-50; $n = 196$) and older adults (>50; $n = 106$). A one-

way ANOVA indicated no significant differences among the three groups on compassionate love scores ($F[2,716] = 1.92, p = .15, \eta^2 = .01$).¹

Furthermore, the bivariate correlation between subjective social class and compassionate love was not significant ($r = .06, p = .12$).

5.3 Personality and Compassionate Love

Next, we examined whether the Big 5 personality traits were associated with scores on the Compassionate Love Scale. As shown in Table 1, four of the Big 5 personality traits had significant bivariate correlations with compassionate love. The highest (positive) correlations were found for Agreeableness, Openness, and Extroversion (in that order).

5.4 Associations of Compassionate Love with Well-being and Happiness

We also examined whether scores on the Compassionate Love Scale were associated with the well-being index and the happiness item. The bivariate correlations of compassionate love (for friends and acquaintances) were significant and positive with both the index of well-being and the item measuring the degree of happiness experienced over the past month (see Table 1).

Table 1. Associations of scores on a brief version of the CLS (for friends/acquaintances) with personality traits, well-being and happiness

Correlate/Outcome	Pearson correlation
<i>Big 5 Personality Traits</i>	
Extroversion	.21***
Agreeableness	.39***
Conscientiousness	.11**
Emotional Stability	.01
Openness	.30***
<i>Wellness, Health, and Happiness</i>	
Total Index of Well-being and Health	.10**
Happiness item	.12**

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

6. Discussion

The results of these analyses supplement our review of prior research presented in our paper at *International Journal of Wellbeing*. The participants' overall score on the 5-item measure of compassionate love for friends and acquaintances was similar to the mean score found in Sprecher and Fehr (2005) for the longer CLS focused on "close others" (as a group). Thus, participants feel compassionate love for the sector of their social network that they refer to as friends and acquaintances.

Consistent with past research (e.g., Hwang et al., 2008; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005), women scored higher than men on compassionate love. Gender differences generally have not been found in past research when the target is a romantic partner or close family member (e.g., Fehr, 2024; Neto & Neto, 2022). However, the gender difference obtained in this research is consistent with other studies in which the target is beyond a very close other.

¹ The significantly higher score on compassionate love for women than for men was found for each of the three age groups ($d_s = .24, .41, \text{ and } .69$, respectively).

Other demographic variables (age and subjective social class), however, were not associated with compassionate love for friends/acquaintances. These findings are consistent with several other studies not finding an association between compassionate love (across targets) and age and social class (e.g., Addis et al., 2022; Novak et al., 2021).

Personality traits were associated with the degree that compassionate love was experienced for friends and acquaintances. Some past research has found that conscientiousness was the personality trait most consistently associated with compassionate love for others. We also found a positive correlation between conscientiousness and compassionate love, but the personality characteristics that were more strongly correlated with compassionate love in this study were agreeableness and openness. These two personality characteristics might be particularly associated with a positive orientation toward a broader social network.

Finally, we examined whether compassionate love for friends/acquaintances was correlated with well-being and happiness (related, but distinct concepts). Compassionately loving friends and acquaintances was associated with both well-being and happiness. Because the study is correlational, the causal direction could be either way or reciprocal. That is, the experience of feeling compassionate love for others can increase one's well-being and happiness. In addition, however, having high levels of well-being and happiness could lead one to feel compassionate love for others.

In sum, this brief report presents additional findings to supplement a narrative review presented in an article for the *International Journal of Wellbeing*. Although this study provides insight into correlates of compassionate love experienced for "friends and acquaintances," this group can be large and non-monolithic. Future research can also consider compassionate love (as well as compassion and other pro-social orientations) toward individual members of networks, ranging from best friends to weak ties at the outer layers of one's social network.

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Author contribution statement

Both authors contributed to this paper, with the first author taking the primary role.

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