CHILDHOOD, TOXIC SHAME, TOXIC GUILT AND SELF-COMPASSION

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Background

Feelings of *toxic shame* and *toxic guilt* are common symptoms of many mental disorders. Both these feelings arise from self-referential processing and it is supposed that they 1) result from maladaptive emotional schemas developed during *childhood* in interaction with parents and 2) are connected with lack of *self-compassion* (Benda, 2019). The aim of this study was to determine the correlations between these variables in two nonclinical samples.

Methods

Two questionnaire surveys were conducted online to investigate connections between 1) parental emotional warmth in childhood or attachment in adulthood, 2) shame-proneness or omnipotence guilt and 3) self-compassion.

Participants

Sample1 (N_1 = 302) consisted of 200 females (66.2 %) and 102 males. Their mean age was 43.68 years (SD = 13.24). Sample 2 (N_2 = 263) consisted of 144 females (54.8 %) and 119 males. Their mean age was 34.60 years (SD = 11.36).

Measures

Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness Scale (EMWSS; Richter, Gilbert, McEwan, 2009). The EMWSS is a 21-item measure which measures recall of feeling warm, safe and cared for in childhood. The sum of scores of the EMWSS items was used for the statistical analysis.

Experience in Close Relationships – Relationship Structures (ECR-RS; Fraley et al., 2011). The ECR-RS is a 36-item measure designed to assess adult attachment in relationships with mother, father, romantic partner and best friend. The sums of scores of the *anxiety scale* and the *avoidance scale* were used for the statistical analysis.

Interpersonal guilt questionnaire-67 (IGQ-67; O'Connor et al., 1997). The IGQ-67 contains 67 items which attempt to measure four types of guilt: survivor guilt (22 items), separation guilt (16 items), omnipotent responsibility guilt (14 items), and self hate (15 items). Only the *omnipotent responsibility guilt subscale* was used for the statistical analysis.

Test of Self-Conscious Affect-3 (TOSCA-3S, Tangney, Dearing, 2003). The TOSCA–3S is composed of 11 scenarios, each followed by 4 possible responses. It measures shame-proneness, guilt-proneness, detachment and externalization (blaming others). Only the *shame-proneness subscale* of the TOSCA-3S was used for the statistical analysis..

Sussex-Oxford Compassion for the Self Scale (SOCS-S; Gu et al., 2019). The SOCS-S is a 20-item measure which measures compassion for the self. The sum of scores of the SOCS-S items was used for the statistical analysis.

Self-Compassion Scale (SCS-CZ, Neff, 2003; Czech version Benda, Reichová, 2016). The original English version is a 26-item self-report inventory. In the Czech version, six items were removed from the original scale (items 3, 9, 15, 21, 22 and 23) to achieve the same factor structure as in the original scale (see Benda, Reichová, 2016). The sum of scores of all 20 items was used for the statistical analysis.

Statistical analysis

Data was analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics software, Version 23. Associations between study variables were analysed by calculating the Pearson's correlation coefficients.

Results

Correlations between study variables

The intercorrelations between all study variables in both samples are presented in Figures 1, 2 and 3. In sample 1 weak to mild correlations were found between parental emotional warmth, omnipotence guilt and self-compassion. In sample 2 weak to moderate correlations were found between attachment avoidance or anxiety, shame-proneness and self-compassion.

As expected, self-compassion was negatively correlated with omnipotence guilt ($r = -.14$; $p < .01$) and shame-proneness ($r = -.50$; $p < .05$). Parental emotional warmth was positively correlated with self-compassion ($r = .22$; $p < .01$) and negatively with omnipotence guilt ($r = -.14$; $p < .01$). Attachment anxiety was negatively correlated with self-compassion ($r = -.41$; $p < .01$) and positively with shame-proneness ($r = .23$; $p < .01$). Attachment avoidance was not significantly correlated with shame-proneness or self-compassion.

Figure 1
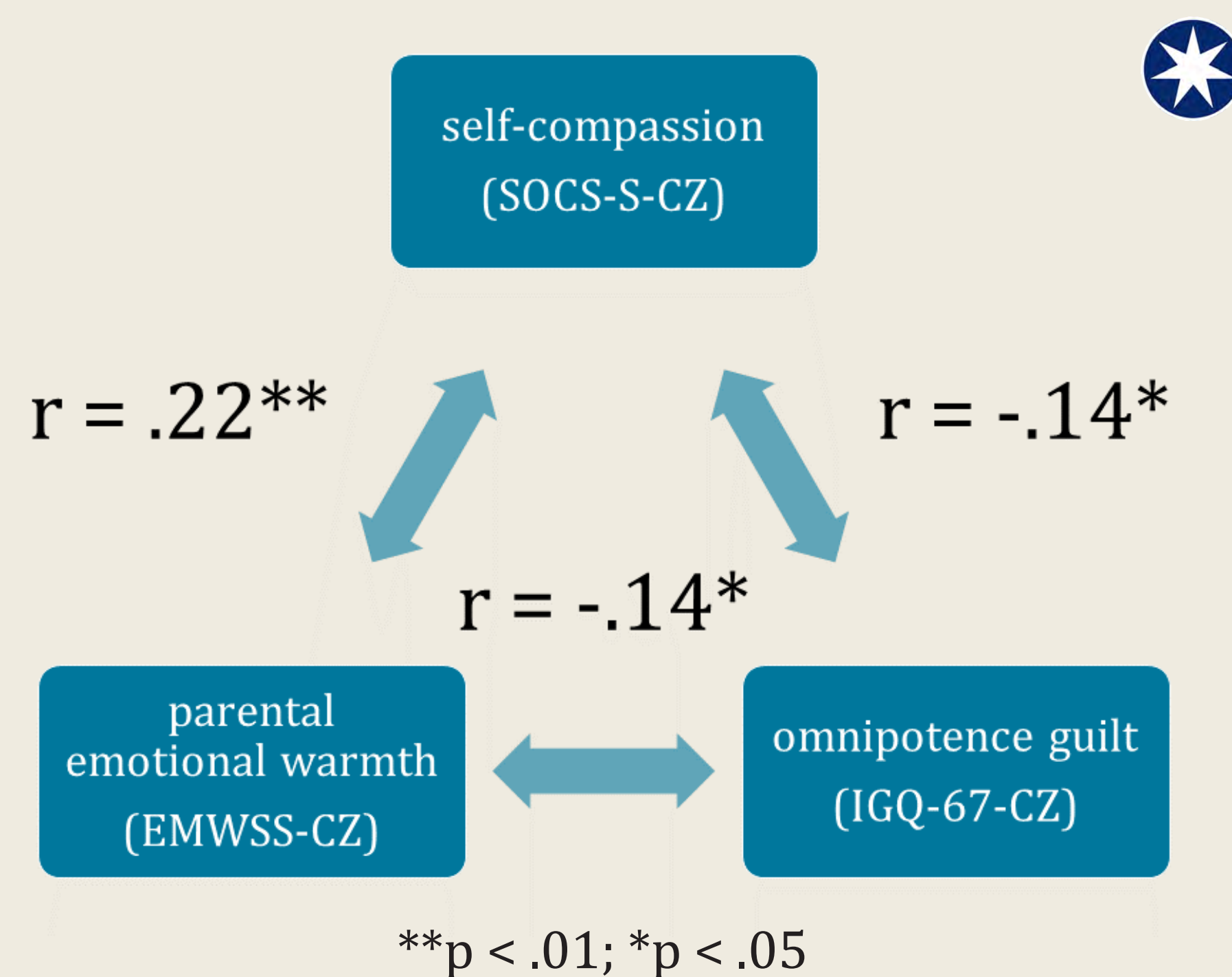*Correlations between study variables in Sample 1.*

self-compassion (SOCS-S-CZ)

$r = .22**$ $r = -.14*$

$r = -.14*$

parental emotional warmth (EMWSS-CZ) ⟷ omnipotence guilt (IGQ-67-CZ)

$**p < .01; *p < .05$

Figure 2
Correlations between anxiety, shame-proneness and self-compassion in Sample 2.

self-compassion (SCS-CZ)

$r = -.41**$ $r = -.50**$

$r = .23**$

anxiety (ECR-RS) ⟷ shame-proneness (TOSCA-3S)

$**p < .01; *p < .05$
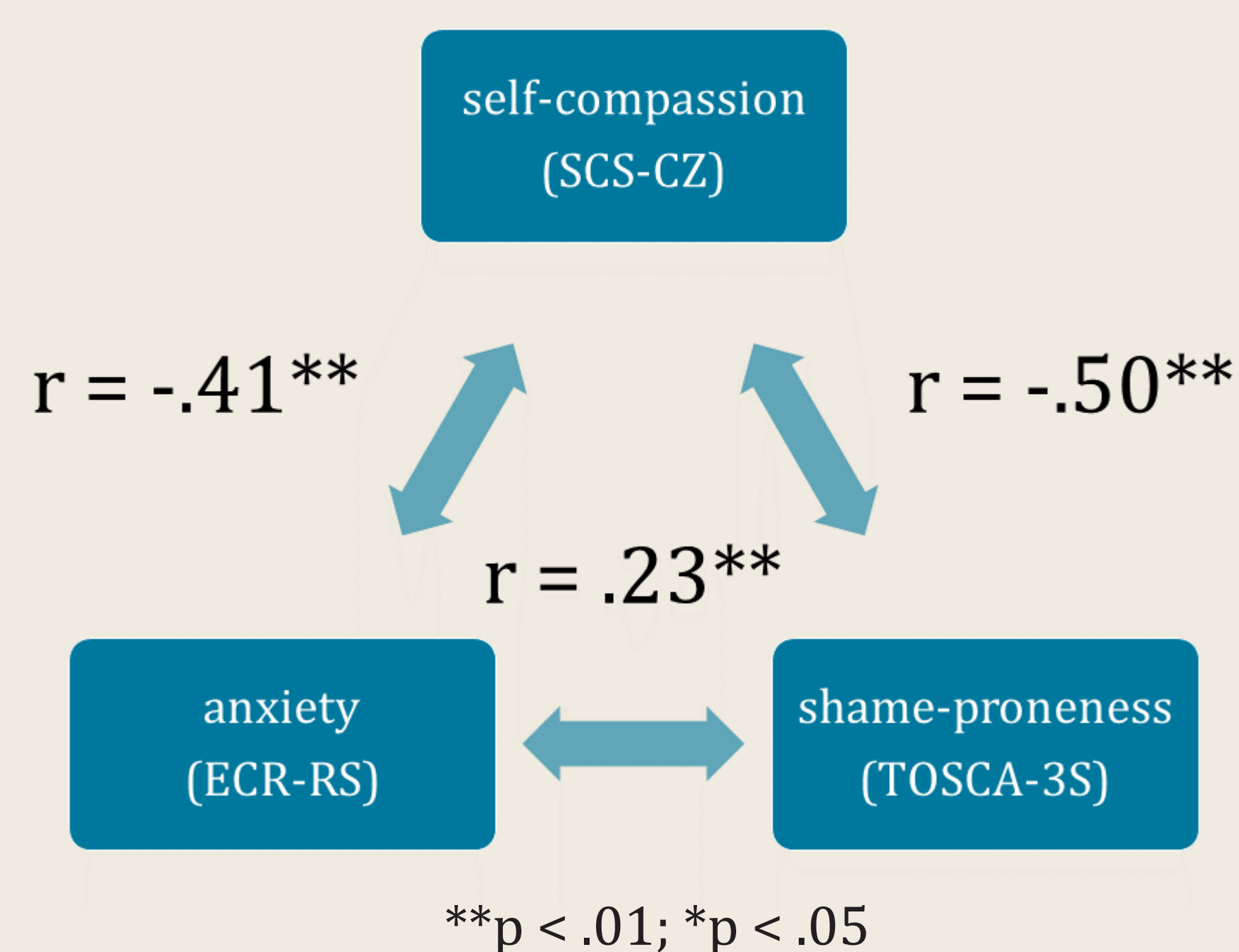
Figure 3
Correlations between avoidance, shame-proneness and self-compassion in Sample 2.

self-compassion (SCS-CZ)

$r = -.08$ $r = -.50**$

$r = -.08$

avoidance (ECR-RS) ⟷ shame-proneness (TOSCA-3S)

$**p < .01; *p < .05$
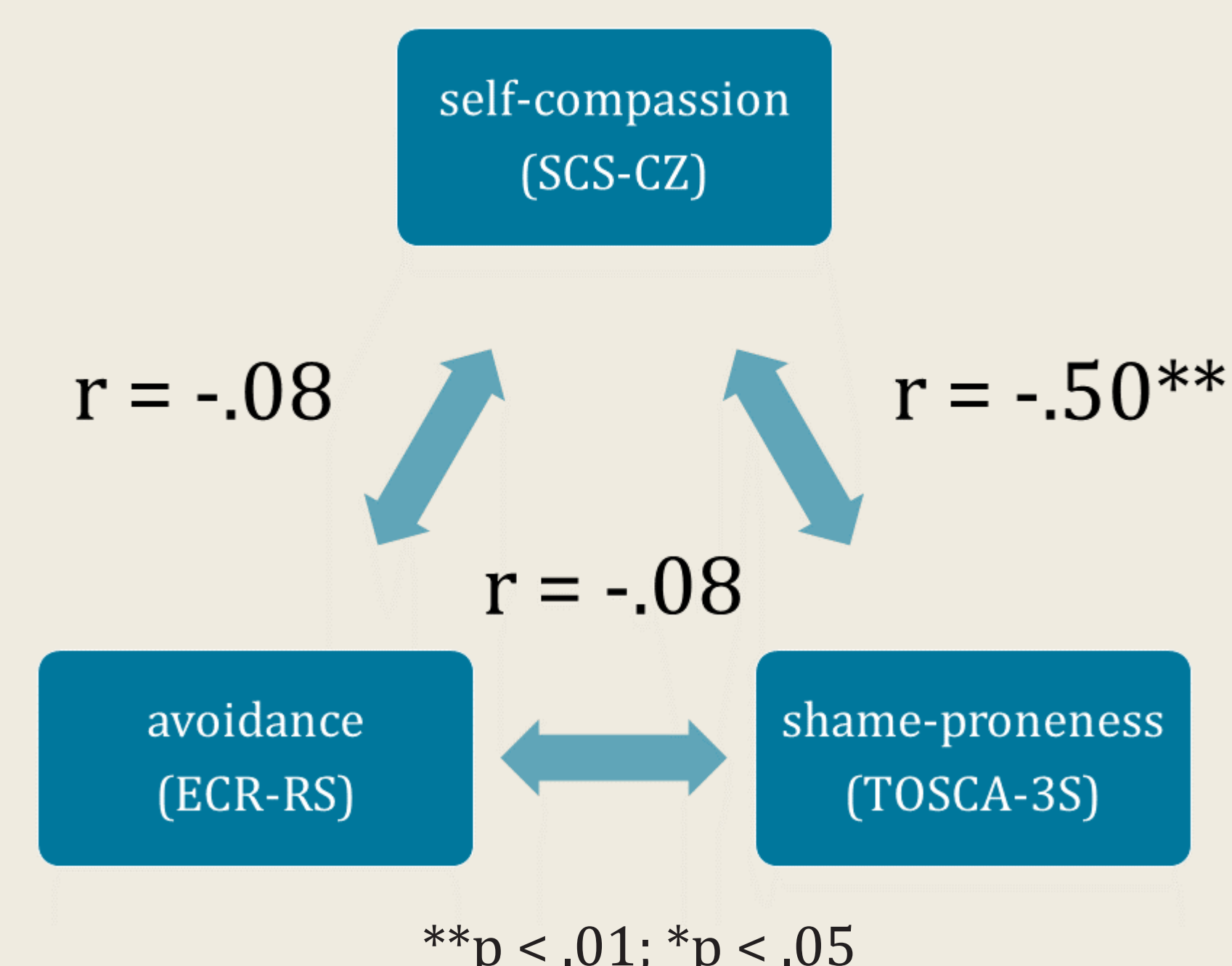
Discussion

We hypothesize that *deprivation of basic needs in childhood* as well as the child's efforts to fill the holes in the roles, leads to *lack of self-compassion* and *toxic shame-proneness* and *omnipotence guilt-proneness* in adulthood. And these transdiagnostic factors seem to cause many symptoms of mental disorders (Benda, 2019). The corrective experience with the image of "ideal parents", on the other hand, probably induces memory reconsolidation (Ecker, 2018), changes the relevant emotional schemas, encourages the development of *self-compassion* and, as a consequence, many symptoms disappear. However, it is difficult to test these hypotheses through correlation analysis. And the fact that there is no measure of fulfillment of basic needs makes it even harder.

Therefore, in future research it may be useful:

1) to develop a new questionnaire suitable to measure the level of fulfillment of basic needs during childhood.

2) to compare the levels of self-compassion, shame-proneness and omnipotence guilt-proneness before and after the PBSP intervention which uses the image of "ideal parents" to provide corrective experience to patients with different mental disorders.

3) closely compare findings of research on PBSP, research on self-compassion and research on shame.

Conclusions

Two independent surveys confirmed links between 1) parental emotional warmth in childhood or attachment in adulthood, 2) shame-proneness or omnipotence guilt and 3) self-compassion.

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