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Don't Be So Hard on Yourself: Self-Compassion Facilitates Creative Originality Among Self-Judgmental Individuals

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Self-compassion is a multifaceted state of potential utility in alleviating the self-critical tendencies that may undermine creative expressions among certain individuals. To investigate this idea, 86 undergraduates were randomly assigned to control or self-compassion conditions, following which creative originality was assessed by a version of the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT). The manipulation was hypothesized to facilitate creative originality particularly among individuals who are prone to critical self-judgment, as assessed by a trait measure. This interactive hypothesis was supported: Self-judgmental individuals displayed lower levels of creative originality in the control condition, but equal levels of creative originality in the self-compassion condition. Results are discussed in the context of theories of creative potential, self-compassion, and chronic tendencies toward self-criticism.

Self-compassion involves viewing the self with kindness and compassion, which has been theorized to be particularly important when negative events and experiences occur (Bennett-Goleman, 2001). Although this construct originates from Buddhist concepts and practices (Kornfield & Walsh, 1993), there is increased recognition that self-compassion may be of secular (i.e., non-Buddhist) utility in alleviating high levels of shyness and self-criticism (Gilbert, 2005), as well as facilitating more flexible approaches to suffering (Germer, 2009). In this context, Neff (2003b) stated that self-compassion involves "being open to and moved by one's own suffering, experiencing feelings of caring and kindness toward oneself, taking an understanding, nonjudgmental attitude toward one's inadequacies and failures, and recognizing that one's experience is part of the common human experience" (p. 224).

A small, but promising, body of findings has provided empirical support for the beneficial nature of self-compassion among nonclinical samples. For example, Neff (2003a) found that individuals scoring low in dispositional self-compassion (i.e., self-critical individuals) were more anxious and depressed. Subsequently, Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, and Hancock (2007) developed a state-related manipulation of self-compassion and showed that it appeared to reduce defensive responding and increase levels of resiliency and equanimity. The dependent measures for both of these studies, though, were predominantly of a self-reported nature. Our study significantly extends this prior literature by seeking to understand whether, and for whom, a self-compassion manipulation facilitates original creative thinking.

SELF-COMPASSION: A PLAUSIBLE FACILITATOR OF CREATIVE ORIGINALITY

A self-compassionate mindset may facilitate higher levels of creative originality, with the caveat that no studies have directly investigated this interface. Nonetheless, Neff (2003a) found that self-compassionate individuals reported engaging in tasks for more intrinsic

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reasons, and intrinsic motivation has been shown to facilitate higher levels of creative originality (Collins & Amabile, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Additionally, Neff, Hsieh, and Dejitterat (2005) found that self-compassion was positively associated with a mastery orientation to tasks, which, too, tends to facilitate creative performance (Silvia, 2006). The creativity literature has additionally shown that lower levels of creative self-efficacy, which may be linked to lesser self-compassion in more general terms (Neff, 2003b), are predictive of lower levels of creative originality (Choi, 2004; Tierney & Farmer, 2002, 2004).

Accordingly, there were reasons for thinking that the variables and processes highlighted in the self-compassion literature would be of value in understanding creative performance. To investigate potential links of this type, dispositional tendencies toward critical self-judgment were assessed (Neff, 2003a). Additionally, a self-compassionate mindset was experimentally manipulated using the priming procedures of Leary et al. (2007). Subsequently, all participants completed a test of creative potential (Goff & Torrance, 2002). It was hypothesized that self-judgmental individuals would exhibit lesser creative originality in a control condition, but that this deficit would be equalized following the induction of a self-compassionate mindset. If so, trait tendencies toward self-judgment and manipulated levels of self-compassion should interact to predict creative originality scores. Because the processes examined here are likely to involve self-censoring novel, original ideas (Beghetto, 2006; Tierney & Farmer, 2002), it was hypothesized that observed effects should be particular to creative originality rather than the mere fluency of creative output.

METHOD

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were 86 (55 male) undergraduate psychology students from North Dakota State University who were required to participate in a number of research studies in return for course credit. The majority of them were freshmen or sophomores, Caucasian in race (>90%), and their mean age was 20.01. To sign up for the study, students logged into the department's Sona Internet registration software and entered their names within a relevant time-slot. Approximately 10% of the students did not show up for their session, but there was 100% participation among those who did.

Manipulation

Self-compassion should be particularly relevant under conditions in which the self's flaws have been made salient (Leary et al., 2007). Accordingly, and to control for the fact that merely writing about a negative event can have therapeutic effects (Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990), all participants wrote about a negative personal experience from the past. Writing instructions were closely modeled on those of Leary et al. (2007) and asked participants to "think about a negative event that they experienced in high school or college that made them feel badly about themselves—something that involved failure, humiliation, or rejection." Participants were asked to describe the event and then provide details regarding what led up to it, who was present, precisely what happened, and how they felt and behaved at the time. After writing about the event for 5 min, participants were then randomly assigned to either a control condition or one designed to induce a self-compassionate mindset.

Participants in the control condition continued to write about the event without additional instructions. Participants assigned to the self-compassion condition received three additional prompts designed to encourage a self-compassionate orientation to the self, again modeled after the procedures of Leary et al. (2007). The first prompt asked individuals to list ways in which others also experience similar events (designed to evoke a common humanity perspective). The second prompt asked individuals to write a paragraph expressing understanding, kindness, and concern for the self in a manner similar to the way in which they would sympathize with a friend who had undergone the experience (designed to evoke a self-kindness perspective). The third prompt asked individuals to view the event in an objective, detached manner (designed to evoke a mindfulness perspective). The three prompts collectively, then, sought to instantiate the multifaceted state of self-compassion in a manner consistent with how this state is defined and understood in the literature (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003b).

Measures

Abbreviated Torrance Test for Adults (ATTA). Creative performance was assessed using the ATTA (Goff & Torrance, 2002), a shortened form of the TTCT (Torrance, 1974). The ATTA consists of three activities, one involving verbal responses and two involving figural responses (e.g., using presented geometrical shapes to draw a more complete picture). Goff and Torrance provided evidence for the reliability and validity of this assessment of creative performance. Responses were scored for fluency (i.e., a count of the number of pertinent responses) and originality (i.e., the number of responses that were unique and original), and scores were then summed across the three activities (Goff & Torrance, 2002).

Prior to scoring the ATTA protocols, the first author initially achieved a very high level of agreement with example responses from the manual. The first author also submitted a subset of ATTA protocols from a prior study (Zabelina & Robinson, 2010) to the test developers. Again, a very high level of agreement with the test developers was obtained, $rs > .90$. Accordingly, the first author scored all ATTA protocols from this study, and did so blind to individual differences in self-judgment and priming condition.

Individual differences in critical self-judgment. Participants completed the self-judgment scale developed and validated by Neff (2003a). This scale asks individuals to indicate the frequency (1 = *almost never*; 5 = *almost always*) with which they are habitually self-critical (e.g., "I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies"). Neff (2003a) reported a .77 Cronbach's alpha for this scale and an alpha coefficient of .63 was found in the present study.

Mood. Mood was assessed following ATTA performance for the sake of discriminant validity. Participants rated the extent to which their present mood state could be characterized as positive (1 = *very positive*; 7 = *not positive*) and negative (1 = *very negative*; 7 = *not negative*) in relation to these two mood items. Reverse-scoring procedures were used such that higher numbers reflected a more pleasant and/or less unpleasant momentary state (Russell & Carroll, 1999). Although the mood scale administered was brief, it was highly reliable (alpha = .74). Accordingly, a composite variable of mood state was calculated.

Procedures

The laboratory consisted of 6 private cubicles and, thus, participants were run in groups of 1–6 individuals at a time. Upon entering the lab, participants were informed that the study would consist of three different, ostensibly unrelated tasks: a writing task (i.e., the manipulation of state self-compassion), a performance task (i.e., the ATTA), and the completion of some questionnaires. Instructions for the writing task were verbally administered and it was thus deemed best to randomly assign sessions, rather than individuals to writing conditions. As it turned out, such procedures resulted in a slightly higher proportion of individuals assigned to the self-compassion condition ($n = 50$) relative to the control condition ($n = 36$), but the important point is that participants were randomly assigned to condition nonetheless.

After completing the writing task, which was interrupted at 10 min for both conditions, participants were told that they would then complete a very different task (i.e., the creative performance task). Following manual-based procedures, individuals were given 3 min for each of the three ATTA activities, for a total of 9 min. Upon completion of the ATTA, mood states were assessed. Finally, individual differences in self-judgment were assessed. Such procedures precluded the possibility that reporting on mood and/or one's personality tendencies could affect ATTA performance in an order-effect manner (Robinson, 2007). In support of such procedures, the self-compassion manipulation did not influence trait self-judgment scores, $F < 1$, and results involving mood states will be reported below.

RESULTS

Initial Results

From the ATTA test of creative performance, fluency scores averaged 11.08 ($SD = 3.60$) and originality scores averaged 6.07 ($SD = 3.54$). Fluency and originality scores exhibited a slight positive correlation, but one that was not significant, $r = .13$, $p > .20$. This finding is in accordance with the creative performance literature (Runco, 2008). None of the predictors—the manipulation, individual differences in critical self-judgment, or their interaction—were informative in understanding ATTA fluency scores, $ps > .70$. Thus, the findings reported in the following are specific to the originality of ATTA responses, as hypothesized.

Hypotheses Involving Originality

The self-compassion manipulation was hypothesized to facilitate creative originality particularly among self-critical individuals. To set the stage for the relevant analysis, a dummy-coded variable was created for the self-compassion manipulation (−1 = *control condition*; +1 = *self-compassion condition*). Then, individual differences in critical self-judgment tendencies were *z*-scored. Finally, an interaction term was created by multiplying these standardized predictors.

Predictions were assessed in a hierarchical multiple regression, with creative originality scores as the dependent measure. Step 1 of the regression entered the two main effect predictors simultaneously. Neither the self-compassion manipulation, $t = 1.19$, Beta = .13, $p = .24$, nor trait variations in levels of self-judgment, $t = -1.1$, Beta = −.12, $p = .27$, were significant predictors. Step 2 of the regression then entered the (manipulation × trait) interaction term. As hypothesized, there was an interaction among these variables and it explained a significant proportion of variance in creative originality not explained by the step 1 main effect predictors, $t = 2.30$, F change = 5.29, Beta = .24, $p < .05$.

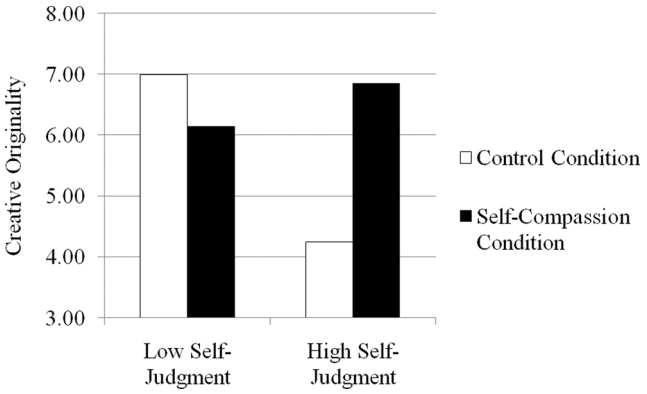

FIGURE 1 Creative originality as a function of chronic tendencies toward self-judgment and manipulated states of self-compassion.

Thus, the manipulation facilitated creative originality particularly among some individuals relative to others.

To determine the nature of the interactive pattern, estimated originality scores for individuals low (-1 *SD*) versus high ($+1$ *SD*) in critical self-judgment for each condition were separately computed. The resulting estimated means are displayed in Figure 1. As shown there, the lowest levels of originality were observed among self-judgmental individuals in the control condition. By contrast, it appeared that the induction of self-compassion was particularly conducive to creative originality among such highly self-judgmental individuals.

To further understand the interactive pattern observed, several follow-up analyses were conducted. To determine the effects of the manipulation at low versus high levels of self-judgment, a median split procedure was performed. Among individuals below the median in tendencies toward critical self-judgment, there was no effect of the self-compassion manipulation, $F < 1$. However, for individuals high (i.e., above the median) in such self-judgmental tendencies, the self-compassion manipulation facilitated creative originality, $F = 5.21$, $p < .05$. Thus, the results indicate that there are benefits to a self-compassionate mindset, but particularly so to the extent that one is generally self-judgmental.

It was hypothesized that tendencies toward critical self-judgment would undermine the originality of creative output, but particularly so in the absence of an induced self-compassionate mindset. To assess such predictions, trait and originality scores were correlated, separately so for each condition. As predicted, in the absence of a manipulation of self-compassion, trait tendencies toward critical self-judgment were a strong inverse predictor of creative originality, $r = .44$, $p < .01$. On the other hand, there was no such correlation in the self-compassion induction condition, $r = .09$, $p > .50$. These results again reaffirm the value of a self-compassionate mindset for those generally prone to self-criticism.

Potential sex differences were examined in a multiple regression in which the manipulation, critical self-judgment tendencies, sex ($-1 =$ male; $+1 =$ female), and all interaction terms were simultaneously regressed in the prediction of originality scores. There was no main effect for sex, $p > .40$. Two-way interactions involving participant sex were also nonsignificant, $ps > .05$. Of most importance, there was no hint of a three-way interaction, $p > .35$. Thus, the interactive results reported in Figure 1 were equally characteristic of men and women.

Results Involving Mood States

Creative performance varies by mood states, though in a complicated manner (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008). The present hypotheses were not of this mood-related type. In fact, self-compassion and self-criticism are not viewed in mood related terms, but rather in terms of the extent to which negative events and experiences stymie the self and its creative potential (Germer, 2009; Leary et al., 2007). Accordingly, results were hypothesized to be independent of potential mood-related confounds.

The self-compassion manipulation ($-1 =$ *control condition*; $+1 =$ *self-compassion condition*) used in this study did not influence mood states, $p > .35$. Additionally, self-judgmental individuals did not report more unpleasant mood states, $p > .90$. Independent of these predictors, more positive mood states were not predictive of higher levels of creativity originality, $p > .30$. Finally, there was no interaction of the manipulation and self-judgment tendencies in predicting mood states, $p > .95$. Thus, the results reported above are independent of mood-related considerations.

DISCUSSION

Implications Related to Self-Compassion and Creativity

A small but growing literature has suggested that a self-compassionate mindset may be generally beneficial to optimal functioning (e.g., Neff, 2003a; Neff et al., 2005). Yet, the outcomes examined have been almost if not exclusively self-reported in nature. Our dependent measure—original creative performance—was of an objectively-scored, rather than self-reported, type. For this reason, the study's results encourage a wider consideration of the potential value that a self-compassionate mindset may play in other behavioral realms in which inhibitory self-related processes have been implicated (Carver & White, 1994; Kagan & Snidman, 1991; Kruglanski & Chun, 2008; Pyszczynski,

Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004; Steele, 1997).

The effects of the self-compassion manipulation in this study can be considered from two perspectives. Because this induction facilitated creative output among some individuals, but did not undermine it among others, it appears that inductions of this type may be generally efficacious in removing some of the barriers to uncensored output generally thought to undermine original creative thinking (Cropley, 2001). On the other hand, because the manipulation interacted with more general tendencies toward critical self-judgment, it appears that only some individuals are likely to benefit from inductions of this type. Such interactive results are intuitive because only self-judgmental individuals are likely to self-impose restrictions to their creative output, and it is for this reason that only such individuals are likely to benefit from a manipulation designed to remove such self-imposed restrictions.

The variables examined in this study were predictive of creative originally, but not its fluency. In understanding this dissociation, higher levels of creative fluency can be achieved in either conventional or original terms (Runco, 2008). For this reason, fluency, *per se*, is relatively uninformative in understanding original thinking of the sort most emphasized by creativity researchers (Goff & Torrance, 2002; Torrance, 1974). Instead, the production of original thoughts in creativity tasks is likely to require some degree of risk-taking (Tierney & Farmer, 2002). Self-compassion and self-criticism, it is suggested, are particularly relevant in understanding whether the individual can ignore the self-censure often proposed to be inimical to original creative thinking (Cropley, 2001; Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004; Silvia, 2008).

Questions and Further Research Directions

The state of self-compassion theoretically involves self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness (Neff, 2003b). This conjunction of qualities has been supported in psychometric terms (Neff, 2003a). Nevertheless, as research on such manipulations develops, it may be important to differentiate these three purported mechanisms (Leary et al., 2007). Self-judgmental tendencies were assessed in terms of Neff's (2003a) relevant trait scale, but could be assessed in terms of tendencies toward perfectionism as well, potentially in a multidimensional manner (e.g., Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblatt, 1990). Finally, it would be valuable to extend our results by assessing relations between self-criticism, self-compassion, and creative behaviors outside of the laboratory (Carson, Peterson, & Higgins, 2005; Nickerson, 1999).

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