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The predictive role of the self-compassion on psychological vulnerability in Turkish University Students

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the predictive role of the self-compassion on psychological vulnerability. Participants were 281 university students (156 women, 125 men). In this study, the Self-compassion Scale and the Psychological Vulnerability Scale were used. The relationships between self-compassion and psychological vulnerability were examined using correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis. In correlation analysis, self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness factors of self-compassion were found negatively and self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification factors of self-compassion were found positively related to psychological vulnerability. According to regression results, psychological vulnerability was predicted positively by self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification. Further self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness predicted psychological vulnerability in a negative way. Self-compassion has explained 56% of the variance in psychological vulnerability. The results were discussed in the light of the related literature and dependent recommendations to the area were given.

Keywords: *Self-compassion, psychological vulnerability, multiple regression analysis*

1. Introduction

Self-compassion

Recently, many researchers have criticized self-esteem trainings and have suggested that this kind of training has excessively emphasized the individual's ego thus leading to narcissistic manners (Damon, 1995; Hewitt, 1998; McMillan, Singh, & Simonetta, 1994). As a consequence of these arguments the concept of self-compassion has been put forward by Neff (2003a) which includes to behaving affectionately towards oneself in the face of perceived inadequacy and involves acknowledging that suffering, failure, and inadequacies are part of the human condition (Neff, 2003b; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Neff (2003a) suggested that self-compassion is a three-dimensional construct: (a) Self-kindness versus self-judgment (an attitude of understanding and kindness to one's self as opposed to harsh judgment), (b) Common humanity versus isolation (perceiving one's experiences as part of the larger human condition instead of feeling separate and isolated), and (c) Mindfulness versus over-identification (being mindfully aware of painful experiences without over-identifying with them). These three dimensions of self-compassion are conceptually distinct and are experienced differently at the phenomenological level, while they interact so as to mutually enhance and engender one another (Neff, 2003a).

The first dimension, self-kindness, involves extending empathy, forgiveness, sensitivity, warmth, and patience to *all aspects* of oneself including all of one's thoughts, feelings, and actions (Gilbert & Irons, 2005; Neff, 2003a) and affirming, even after failure, that one's self deserves love, happiness, and affection (Barnard & Curry, 2011). Common humanity, the second dimension of self-compassion, is seeing one's happy or painful experiences as not personal, but as all human beings'. Common humanity entails acknowledging our connection to others, particularly in our sorrows, imperfections, and

weaknesses and involves forgiving oneself for being fully human—for being limited and imperfect (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, 2003a). By this kind of awareness, an individual perceives these negative experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than feeling isolated and alienated from the society (Neff, 2003a). The last component of self-compassion, mindfulness, means a pre-conceptual awareness that allows people to accept their life's most stressful and painful emotions without being carried away by them (Gunaratana, 1993; Martin, 1997; Neff, 2003a; Nisker, 1998; Rosenberg, 1999). It is a state of balanced awareness that one's thoughts and feelings are observed without trying to change them, without exaggeration and prejudice. If individuals accept their painful experiences are something that all humans experience and if they are gentle toward themselves, they avoid suppressing their emotions and thoughts and they are not trapped by over-identification (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005).

Studies suggest that self-compassion is strongly and significantly related to psychological well-being. People with higher levels of self-compassion report higher levels of life satisfaction, social relatedness (Neff, 2003b), reflective and affective wisdom, personal initiative, curiosity and exploration, optimism, positive affect, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness (Baker & McNulty, 2011; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007), self-deception (Akın & Abacı, 2009), psychological well-being (Akın, 2008a), social relationship, emotional intelligence, self-determination (Neff, 2003a), learning-approach goals (Akın, 2008b), social support (Akın, Kayış, & Satıcı, 2011), and relational-interdependent self construal (Akın & Eroglu, 2013). Self-compassionate people also report less depression, anxiety, rumination, thought suppression (Neff, 2003b), social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation (Werner et al., 2012), performance-approach/avoidance goals (Akın, 2008b), submissive behavior (Akın, 2009), interpersonal cognitive distortions (Akın, 2010a), loneliness (Akın, 2010b), internet addiction (Iskender & Akın, 2011), automatic thoughts (Akın, 2012), and neuroticism (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Psychological Vulnerability

The psychological vulnerability construct, which is considered as a natural consequence of being human (Kottow, 2004), in general means susceptibility and assumes that some people are more affected by stressful events rather than others and stressful or traumatic events may cause vulnerability (Ingram, Miranda, & Segal, 1998; Updegraff & Taylor, 2000). For example old people, women (Thoits 1982), poor people (Levine, 2004; Tohits, 1982), unmarried people (Kessler & Essex, 1982), and new mothers (Turner & Noh, 1983) were typically found to be influenced more by stressful events and traumatic cases. Aday (2001) defined vulnerable populations as being at risk of physical, psychological, and/or social health and being vulnerable refers to be susceptible to health problems, harm, or neglect. These individuals feel more negative emotionality than non-vulnerable people (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) and withdraw more quickly when they face with stressful events and stand on more strength less (Levine, 2004).

Studies suggest various kinds of vulnerability such as physical vulnerability (Clark, Stump, Miller, & Long 2007; Sinclair, & Wallston, 1999), cognitive vulnerability (Alloy, & Abramson, 2005), and psychological vulnerability. Physical vulnerability refers to people who are susceptible to physically harm and have sensitive medical conditions (Clark et al., 2007), while cognitive vulnerability describes cognitive characteristics of people (such as maladaptive beliefs, attributional patterns, thought processes, schemas) that increase the probability of future disorders or problems (Riskind & Black, 2005). Psychological vulnerability on the other hand, is considered to be a cognitive structure that consists of harmful reactions to stress and is described as a pattern of cognitive beliefs reflecting a dependence on achievement or external sources of affirmation for one's sense of self-worth (Sinclair & Wallston, 1999; Kernis, 2003). According to Sinclair and Wallston (1999) psychological vulnerability is a form of cognitive vulnerability related to dependence, perfectionism, and need to be approved by external sources. Smith, Peck, Milano and Ward (1988) proposed that cognitive vulnerability can affect the psychological and physical aspects of people's lives and that the three different forms of vulnerability are assumed to interact with each other.

Research shows that psychological vulnerability is associated positively with maladaptive psychological variables such as depressive symptoms, anxiety, stress (Cox, Enns, Walker, Kjernisted, & Pidlubny, 2001; Sherman, Bunyan, Creswell, & Jaremka, 2009), eating disorders (Lindeman & Stark, 2001), perceived helplessness, negative effect, and maladaptive coping behavior (Sinclair & Wallston, 1999). On the other hand psychological vulnerability has negative relationship with life satisfaction, positive affect, emotional support, perceived social support, dispositional optimism, and self-efficacy (Sinclair & Wallston 1999).

The present study

Although increasing number of research conducted with the self-compassion is encouraging, to date, however, no research has examined whether self-compassion predicts psychological vulnerability. The goal of this study, therefore, was to examine the predictive role of the self-compassion on psychological vulnerability. Self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, adaptive dimension of self-compassion, involve turning compassion inward and taking a compassionate perspective toward oneself in the same way. They also moderate reactions to distressing situations and buffer people against the influence of negative self-feelings and failure experiences (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007). In contrary people with psychological vulnerability are affected more by stressful or traumatic events (Ingram, Miranda, & Segal, 1998; Updegraff & Taylor, 2000), feel more negative emotions (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), and withdraw more quickly when they face with stressful events (Levine, 2004) than non-vulnerable people.

Moreover, self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness are associated positively and psychological vulnerability is associated negatively with better emotional coping skills (Neff et al., 2005). Psychological vulnerability also has been found to relate depressive symptoms and anxiety (Cox, Enns, Walker, Kjernisted, & Pidlubny, 2001; Sherman, Bunyan, Creswell, & Jaremka, 2009) and it is a central feature of negative affect (Sinclair & Wallston, 1999), whereas self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness have been found inversely related to depression and anxiety (Neff, 2003b). These findings show self-compassion to be related to adaptive functioning, particularly in the face of failures, losses, and life stress (Leary et al., 2007) and psychological vulnerability to be related to maladaptive functioning. Based on the above relationships of self-compassion and psychological vulnerability, it was hypothesized that self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness would be associated negatively with psychological vulnerability. It was also hypothesized that self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification would be related positively to psychological vulnerability.

2. Method

Participants

Participants were 281 educational faculty students (156 women, 125 men) enrolled in various undergraduate programs. Of the participants, 71 were first-year students, 86 were second-year students, 64 were third- year students, and 60 were fourth-year student. Their ages ranged from 17 to 23 years old and GPA scores ranged from 1.97 to 3.69.

Measures

Self-compassion Scale. Self-compassion was measured by using Self-compassion Scale (Neff, 2003b). Turkish adaptation of this scale had been done by Akın, Akın, and Abacı (2007). Self-compassion Scale is a 26-item self-report measurement and consists of six sub-scales; self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*). Language validity findings indicated that correlations between Turkish and English forms were .94, .94, .87, .89, .92, and .94 for six subscales, respectively. Results of confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the model was well fit. The goodness of fit index values of the model were RMSEA=.056, NFI=.95, CFI=.97, IFI=.97, RFI=.94, GFI=.91, and

SRMR=.059. The internal consistency coefficients were .77, .72, .72, .80, .74, and .74 and the test-retest reliability coefficients were .69, .59, .66, .60 .69, and .56, for six subscales, respectively.

Psychological Vulnerability Scale.

The Psychological Vulnerability scale was developed by Sinclair and Wallston (1999). The scale contains 6 items (e.g., "If I don't achieve my goals, I feel like a failure as a person") with each item rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Turkish adaptation of this scale was done by Akın and Eker (2011), who indicated that a one-factor model fit the data well (x^2= 7.82, *df*= 9, RMSEA= .001, NFI= .97, CFI= 1.00, GFI= .99, AGFI= .98, RFI= .95, and SRMR= .025). Cronbach's alpha was .75.

Procedure

Participants voluntarily participated in research. Completion of the scales was anonymous and there was a guarantee of confidentiality. The scales were administered to the students in groups in the classrooms. Prior to administration of measures, all participants were told about purposes of the study.

Statistical Analysis

In this research, multiple linear regression analysis and Pearson correlation coefficient were used to investigate the relationships between self-compassion and psychological vulnerability. The variables which were entered in multiple regression analysis were measured by summing the items of each scale. These analyses were carried out via SPSS 11.5.

3. Results

Descriptive data and inter-correlations

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, inter-correlations, and internal consistency coefficients of the variables used.

Table 1 ***Descriptive Statistics, Alphas, and Inter-correlations of the Variables***

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Self-kindness	—						
2. Self-judgment	-.56**	—					
3. Common humanity	.63**	-.38**	—				
4. Isolation	-.48**	.67**	-.35**	—			
5. Mindfulness	.71**	-.52**	.56**	-.47**	—		
6. Over-identification	-.45**	.65**	-.26**	.69**	-.46**	—	
7. Psychological vulnerability	-.56**	.62**	-.45**	.64**	-.55*	.59**	—
Mean	14.26	13.55	11.83	11.50	11.93	12.20	17.40
Standard deviation	4.36	5.02	3.49	3.87	3.51	4.03	5.53
Alpha	.80	.70	.79	.81	.76	.73	.74

**$p < .01$

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables. Self-kindness (r=–.56, p<.01), common humanity (r=–.45, p<.01), and mindfulness (r=–.55, p<.01) were found negatively and self-judgment (r=.62, p<.01), isolation (r=.64, p<.01), and over-identification (r=.59, p<.01) were found positively associated with psychological vulnerability. There were also significant correlations between dimensions of self-compassion.

Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis has performed in which the dependent variable was psychological vulnerability and the independent variables were dimensions of self-compassion (Table 2). As many of those predictor variables were dependent on each other, forward stepwise procedure, which includes one new explanatory variable at each step, specifically the most associated with the dependent variable while

being, at the same time, independent of the explanatory variables already included in the model. The criteria to include the variables from the regression model were: criterion probability-of-F-to enter <=.05.

Table 2. **Summary of forward stepwise multiple regression analysis for variable predicting psychological vulnerability**

Variables	*B*	Standart Error of B	*β*	*t*
Step 1				
Isolation	.919	.066	.642	13.982*
Step 2				
Isolation	.692	.069	.484	9.998*
Self-kindness	-.422	.061	-.332	-6.872*
Step 3				
Isolation	.514	.081	.359	6.320*
Self-kindness	-.328	.064	-.258	-5.082*
Self-judgment	.260	.067	.237	3.909*
Step 4				
Isolation	.488	.081	.341	6.017*
Self-kindness	-.207	.078	-.163	-2.666*
Self-judgment	.240	.066	.218	3.616*
Mindfulness	-.255	.094	-.162	-2.708*
Step 5				
Isolation	.396	.089	.276	4.430*
Self-kindness	-.208	.077	-.164	-2.703*
Self-judgment	.192	.069	.175	2.795*
Mindfulness	-.233	.094	-.148	-2.480*
Over-identification	.197	.083	.144	2.373*
Step 6				
Isolation	.381	.089	.266	4.281*
Self-kindness	-.140	.083	-.110	-1.683*
Self-judgment	.190	.068	.172	2.776*
Mindfulness	-.188	.095	-.120	-1.973*
Over-identification	.218	.083	.159	2.622*
Common humanity	-.184	.085	-.116	-2.159*

According to the results of multiple regression analysis, summarized in Table 2, isolation entered the equation first, accounting for 41% of the variance in predicting psychological vulnerability (R^2=.41, adjusted R^2=.41, F(1, 279)= 195,484, p<.01). Self-kindness entered on the second step accounting for an additional 9% variance (R^2=.50, ΔR^2=.09, adjusted R^2=.49, F(2, 278)= 137,552, p<.01). Self-judgment entered on the third step accounting for an additional 2% variance (R^2=.52, ΔR^2=.02, adjusted R^2=.52, F(3, 277)= 101,506, p<.01). Mindfulness entered on the fourth step accounting for an additional 2% variance (R^2=.54, ΔR^2=.02, adjusted R^2=.53, F(4, 276)= 79,703, p<.01). Over-identification entered on the fifth step accounting for an additional 1% variance (R^2=.55, ΔR^2=.01, adjusted R^2=.54, F(5, 275)= 65,958, p<.01). Common humanity entered last, accounting for an additional 1% variance (R^2=.56, ΔR^2=.01, adjusted R^2=.56, F(6, 274)= 56,473, p<.01). The standardized beta coefficients indicated the relative influence of the variables in last model with isolation (β= .26, p<.01), self-kindness (β= -.11, p<.01), self-judgment (β= .17, p<.01), mindfulness (β= -.12, p<.01), over-identification (β= .16, p<.01), and common humanity (β= -.12, p<.01) all significantly influencing psychological vulnerability and isolation was strongest predictor.

4. Discussion

The aim of this research was to investigate the predictive role of self-compassion on psychological vulnerability and significant relationships were found. As expected mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness -adaptive dimensions of self-compassion- predicted psychological vulnerability negatively. Self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness allow people to cope effectively with challenging life

events and stressors by treating themselves with kindness and care, viewing these negative experiences as part of the greater human experience, and not allowing themselves to be swept up by strong negative emotions (Neff, 2003a). Self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness also seem to protect individuals both when they are personally responsible for the negative experiences and when these experiences are beyond their control (Leary et al., 2007) and thus people can easily deal with the adverse effects of an array of negative events and circumstances. Moreover, since individuals with self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness recognize when they are suffering, but by doing so they provide themselves with warmth, kindness, and interconnectedness with the rest of humanity (Neff, 2009), they can experience more positive and less negative emotions. Research shows that people who have higher self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness make more accurate self-appraisals (i.e., without self-enhancement or self-deprecation) than those lacking (Leary et al., 2007), suggesting that self-compassion provides the emotional safety needed to see the self clearly. In contrary researchers have discovered that psychological vulnerability related to perceptions of dependency, perfectionism, negative self-attributions, self-blame, dysfunctional attributions, and the need for external sources of approval (Sinclair & Wallston, 1999). This means that self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness can lessen feelings of psychological vulnerability.

Moreover people who high in self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness have been shown to possess many of the psychological strengths such as well-being (Akın, 2008a), life satisfaction, optimism, positive affect, extraversion, and agreeableness (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Also self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness are related to feelings of autonomy and competence (Neff, 2003a), higher levels of brain activation in the left prefrontal cortex, a region associated with joy and optimism (Lutz, Greischar, Rawlings, Ricard, & Davidson, 2004) and related to maintain optimistic expectations about the future (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). On the other hand psychological vulnerability was found related negatively to psychological variables such as life satisfaction, positive affect, emotional support, perceived social support, dispositional optimism, and self-efficacy (Sinclair & Wallston 1999). Thus the inverse associations between self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness and psychological vulnerability are not surprising.

On the other hand as anticipated in the current research self-judgment, isolation and over-identification - maladaptive dimensions of self-compassion- predicted psychological vulnerability positively. People with self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification, reject their own feelings, thoughts, and actions, tend to feel ashamed from their faults (Neff, 2003a), and ruminate on pessimistic emotions, and their own limitations (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). These individuals become identified with and carried away by negative feelings and thoughts about themselves (Neff & Vonk, 2009), tend to experience more negative emotions such as irritability, hostility, or distress (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007) and so they often are exposed to psychological problems (Nolen- Hoeksema, 1991). In times of distress or frustration they feel isolated from the rest of humanity, thereby experience decreasing feelings of interconnectedness. Therefore people with self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification can't ameliorate their negative feelings and transform them into positive feelings and these dimensions of self-compassion are maladaptive. Likewise psychological vulnerability is a variable that may reflect a preoccupation with fear of failure and disapproval. Psychologically vulnerable individuals depend on others' approval for their sense of self-worth and if they fail to receive the affirmation they long for from others, they could develop negative expectations and a pattern of learned helplessness. These heightened negativity and feelings of helplessness may then cause people with psychological vulnerability feel increased of self-blame and isolation from others (Sinclair & Wallston 1999), which is similar to feelings of people with self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification. This situation may explain the positive relationships between self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification and psychological vulnerability.

5. Conclusions

The current study has some limitations. First participants were university students and replication of this study on other students should be made to generate more solid relationships among the constructs

examined in this study, because generalization of the results is somewhat limited, (b) as correlational statistics were utilized, no definitive statements can be made about causality, and (c) the data reported here for self-compassion and psychological vulnerability are limited to self-reported data.

Consequently, the present research provides important information about the predictors of psychological vulnerability. An increment in self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification will increase psychological vulnerability. Present study also shows that the encouragement of self-compassion could be highly beneficial for diminishing psychological vulnerability (Neff, 2003a). Nonetheless it is important to note that research on self-compassion is still in its nascent phases and more research will need to be done before any policy implications can be drawn (Neff et al., 2005).

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