Does Self-Compassion Predict Spiritual Experiences of Turkish University Students?

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Abstract The purpose of this study was to examine the predictive role of self-compassion on spiritual experiences. Participants were 285 university students. In this study, the self-compassion scale and the spiritual experiences scale were used. Self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness factors of self-compassion were found positively, and self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification factors of self-compassion were found negatively related to spiritual experiences. According to regression results, spiritual experiences were predicted negatively by self-judgment and over-identification. Further common humanity predicted spiritual experiences in a positive way. Self-compassion has explained 21% of the variance in spiritual experiences.

Keywords Self-compassion · Spiritual experiences · Regression analysis

Introduction

Self-compassion includes being gentle and discerning toward oneself in the face of hardship or perceived inadequacy and involves accepting that failure, suffering, and inadequacies are part of the human condition and that all people, oneself included, are worthy of compassion (Neff 2003b; Neff et al. 2007a). Neff (2003a, b) defined self-compassion as a three-dimensional concept: (a) self-kindness (an attitude of kindness and understanding to one’s self as opposed to harsh judgment), (b) common humanity (perceiving one’s experiences as part of the larger human condition instead of feeling separate
and isolated), and (c) mindfulness (being mindfully aware of painful experiences without over-identifying with them). While these three aspects of self-compassion are conceptually distinct and are experienced differently at the phenomenological level, they also interact so as to mutually enhance and engender one another (Neff 2003a).

Self-kindness refers to being gentle toward oneself in instances of pain or failure rather than being harshly self-critical. If people with self-kindness, notice some disliked aspect of their personality, they use a soft and supportive emotional tone of language toward themselves (Neff 2009). Common humanity, the second dimension of self-compassion, means that a person should perceive both his/her happy and painful experiences as are not personal, but as all human beings’. The sense of common humanity implies to recognize that all humans are imperfect and they can fail and make mistakes (Neff 2009). By having this awareness, one perceives these experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than feeling alienated and isolated from the society (Neff 2003a). Mindfulness, the third component of self-compassion, is a pre-conceptual awareness that allows people to accept life’s most painful and stressful emotions without being over-identified by them (Gunaratana 1993; Martin 1997; Neff 2003a; Nisier 1998; Rosenberg 1999). It is a state of balanced awareness that one’s thoughts and feelings are observed without avoiding or trying to change them, without exaggeration and prejudice. If individuals accept and tolerate their distress and if they are kind toward themselves, they avoid suppressing their emotions and thoughts. Thus, when they are aware that distress and pain are something all humans experience, they are not trapped by over-identification (Neff et al. 2005).

Research on self-compassion has found that it is a powerful predictor of mental health. Studies demonstrated that self-compassion is associated positively with life satisfaction, social relatedness (Neff 2003b), social support (Akin et al. 2011), self-deception (Akin and Abaci 2009), psychological well-being (Akin 2008a), learning-approach goals (Akin 2008b), and relational-inter-dependent self-construal (Akin and Eroglu 2013). Self-compassionate people also report more reflective and affective wisdom, personal initiative, curiosity and exploration, optimism, positive affect, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness (Baker and McNulty 2011; Neff et al. 2007b), social relationship, emotional intelligence, and self-determination (Neff 2003a). The other studies have proved that self-compassion is negatively associated with depression, anxiety, rumination, thought suppression (Neff 2003b), social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation (Werner et al. 2012), interpersonal cognitive distortions (Akin 2010a), automatic thoughts (Akin 2012), submissive behavior (Akin 2009), loneliness (Akin 2010b), internet addiction (Işıkender and Akin 2010), performance-approach/avoidance goals (Akin 2008b), and neuroticism (Neff et al. 2007b).

Spiritual Experiences

Since researchers have recognized that the importance of concept of spirituality on people at the personal level is inadequately understood, the research literature addressing this construct has grown dramatically during the past three decades (Sánchez et al. 2010). Therefore, recently, psychology has been experiencing a renaissance, consisting of an expansion of the psychological literature on the influence of spirituality on emotional and mental health. Spirituality was defined by Underwood and Teresi (2002) as “a person’s perception of the transcendent (God, the divine) and his or her perception of his or her interaction with or involvement of the transcendent in life” (p. 23). These authors suggested that the spiritual feelings and awareness are supplementary part of the daily religious and spiritual lives of many individuals. They considered spirituality as concerned
with the transcendent, addressing ultimate questions on meaning of life, with the assumption that there is more to life than what we see or fully understand (Underwood and Teresi 2002).

Spirituality can potentially inspire noble human qualities, such as altruism or caring for others and thus is associated with personal tolerance and openness to social and cultural experience (Kalkstein 2006; Sánchez et al. 2010). Relatedly, Rayburn (2004) defines the spiritual person as “caring for others” and “seeking goodness and truth, transcendence, and forgiveness/cooperation/peacefulness” (p. 53). Numerous studies have demonstrated that spiritual, practices such as prayer, imagery, hypnosis, meditation, biofeedback, massage, acupuncture, laughter, and play can have useful influences on psychological, social, and physical health (Hostetler 2002; Meyerstein and Ruskin 2007; Sánchez et al. 2010; Underwood 1999). Some of these rehabilitative effects of spirituality include a reduction in distress and symptoms of anxiety and depression; increased life satisfaction and psychological well-being; a strengthened immune system; and increased meaning and purpose of life for whom recovery from alcoholism and drug addiction (Kalkstein and Tower 2009; Lewis and Cruise 2006; Reis et al. 2007; Sánchez et al. 2010; Underwood 1999).

Research has consistently shown that spiritual experiences are related positively to adaptive psychological outcomes such as social support (Koenig et al. 2004; Underwood and Teresi 2002; Watlington 2006), quality of life, optimism (Ellison and Fan 2008; Underwood and Teresi 2002), happiness, excitement with life, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Ellison and Fan 2008; Sánchez et al. 2010), energy (McCauley et al. 2008), better emotional health (Allen et al. 2008), positive affect, and psychological well-being (Sánchez et al. 2010). In contrary, spiritual experiences are found negatively associated with unhealthy variables such as anxiety (Sánchez et al. 2010; Kalkstein and Tower 2009; Underwood and Teresi 2002), alcohol consumption, depression (Blumenthal et al. 2007; Desrosiers and Miller 2007; Kalkstein and Tower 2009; Koenig et al. 2004; McCauley et al. 2008; Mofidi et al. 2006; Sánchez et al. 2010; Underwood and Teresi 2002; Watlington 2006), stress, hostility (Underwood and Teresi 2002), loneliness, and fewer close friendships (Kalkstein and Tower 2009).

The Present Study

Although an increasing number of researchers have been examining the impact of self-compassion on individual functioning, no research has examined the role of self-compassion in the context of spiritual experiences. Thus, the current study aims to examine the predictive role of self-compassion on spiritual experiences. Spiritual experiences include an awareness of discernment/inspiration and a sense of deep inner peace. Also indicators of spirituality have consistently been found to operate as effective coping resources on the global level (Pargament 1997), ameliorating the harmful effects of negative life events (Ellison and Taylor 1996), and perceived stress (Jackson 2010; Lee 2007). Besides, spiritual experiences were found associated with personal tolerance (Kalkstein 2006; Sánchez et al. 2010), better emotional health (Allen et al. 2008), and optimism (Ellison and Fan 2008; Underwood and Teresi 2002). Similarly, higher level of self-compassion is linked to reflective and affective wisdom, optimism, positive affect, conscientiousness (Neff et al. 2007b), and emotional intelligence (Neff 2003a). It is possible, therefore, that there may be a parallelism between self-compassion and spiritual experiences. Based on the above relationships of self-compassion with and spiritual experiences, it was hypothesized that self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness dimensions of self-compassion would
be associated positively and self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification dimensions of self-compassion would be associated negatively with spiritual experiences.

Method

Participants

Participants were 285 university students (148 women, 137 men) enrolled in various undergraduate programs at two mid-size state universities, Turkey. These programs were mathematics education ($n = 63$), science education ($n = 52$), Turkish education ($n = 54$), computer and instructional technology education ($n = 86$), and preschool education ($n = 30$). Of the participants, 70 were first-year students, 83 were second-year students, 78 were third-year students, and 54 were fourth-year student. Their ages ranged from 18 to 27 years old ($M = 20.9$, $SD = 1.04$), and GPA scores ranged from 1.90 to 3.86.

Measures

Self-Compassion Scale

Self-compassion was measured by using self-compassion scale (Neff 2003b). Turkish adaptation of this scale had been done by Akin et al. (2007). Self-compassion scale is a 26-item self-report measurement and consists of six subscales: 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.

Daily Spiritual Experience Scale

Spiritual experience was measured using the Turkish version of the daily spiritual experience scale (Underwood and Teresi 2002). This scale is a 16-item, e.g., I find comfort in my religion or spirituality. Turkish adaptation of this scale was done by Akin et al. (2013). Confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that the unidimensional model was well fit ($\chi^2 = 242.06$, df = 99, RMSEA = .069, NFI = .90, NNFI = .93, CFI = .94, IFI = .94 and RFI = .88). The Cronbach alpha coefficient in the Turkish sample was .89.

Procedure

Permission for participation of students was obtained from related chief departments and students 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. The measures were counterbalanced in administration. Prior to administration of measures, all participants were told about purposes of the study.

**Statistical Analysis**

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

**Results**

**Descriptive Data and Inter-correlations**

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations of the variables used. Self-kindness (r = .28), common humanity (r = .30), and mindfulness (r = .18) were found positively, and self-judgment (r = -.38), isolation (r = -.34), and over-identification (r = -.39) were found negatively associated with spiritual experiences. There were also significant correlations between dimensions of self-compassion.

**Regression Analysis**

Multiple regression analysis was performed in which the dependent variable was spiritual experiences and the independent variables were dimensions of self-compassion.

According to the results of multiple regression analysis, summarized in Table 2, over-identification entered the equation first, accounting for 15% of the variance in predicting spiritual experiences ($R^2 = .15$, adjusted $R^2 = .15$, $F(1, 283) = 51,259$, $p < .01$). Common humanity entered secondly accounting for an additional 4% variance ($R^2 = .19$, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, adjusted $R^2 = .19$, $F(2, 282) = 32,976$, $p < .01$). Self-judgment entered last, accounting for an additional 2% variance ($R^2 = .21$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, adjusted $R^2 = .20$, $F(3, 281) = 24,614$, $p < .01$). Despite the initial regression design included mindfulness,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-kindness</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Self-judgment</td>
<td>-.40**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Common humanity</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>-.37**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Isolation</td>
<td>-.41**</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Mindfulness</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>-.45**</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>-.34**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Over-identification</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
<td>.58**</td>
<td>-.31**</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>-.38**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Spiritual experiences</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>-.38**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>-.34**</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>-.39**</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>14.63</td>
<td>12.45</td>
<td>11.69</td>
<td>10.97</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>11.24</td>
<td>31.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>12.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01; * p < .05
common humanity, self-kindness, over-identification, isolation, and self-judgment as independent variables, the last regression model involved over-identification, common humanity, and self-judgment as predictors of spiritual experiences and accounted for 21% of the variance. The standardized beta coefficients indicated the relative influence of the variables in last model with over-identification (β = -0.24), common humanity (β = 0.16), and self-judgment (β = -0.17) all significantly influencing spiritual experiences and over-identification was the strongest predictor.

Discussion

In this study, it was aimed to examine the predictive role of self-compassion on spiritual experiences. As expected, common humanity predicted spiritual experiences positively. On the other hand, self-judgment and over-identification—maladaptive dimensions of self-compassion—predicted spiritual experiences negatively. However, self-kindness, isolation, and mindfulness did not emerge as significant predictors in the regression model. These results indicated that the sense of connectedness and resilience provided by common humanity, namely by self-compassion, enhances spiritual experiences, whereas feeling being harshly self-critical and ruminating on negative self-related emotions diminish spiritual experiences.

Yet, no research has examined the associations between spiritual experiences and self-compassion, and thus, it is hard to tie the results to the existing literature and to make a firm suggestion about the results. However, in interpreting the results of the present findings, several plausible explanations exist. First, spiritual experiences might function as a stress buffer is reinforced by the positive relation with psychological variables such as optimism and positive affect and the negative relation with perceived stress (Underwood and Teresi 2002). Also it was found that adopting any one of the several personal spiritual orientations often buffers against negative affective outcomes (Simoni and Ortiz 2003) and that spirituality is an attitude that may diminish the manifestation of negative affective outcomes due to stress. Similarly, self-compassion moderates reactions to distressing situations and buffers people against negative self-feelings when imagining distressing social events (Leary et al. 2007). Second, because spiritual experiences provided people feelings of joy, comfort, and connection (Underwood and Teresi 2002), it is psychologically beneficial (Landis 1996; Simoni and Ortiz 2003). Likewise, self-compassion serves as an emotional regulation strategy that transforms negative emotions and thoughts into self-acceptance.

Table 2 Summary of multiple regression analysis for variables predicting social safeness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE of B</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>42.89</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>24.33</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Over-identification</td>
<td>-1.03</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.39</td>
<td>-7.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>33.37</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>10.46</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Over-identification</td>
<td>-.87</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.33</td>
<td>-5.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Common humanity</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>37.49</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>10.58</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Over-identification</td>
<td>-.64</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>-3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Common humanity</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-judgment</td>
<td>-.43</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-2.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01; * p < .05
thereby enhancing happiness and life satisfaction (Neff 2003b; Neff et al. 2007a; b; Ying 2009). So both self-compassion and spiritual experiences contain the same psychological benefits and their conceptual nature is very similar.

Third spirituality is found associated with personal tolerance (Kalkstein 2006; Sánchez et al. 2010). In a similar way, self-compassion refers to being with self-tolerance when one’s expectations are not met and suggests the individual should encourage his/her ego gently and patiently to change behaviors (Neff 2003a). And last, studies demonstrated that both spiritual experiences and self-compassion linked to same adaptive outcomes such as social support, optimism, happiness, excitement with life, life satisfaction, emotional health, positive affect, and psychological well-being. Moreover, these two construct linked to same maladaptive outcomes such as anxiety, depression, stress, and loneliness.

There were several limitations of this study that should be taken into account when evaluating the findings. First, participants were university students and replication of this study for targeting other student populations should be made in order to generate a more solid relationship among the constructs examined in this study, because generalization of the results is somewhat limited. Second, as correlational statistics were utilized, no definitive statements can be made about causality. And last, the data reported here for self-compassion and spiritual experiences are limited to self-reported data and did not include any observations of behavior.

Consequently, the present research provides important information about the predictors of spiritual experiences and therefore would further our understanding of the psychological process of spiritual experiences. An increment in self-compassion will increase spiritual experiences. Encouraging the development of self-compassion should also be useful individuals by helping them to counter destructive self-critical tendencies and deal with their negative emotions with greater clarity and equanimity (Neff 2003a). Also there are enough positive indicators from self-compassion studies to suggest that more research on self-compassion would be a worthwhile (Neff et al. 2005).

References


