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The Effect of Self-Compassion on Emotions When Experiencing a Sense of Inferiority across Comparison Situations

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Abstract

This study examined different emotions induced by social comparisons between the two groups divided by the level of self-compassion. A total of 108 Korean undergraduates (62% women; mean age of 21 years) first responded to the self-compassion scale to divide them into either high or low self-compassion group. They were also presented with two scenarios (upward and downward comparisons). After reading each scenario, respectively, they completed a survey to assess their emotions. ANOVA results showed no significant difference between high and low self-compassion groups in experience of positive emotion, whereas the high self-compassion group reported less negative feelings than their counterpart after both scenarios. This suggests that self-compassion is a potentially influential factor buffering the negative consequences of social comparisons.

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1. Introduction

Self-compassion is a self-concept which is receiving an increasing attention in the field of psychology. This concept, originally from Buddhist psychology, "involves being touched by and open to one's own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to alleviate one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness (Neff, 2003a, p. 87)". Self-compassion not only helps individuals to accept their negative self instead of engaging in denial, but also to perceive themselves more accurately in order to promote self-development and emotional stability by modifying their negative cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (Neff, 2003b). Thus, individuals high on self-compassion would embrace themselves as they are, rather than criticizing or comparing themselves with others, and this would act as a buffer against negative self-evaluation (Neff, 2003b).

Literature has shown that self-compassion was positively related to psychological well-being, such as life satisfaction, social connectedness, happiness, and optimism (Neff, 2003a, b; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejithirat, 2005), while negatively associated with indices of psychological distress, such as depression, anxiety, hostility, and somatization (Neff, Kirpatrick, & Rude, 2007). In particular, self-compassion is known to protect the self-view against distress. For example, when the anxiety level was measured before and after thinking about and describing the most critical

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weakness about the self, self-compassion seemed to work as a potential buffer against self-threatening situations (Neff et al., 2007). Moreover, Neff (2003b) reported that self-compassion was closely related to emotional intelligence and improvement of psychological well-being (Neff et al., 2007). In short, self-compassion can be a strong predictor of psychological health (Gilbert & Irons, 2005; Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff, 2003a, b; Neff et al., 2005; Neff et al., 2007).

As social being living in a society which is becoming increasingly competitive, individuals establish their self-concept by evaluating themselves compared to others and leaving them to be vulnerable to psychological distress associated with social comparison. After Festinger (1954) first introduced his theory of social comparison processes, psychologists have focused their lens on the mechanism between social comparison and psychological distress in order to investigate the potential existence of a protecting factor. In this sense, self-compassion can be a good candidate. This is especially relevant for collectivistic culture like Korea where social comparison is relatively more apparent. Korean's passion for children's education is so essential that it is thought to be excessive. Thus, Korean students are exposed to a culture that fosters competition and social comparison (Han, 1994), which has repeatedly been associated with negative emotions, including unhappiness, anxiety, and depression (Fenigstein, Scheier & Buss, 1975; Heidrich & Ryff, 1993; Mahone, Bruch & Heimberg, 1993). Therefore, it can be expected that the perception of oneself as inferior than the comparison target would maximize psychological distress.

From this angle, the present study focuses on the role of self-compassion, potential protective factor from the harmful effects of social comparison. Given that the increase in the level of self-compassion through the Compassion Mind Training program and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program was associated with lowered levels of self-hatred, anxiety, and depression as well as better psychological health (Neff et al., 2007), it can be hypothesized that self-compassion might contribute to psychological well-being by lowering negative feeling and increasing positive feeling. As such, one can assume that self-compassion can potentially buffer psychological distress followed by failure experience or stress coming from comparison situation. However, little research has investigated the effect of self-compassion on emotion in response to failure experience, especially in Asian culture.

Accordingly, the present study attempted to investigate the difference in positive and negative emotions experienced by the high and low self-compassion groups when a sense of inferiority is induced. Specifically, the present study attempted to answer this question by testing the following hypotheses in Korean college sample.

Hypothesis 1: If the comparison target is imagined to have performed better than the participant, high self-compassion group will experience more positive emotions compared to low self-compassion group in both the upward and downward comparison situations.

Hypothesis 2: If the comparison target is imagined to have performed better than the participant, high self-compassion group will experience less negative emotions compared to low self-compassion group in both the upward and downward comparison situations.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants comprised of students in psychology-related classes from a university located in Seoul. A total of 108 students (62% women; mean age of 21 years) from 18 to 27 years of age participated in the study. Students were administered with a research packet, including two scenarios of social comparison, and measures of self-compassion as well as positive and negative emotions.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Korean Version of the Self-Compassion Scale (K-SCS; Kim, Yi, Cho, Chai, & Lee, 2008)

The K-SCS is the translated version of the Self-Compassion Scale originally developed by Neff (2003b). The K-SCS measures three components of self-compassion using 26 items: five items assessing self-kindness and self-judgment each, as well as four items measuring common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification each. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = almost never, 5 = almost always). The total score of self-compassion was computed to examine the overall role of self-compassion. The alpha coefficient (α) of this scale in this study was .91 (self-compassion total).

2.2.2. Korean Version of the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (K-PANAS; Lee, Kim, & Lee, 2003)

The Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule, originally developed by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988) and translated by Lee and colleagues (2003), was used to measure the emotional experience after reading the comparison scenario. K-PANAS is composed of 20 items representing nine positive emotions (e.g., active, enthusiastic, inspired, proud, strong, interested, etc.), and 12 negative emotions (e.g., nervous, irritable, distress, ashamed, etc.). Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*). The alpha coefficients (α) of this scale in this study were .91 for positive affect and .92 for negative affect.

2.2.3. Upward and Downward Social Comparison Situations Scenarios (Jang, 2004)

The upward and downward comparison situations scenarios developed by Jang (2004) were used to induce failure experience. The scenario first reminds the participants of someone who is superior or inferior to them, then makes them imagine that they received lower scores on an ability test. Ten graduate students majoring psychology evaluated the appropriateness of the two scenarios in terms of representing the comparison situation and inducing failure-related affects, on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). The results showed that the scenario is a quite relevant representation of comparison situation ($M = 5.2$, $SD = .79$) and that it adequately induces failure-related affects ($M = 5.7$, $SD = .67$).

2.3. Procedures

After receiving the approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University, which the researchers are affiliated to, a research packet was administered to students in psychology-related classes through an online survey program. The survey consisted of self-report and lasted approximately 20 minutes. All students received a course credit for their participation.

The high and low self-compassion (SC) groups were divided by the median split on the total score. Then, the participants were also presented with two scenarios (upward and downward comparisons). After reading each scenario, respectively, they completed a survey to assess their emotions.

3. Results

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed using the SPSS 15.0 program to examine the difference in positive and negative affects by the two self-compassion groups (High and Low SC). As a result, there was no significant difference between the high and low SC groups in terms of positive affects ($ps > .05$); however, the high SC group showed a significantly lower score on negative affects compared to the low SC group in both the upward comparison, $F(1, 106) = 8.247$, $p < .01$, and downward comparison situations, $F(1, 106) = 18.247$, $p < .01$ (Table 1).

Table 1. Difference in experienced affects by the high and low self-compassion groups

		High SC group		Low SC group		$F(1,106)$	Partial η^2
		$(n = 54)$		$(n = 54)$			
		M	SD	M	SD		
Upward Comparison	Positive Emotion	18.70	7.36	18.52	9.01	.014	.000
	Negative Emotion	21.31	8.18	26.19	9.40	8.247**	.072

Downward Comparison	Positive Emotion	17.96	6.76	19.28	8.63	.777	.007
	Negative Emotion	23.02	10.25	30.07	10.99	18.247**	.101

Note. **: $p < .01$.

Accordingly, only the hypothesis 2 of the present study was supported, and no significant gender difference was found ($ps > .05$). The positive and negative affect scores are presented comparing each group in Figures 1 and 2.

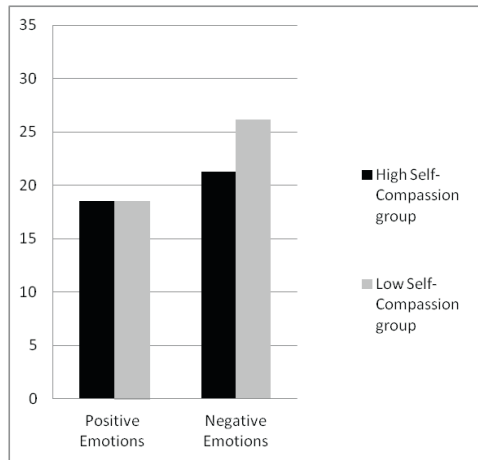


Figure 1. Positive and negative emotions of high and low self-compassion groups in upward comparison

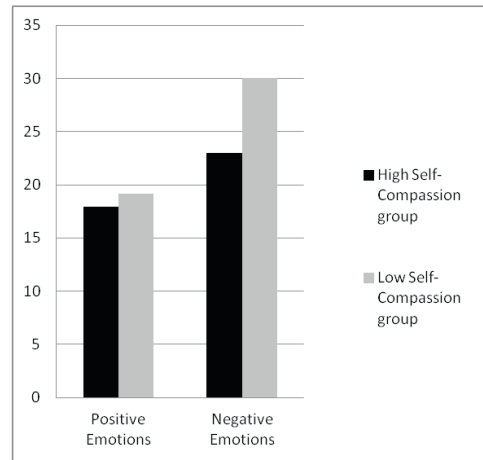


Figure 2. Positive and negative emotions of high and low self-compassion groups in downward comparison

4. Discussion

The present study examined the difference in emotions by the high and low self-compassion groups when experiencing a sense of inferiority in the upward and downward comparison situations. First, as the results showed that there was no significant difference in positive emotions between the high and low groups in both of the comparison situations, the hypothesis 1 was not supported. In contrast, high SC group reported less negative emotions compared to low SC group, which supports the hypothesis 2. This suggests that self-compassion can work as a potential buffer against negative emotions followed by a sense of inferiority induced by comparison situations, and that the role of self-compassion is strong enough to protect even from the negative emotions experienced when one is worse than the comparison target judged to be inferior to them, which can be even more stressful. This is consistent with the previous findings that self-compassion can significantly lower negative feelings in self-threatening situations (Cho, 2009; Leary et al., 2007) as well as with the results that highly self-compassionate individuals ruminate the negative situations less (Neff, 2003a). However, the present study failed to show that self-compassion fosters adaptability by enhancing positive emotions (Kim et al., 2008). This may be explained by the fact that inducing a sense of inferiority is unlikely to be associated with positive feelings in general regardless of the level of self-compassion.

Limitations and suggestions for future research merit mentioning. First, as the study did not examined how each participant interpreted the scenario, we cannot be certain whether the difference in affects purely reflects the difference in the level of self-compassion or that it is due to a third factor. Second, further researches with multiple indices of psychological health (e.g., depression, anxiety, interpersonal sensitivity, etc.) are needed, because the positive and negative affects scale only measures temporary emotional experience and might be insufficient to directly represent psychological status. Third, future studies should use criteria other than the median to separate the high versus low groups and more detailed divisions of the groups. Lastly, it is necessary to replicate the findings

with various samples from other age groups (e.g., high school students, who might be more sensitive to social comparison) and with different backgrounds (e.g., universities in different cities) in order to be able to generalize the results because the participants in the present study is composed of a relatively small sample from a university in Seoul.

Despite aforementioned limitations, the current findings contributed largely to the field of psychology by clarifying the role of self-compassion as a potential buffer against negative emotions followed by stressful situations and that it is an important factor activating self-soothing system (Gilbert & Irons, 2005) not only in Western culture, but in East Asian culture like Korea as well. Such results can be particularly important in Korea, where students are exposed to higher level of competition, and can facilitate more effective interventions for practicing psychologists treating college students vulnerable to negative evaluations.

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