2018

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Evaluating Implicit Self-Compassion in College Students

Emily Kutok, Psychology

BACKGROUND

- Self-compassion is an attitude that involves treating oneself with kindness during difficult times. Research suggests that people with low self-compassion may be especially vulnerable to negative mental health outcomes (Smets et al., 2014), including depression and anxiety (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012).

- Attitudes about the self can be explicit (conscious) or implicit (outside of conscious awareness). For example, people who are high in explicit self-esteem but low in implicit self-esteem tend to be more defensive and their self-worth is more vulnerable to threats (Eston et al., 2007).

- Implicit Association Tests (IAT) can be applied to a number of different constructs, some of which include racial bias, gender stereotypes, and suicidal ideation. They are used to measure the strength of a person's automatic association between two concepts (in this case, between self and compassion).

- By measuring implicit self-compassion, a researcher can expect less self-report bias related to self-presentational concerns and the limits of introspection, and they can capture psychological processes that occur without full conscious awareness but still influence a person's thoughts and behaviors.

Method

- The present study examines data derived from a sample of (N = 35) of undergraduate Psychology students who were recruited from a Quantitative Methods in Psychology course in the Fall semester of 2017.

- The survey portion took approximately 15-30 minutes to complete and is composed of 104 questions.

- The Self-Compassion IAT portion took approximately 5-10 minutes to complete and is composed of 80 questions.

Purpose

- The goal of this Honors project was to evaluate college students' implicit self-compassion through a Self-Compassion IAT that was based on the already existing Self-Esteem IAT (Greenwald and Farnham, 2000), and then compare it to other constructs, including explicit self-compassion, compassion for others, self-esteem, depression, and anxiety through self-report surveys.

HYPOTHESIS

Hypothesis 1: Explicit self-compassion will be negatively correlated with symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Hypothesis 2: Implicit self-compassion will be negatively correlated with symptoms of depression and anxiety, and positively correlated with explicit self-compassion and self-esteem.

Statistical Analysis

- We conducted correlation analysis to determine the relationship between the six variables.

MEASURES

i. Self-Compassion Implicit Association Test (IAT)

- Self-compassion can be defined as "being kind and understanding toward oneself in instances of pain or failure rather than being harshly self-critical; perceiving one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as isolating; and holding painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness rather than over-identifying with them." (Neff, 2003). This scale attempts to measure this construct implicitly using a word association technique.

- The following is a list of category labels and the items that belong to each of those categories: Compassion; affection, care, warmth, support, kindness, and love. Hatred; dislike, repulsion, resentment, despotism, disrespect, and disgust. Me; I, myself, mine, my, and self. Not Me; you, other, them, youself, theirs, and their.

ii. Self-Compassion Scale (SCS)

- Self-Compassion Scale is a scale developed by Neff (2003) that aims to measure the construct defined above explicitly through a self-report survey.

- Respondents were asked to complete a 26-item scale with responses ranging from 1= Almost never to 5= Almost always. Example items:
  - I'm frustrating and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies. (reverse-scored)
  - I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain.

iii. Compassion for Others Scale (CS)

- Compassion for Others Scale aims to measure the elements of compassion, which are kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness (Neff, 2003).

- Respondents were asked to complete a 24-item scale with responses ranging from 1= Almost never to 5= Almost always. Example items:
  - When people cry in front of me, I often don't feel anything at all. (reverse-scored)
  - My heart goes out to people who are unhappy.

iv. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)

- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale measures "global self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self" (Rosenberg, 1965).

- Respondents were asked to complete a 10-item scale with responses ranging from 1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree. Example items:
  - On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
  - All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure. (reverse-scored)

v. Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D)

- The purpose of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale is to "measure current depressive symptomatology, with an emphasis on the affective component, depressed mood." (Radloff, 1977).

- Respondents were asked to complete a 20-item scale. Response options included the following: Rarely or none of the time (less than one day), Some of the time (1-2 days), Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days), and Most or all of the time (5-7 days). Example items:
  - I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.
  - I felt hopeful about the future. (reverse-scored)

vi. Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI)

- The Beck Anxiety Inventory is meant to measure anxiety symptoms and their severity (Beck et al., 1988).

- Respondents were asked to complete a 20-item scale. Response options included the following: 0 = Not at all; 1 = Mildly but it didn’t bother me much; 2 = Moderately—not pleasant at times; 3 = Severely—bothered me a lot. Example Items:
  - Fear of losing control
  - Nervous

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics:

- Self-Compassion IAT: M = .54; SD = .44
- Self-Compassion Scale: M = 2.96; SD = .66
- Compassion for Others: M = 4.19; SD = .53
- Self-Esteem M = 4.59; SD = 1.14
- Depression M = 19.80; SD = 11.82
- Anxiety M = 15.29; SD = 9.84

Hypothesis Tests:

- Correlation analysis was used to study the relationship between implicit self-compassion and explicit (self-report) self-compassion, compassion for others, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and anxiety symptoms.

- The correlation matrix of self-compassion and compassion for others, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and anxiety symptoms are shown in Table 1.

- Explicit self-compassion was significantly negatively correlated with depressive symptoms and anxiety symptoms and significantly positively correlated with self-esteem, supporting hypothesis 1.

- Hypothesis 2 was not supported: Implicit self-compassion was not significantly correlated with depression, anxiety, explicit self-compassion, or self-esteem.

DISCUSSION

- In conclusion, explicit self-compassion, but not implicit self-compassion, was significantly negatively correlated with symptoms of anxiety and depression. Implicit and explicit self-compassion were uncorrelated.

- Explicit self-compassion and compassion for others were not significantly correlated, suggesting that the way a person feels about themselves may not be strongly related to the way they feel about others.

- Future research could examine other potential methods for evaluating implicit self-compassion, such as an improved Implicit Association Test.

- Such measures may help researchers and clinicians recognize if a person may be vulnerable to negative mental health outcomes. Using implicit measure may help future researchers avoid self-report bias that is often found, and must be corrected for when using self-report surveys.

REFERENCES and ACKNOWLEDGEMENT


I would like to sincerely thank my mentor Dr. Juliana Breines, whose dedication and support were monumental for my and this project’s success.