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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 (Smeets 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 (Eaton et al., 2007).
- Implicit Association Tests (IAT) can be applied to a number of different constructs, some of which include racial biases, 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 volunteers (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.

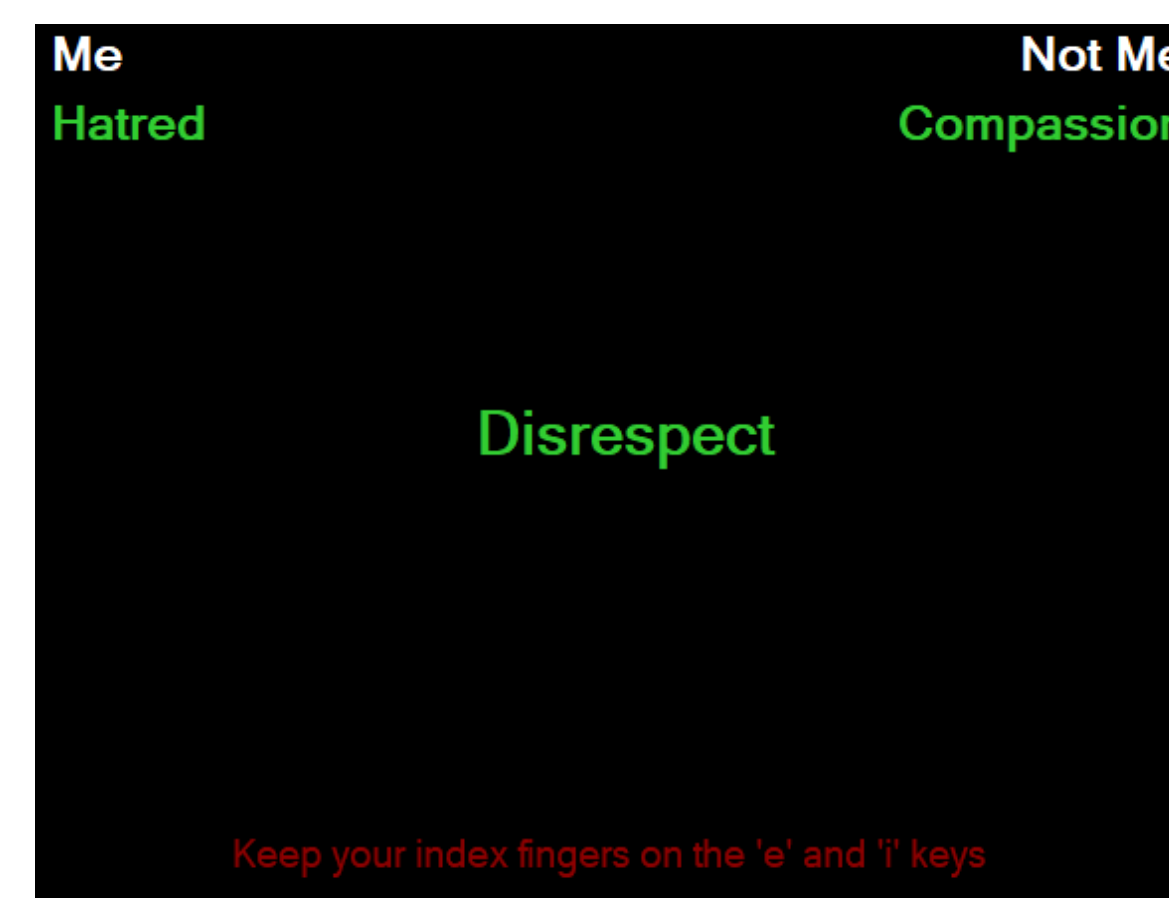
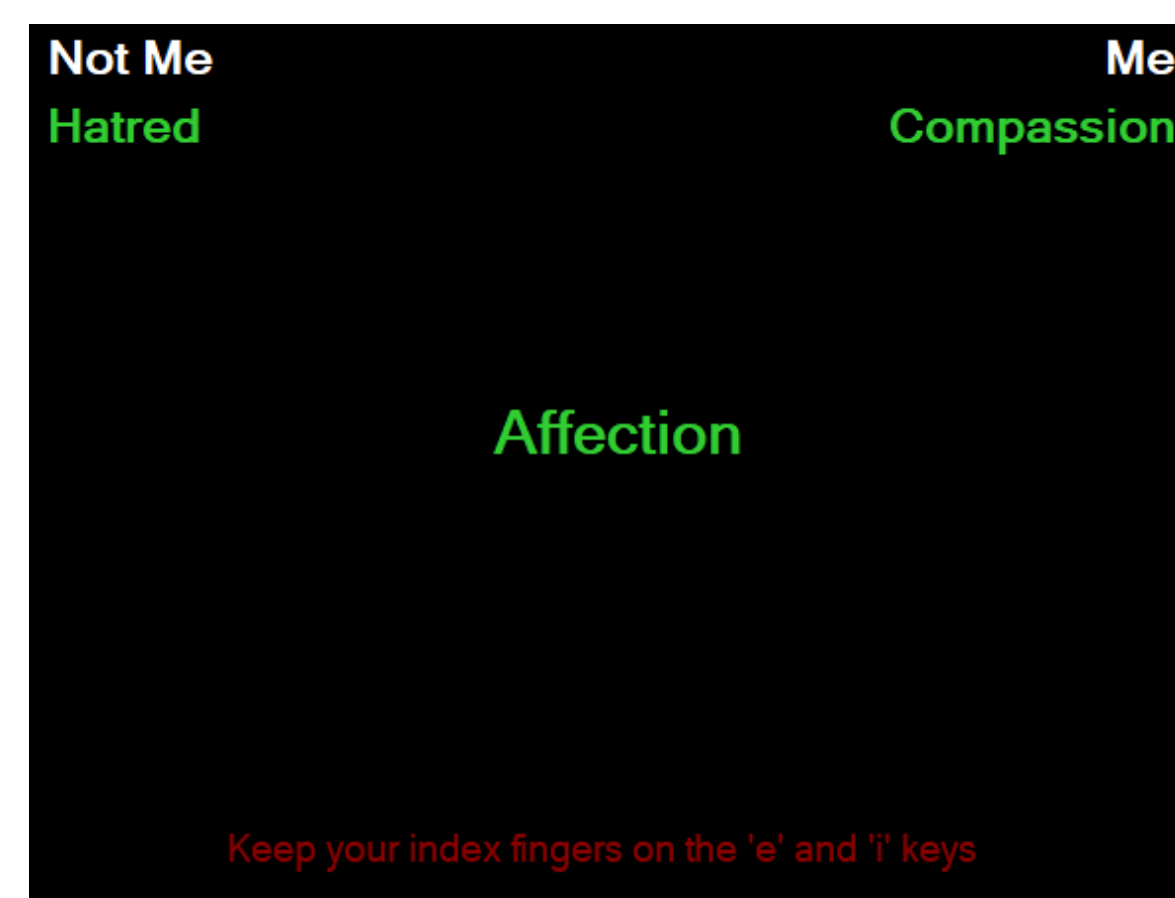
### Statistical Analysis

- 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, despise, disrespect, and disgust. Me; I, myself, mine, my, and self. Not Me; pen, chair, table, car, and book.



### 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 disapproving 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 three 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.

### iiii. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

- 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 or a little 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- it wasn't pleasant at times; 3= Severely- it 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.

Table 1:

Correlation Between Explicit and Implicit Self-Compassion and Compassion for Others, Self-Esteem, Depressive Symptoms and Anxiety Symptoms

| Measure                     | 1      | 2     | 3      | 4     | 5    |
|-----------------------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|------|
| 1. Explicit Self-Compassion | —      |       |        |       |      |
| 2. Compassion for Others    | .24    | —     |        |       |      |
| 3. Self-Esteem              | .77**  | .32   | —      |       |      |
| 4. Depressive Symptoms      | -.74** | .15   | -.70** | —     |      |
| 5. Anxiety Symptoms         | -.49** | -.40* | -.44** | .62** | —    |
| 6. Implicit Self-Compassion | .039   | .043  | -.049  | -.11  | -.10 |

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

## 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.

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