ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Self-compassion as a predictor of social safeness in Turkish university students

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Abstract

There are few studies that have examined the role of self-compassion in the context of social life, while self-compassion appears to enhance interpersonal relationship skills. The purpose of this study is to examine the predictive role of self-compassion on social safeness. Participants were 401 university students (213 women, 188 men; *M* age= 20.5 yr.). In this study, the Self-compassion Scale and the Social Safeness and Pleasure Scale were used. The relationships between self-compassion and social safeness were examined using correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis. In the correlation analysis, self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness factors of self-compassion were found to be positively related, and self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification factors of self-compassion were found to be negatively related to social safeness. According to regression results, social safeness was predicted positively by mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity. Further isolation predicted social safeness in a negative way. The regression model explained 28% of the variance in social safeness. Together, the findings illuminate the importance of self-compassion on social adjustment. The results are discussed in the light of the related literature.

Autocompasión como predictor de la seguridad social en estudiantes de la universidad turca

Resumen

Existen pocos estudios que examinen el papel de la autocompasión en el contexto de la vida social, mientras que la autocompasión parece mejorar habilidades de relación inter- personal. El propósito de este estudio es examinar el papel predictivo de la autocompa-

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sión sobre la seguridad social. Los participantes eran estudiantes universitarios 401 (213 mujeres, 188 hombres; Edad M = 20,5 años.). En este estudio, se utilizaron la escala de la autocompasión y la Seguridad Social y la escala de placer. Las relaciones entre la seguridad social y la autocompasión fueron examinadas usando análisis de correlación y análisis de regresión múltiple. En el análisis de correlación se consideraron positivos los factores de la autocompasión de la auto-amabilidad, la humanidad común y la atención plena mientras que el autojuicio, el aislamiento y los factores de identificación excesiva de autocompasión fueron considerados negativamente en relación con la seguridad social. Según los resultados de regresión, la seguridad social fue considerada positivamente por concienciación, uno auto-bondad y humanidad común. Un aislamiento adicional predijo la seguridad social de una manera negativa. El modelo de regresión explica el 28% de la varianza en seguridad social. Juntos, los resultados iluminan la importancia de la autocompasión en el ajuste social. Los resultados se discuten a la luz de la literatura relacionada.

Self-compassion was proposed first by Neff (2003a) as an alternative conception of individual's achieving functional attitudes toward himself and was described by her as "being gentle towards oneself in the face of hardship or perceived inadequacy, acknowledging that suffering, failure, and inadequacies are part of the human condition and that all people, oneself included, are worthy of compassion" (Neff, 2003b; Neff, Kirkpatrick & Rude, 2007). In her pioneer articles Neff (2003a,b) conceptualized and developed a valid and reliable instrument to measure this concept and considered self-compassion as a three-dimensional concept: (a) self-kindness (vs. self-judgment), which involves the ability of treating oneself with understanding and care as opposed to harsh self-judgment. People with self-kindness offer themselves warmth and non-judgmental understanding rather than belittling their pain or berating themselves with self-criticism (Neff, 2003b; Neff et al., 2007); (b) common humanity (vs. isolation), which requires the recognition that imperfection is a shared aspect of the human experience, as opposed to feeling isolated and alone by one's failures; individuals with awareness of common humanity consider joyful and painful experiences as not personal, but as all human beings', accept that all humans are imperfect (Neff, 2009), and (c) mindfulness (vs. over-identification), which includes a state of balanced awareness that one's feelings and thoughts are observed without avoiding or exaggerating them. While these three dimensions of self-compassion are conceptually distinct and are experienced differently at the phenomenological level, they combine and mutually interact to create a self-compassionate frame of mind (Neff, 2003a). For example, if individuals accept and tolerate their painful or failure experiences and if they are gentle and kind toward themselves, they may avoid suppressing their emotions and thoughts. Thus, when they are aware that these negative experiences are something that all humans experience, they are not trapped by over-identification (Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005).

Studies have traditionally demonstrated that self-compassion is correlated positively with psychologically healthy outcomes in a variety of domains such as affect, cognitive patterns, achievement, and social connections. For example, self-compassion was linked positively to psychological well-being (Akin, 2008a), 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), social relationship, emotional intelligence, self-determination (Neff, 2003a), learning-approach goals (Akin, 2008b), social support (Akin, Kayis & Satici, 2011), and relational-interdependent self construal (Akin & Eroglu, 2013). The other studies have proved that self-compassion is negatively associated with submissive behavior (Akin, 2009), depression, anxiety, rumination, thought suppression (Neff, 2003b), loneliness (Akin, 2010b), interpersonal cognitive distortions (Akin, 2010a), social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation (Werner et al., 2012), performance-approach/avoidance goals (Akin, 2008b), internet addiction (Iskender & Akin, 2011), automatic thoughts (Akin, 2012), and neuroticism (Neff, Rude & Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Social safeness

People, like animals, should overcome three basic life functions that have been sub-served by emotion regulation systems (Kelly, Zuroff, Leybman & Gilbert, 2012): (a) to detect, avoid, and protect themselves from threats; (b) to acquire, control, and maintain resources necessary for survival and reproduction, and (c) to regulate affect and motivation during times of affiliation and goal satisfaction (Gilbert, 2005, Porges, 2007). The first basic life functions are thought to produce negative affects while the latter two promote different types of positive affect (Kelly et al., 2012). However more recently, a gradual differentiation has been made between positive emotions associated with dopaminergic drives and activation states and positive emotions related to endorphin-based states of contentment,

connectedness, and peaceful well-being (Depue & Morrone-Strupinsky, 2005). In their studies, Gilbert et al. (2008) have conducted a factor analysis to operationalize these different types of positive affect and found that feeling safe and content (a dimension of positive affect) had high negative correlations with depression, anxiety, stress, self-criticism, and insecure attachment. Gilbert et al. has operationalized this factor as social safeness and considered it as an output of the soothing-affiliation system which plays an important role in affect regulation system (Depue & Morrone-Strupinsky, 2005), by contributing to feelings of contentment, soothing, and safeness.

Two basic types of positive affect regulation systems have been suggested by Depue and Morrone-Strupinsky (2005): One is focused on achieving and positive feelings such as excitement, joy, and vitality, and the other is focused on contentment and social soothing, which is in turn linked to the experience of social safeness and related to positive feelings associated with peacefulness and well-being (Gilbert et al., 2008, 2009). Feelings of contentment, soothing, peace, and care activate hormones like oxytocin and endorphins and reveal feeling of safeness that make less forcefully threat and distress (Carter, 1998). This experiment also gives people the feeling of well-being that derived from feeling loved and safe with others (Gilbert, 2009). Feelings of affection and kindness help people to feel calm when they are nervous and distressed and provide feelings of safeness. These feelings work through brain systems similar to those that produce peaceful feelings associated with contentment (Gilbert, 2009, 2010).

Social safeness was defined as people's experiences and perceptions about their social world as safe, warm, and soothing which are related feelings of belonging, acceptance, and warmth from others (Gilbert et al., 2009). People who experience sense of social safeness tend to manage problems more effectively, think creatively, and act in a more pro-social manner. Contrariwise, individuals who have difficulty in accessing social safeness are vulnerable to psychological problems because they are mistrustful and fearful of compassion from others (Gilbert, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2009). Similarly, when people feel unsafe or threatened, they need to stay vigilant to and track threats and be ready for rapid defending, with decisions about which response(s) to engage (e.g. fight, flight, submission) (Gilbert, 2005).

People who perceive other people as trustable and feel themselves in a safe environment tend to be more optimistic about their own power to change their life and tend to be happier with how their life is going (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005), whilst individuals who feel socially insecure have restricted social lives, experience problems in social relationships, and use Internet more frequently (Griffiths, 2000). Studies have demonstrated that social safeness is positively related to contentedness, love, self-esteem, and secure attachment (Kelly et al., 2012). Social safeness, on the other hand, was found associated negatively with depression, anxiety, self-criticism, hostility, preoccupied attachment, fearful attachment, dismissing attachment, paranoid traits, borderline traits (Gilbert, 2010; Kelly et al., 2012), submissive behavior, shame, and feelings of inferiority (Gilbert, 2010).

This study

Although a lot of research has focused on the impact of self-compassion on individual functioning, little research has examined the role of self-compassion within the context of interpersonal relationships; thus, little is known about the interpersonal implications of self-compassion. For this reason, it may be worthwhile to investigate the predictive role of self-compassion on social safeness; this is the purpose of this paper. Social safeness may be linked to self-compassion via attachment styles and soothing-affiliation system. The soothing-affiliation system likely evolved in tandem with the attachment styles; activation of this system lowers the threat system and people experience a lesser need to defend themselves (Gilbert, 2005; Kelly et al., 2012). Thus, a reduced sense of threat and distress may enhance the sense of social safeness and feelings of warmth, connectedness, and contentment that characterize social safeness (Kelly et al., 2012), which may lead people to consider themselves in a more balanced manner, and this could in turn contribute to a feeling of self-compassion.

In addition, as self-compassion buffers people against the negative social implications of their failures (Baker & McNulty, 2011; Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen & Hancock, 2007; Neff et al., 2005), a growing body of research has documented relations of self-compassion with numerous adaptive interpersonal and social variables such as social relationship, self-determination (Neff, 2003a), extraversion (Neff, Rude & Kirkpatrick, 2007), social relatedness (Neff, 2003b), and social support (Akin et al., 2011). For example, Neff and Beretvas (2012) found in their research with 104 couples that self-compassionate individuals displayed more positive relationship behavior than those who lacked self-compassion. Additionally, it was shown that higher levels of self-compassion were significantly linked to more perspective taking, greater forgiveness, compassion for humanity, empathetic concern, and altruism among community adults and meditators (Neff & Pommier, 2013). Moreover, Yarnell and Neff's (2013) study with 506 college undergraduates demonstrated that higher levels of self-compassion were related to greater likelihood to compromise and lesser likelihood to self-subordinate needs, as well as greater authenticity, lower levels of emotional turmoil, and higher levels of relational well-being.

People with self-compassion are more likely to have fulfilled needs for relatedness (Neff, 2003a), suggesting that they may also be more likely to have positive relationship interactions and be less likely to feel a sense of being isolated. Therefore, self-compassion appears to enhance interpersonal relationship skills and there may be a positive link between self-compassion and social safeness. Based on the above relationships of self-compassion with social variables, it was hypothesized that self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, which are adaptive dimensions of self-compassion, would be associated positively and self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification, which are maladaptive dimensions of self-compassion, would be associated negatively with social safeness.

Method

Participants

Participants were 401 university students (213 women and 188 men; mean age, 20.5 years) who enrolled in various undergraduate programs at Sakarya University School of Education, Turkey. These programs were psychological counseling and guidance (n = 72), science education (n = 80), mathematics education (n = 69), Turkish education (n = 73), and pre-school education (n = 107). Of the participants, 81 were first-year students, 116 were second-year students, 99 were third-year students, and 105 were fourth-year students. Ages ranged from 18 to 29 (mean, 20.5 ± 1.04) years and GPA scores ranged from 1.80 to 3.91.

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, Akin, and Abaci (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 (from 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. Cronbach alpha 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.

The Social Safeness and Pleasure Scale (SSPS) (Gilbert et al., 2009). The SSPS was used to measure social safeness. This scale was developed to assess the extent to which individuals feel a sense of warmth, acceptance, and connectedness in their social world (Gilbert et al., 2009).

Participants rate their agreement with 11 statements using a Likert scale from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost all the time). The Cronbach alpha coefficient of the original form was .91. The Turkish adaptation of this scale was carried out by Akin, Uysal, Özkara, and Bingöl (2012). The overall internal consistency reliability coefficient of the scale was .82. The corrected item-total correlations of SSPS ranged from .34 to .61. Results of confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the model was well fit. The goodness of fit index values of the model were x^2 = 71.82, df = 40, RMSEA = .048, NFI = .96, CFI = .98, IFI = .98, RFI = .95, GFI = .96, and SRMR = .042.

Procedure and statistical analysis

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 the measures, all participants were told about the purposes of the study. In this research, multiple regression analysis and the Pearson correlation coefficient were used to investigate the relationships between self-compassion and social safeness. 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.

Results

Descriptive data and inter-correlations

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

Self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness were found positively and self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification were found negatively associated with social

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	-.25[a]	—					
3. Common humanity	.53[a]	-.16[a]	—				
4. Isolation	-.18[a]	.56[a]	-.09	—			
5. Mindfulness	.66[a]	-.26[a]	.61[a]	-.17[a]	—		
6. Over-identification	-.21[a]	.60[a]	-.18[b]	.65[a]	-.32[a]	—	
7. Social safeness	.45[a]	-.23[a]	.42[a]	-.15[a]	.46[a]	-.20[a]	—
Mean	14.62	11.93	11.29	11.20	12.01	10.67	37.91
Standard deviation	3.95	4.56	3.22	3.71	3.66	3.79	8.87
Cronbach's a	.70	.80	.73	.79	.66	.85	.79

[a]p < .01.
[b]p < .05.

safeness. There were also significant correlations between dimensions of self-compassion. Self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness were positively correlated with one another while self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification were positively associated with one another. On the other hand, self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness were negatively related to self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification.

Multiple regression analysis

Before applying regression, assumptions of multiple regression were verified. In order to run parametric tests, the data were examined for normality by means of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated normality of distributions of test scores for all tests in the current study, and hierarchical multiple regression analysis was subsequently conducted. Outliers are cases that have data values that are very different from the data values for the majority of cases in the data set. Outliers were investigated using Mahalanobis distance. A case is an outlier if the probability associated with its D^2 is .001 or less (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Based on this criterion, nine pieces of data were labeled as outliers and they were deleted. Multicollinearity was verified by means of variance inflation factors (VIF). All VIF values were less than 10 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), which indicated that there was no severe multicollinearity. Multiple regression analysis was performed in which the dependent variable was social safeness and the independent variables were dimensions of self-compassion.

According to the results of multiple regression analysis, summarized in table 2, mindfulness entered the equation first, accounting for 21% of the variance in predicting social safeness ($R^2 = .21$, adjusted $R^2 = .21$, $F(1, 398) = 105,795$, $p < .01$). Self-kindness entered secondly accounting for an additional 4% variance ($R^2 = .25$, $\Delta R^2 = .05$, adjusted $R^2 = .25$, $F(2, 397) = 66,023$, $p < .01$). Common humanity entered thirdly accounting for an additional 2% variance ($R^2 = .27$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, adjusted $R^2 = .27$, $F(3, 396) = 48,930$, $p < .01$). Isolation entered last, accounting for an additional 1% variance ($R^2 = .28$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, adjusted $R^2 = .27$, $F(4, 395) = 38,291$, $p < .01$). Despite the initial regression design included mindfulness, common humanity, self-kindness, over-identification, isolation, and self-judgment as independent variables, the last regression model involved mindfulness, self-kindness, common humanity, and isolation as predictors of social safeness and accounted for 28% of the variance. The standardized beta coefficients indicated the relative influence of the variables in last model with mindfulness ($B = .18$, $p < .01$), self-kindness ($B = .21$, $p < .01$), common humanity ($B = .19$, $p < .01$), and isolation ($B = -.10$, $p < .01$) all significantly influencing social safeness and self-kindness was the strongest predictor.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to investigate the predictive role of self-compassion on social safeness. Findings demonstrated that there are significant relationships between these variables. To our knowledge, this is the first study investigating the relationships between self-compassion and social safeness. As expected self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness —adaptive dimensions of self-compassion— predicted social safeness positively. On the other hand, isolation —a maladaptive dimension of self-compassion— predicted social safeness negatively. However over-identification and self-judgment did not emerge as significant predictors in the regression model.

The results of the current research demonstrated that the sense of care, connectedness, and a balanced attitude towards emotions provided by self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness are more generally associated with greater emotional well-being (Neff, 2009), and well-

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

Model	Variables	B	Standard error of B	B	t^*
Model 1	Constant	24.57	1.36		18.10
	Mindfulness	1.11	.11	.46	10.29
Model 2	Constant	20.94	1.54		13.57
	Mindfulness	.69	.14	.29	4.97
	Self-kindness	.59	.13	.26	4.58
Model 3	Constant	19.04	1.63		11.71
	Mindfulness	.49	.15	.20	3.25
	Self-kindness	.50	.13	.22	3.79
	Common humanity	.51	.15	.19	3.36
Model 4	Constant	22.25	2.17		10.25
	Mindfulness	.45	.15	.18	2.96
	Self-kindness	.46	.13	.21	3.53
	Common humanity	.52	.15	.19	3.42
	Isolation	-.19	.09	-.10	-2.21

*All $p < .05$.

being within the context of interpersonal relationships (Yarnell & Neff, 2013). These results are consistent with the literature; which proved that self-compassion is closely related to markers of social adjustment such as extraversion (Neff, Rude & Kirkpatrick, 2007), social relationship, self-determination (Neff, 2003a), social relatedness (Neff, 2003b), and social support (Akin et al., 2011). Studies showed that the extent to which individuals are kind to themselves is linked to how kind they are to relationship partners, as assessed by partners' perceptions of their behavior (Neff & Beretvas, 2012). Also, to the extent that they were high in self-kindness, people were perceived by partners as being significantly more caring (i.e., affectionate, warm, and considerate). Besides, individuals with common humanity and self-kindness are more likely to feel themselves in a social safeness because they are less likely to be concerned about the impression they make on other people, a concern that can lead to shy and withdrawn behavior (Neff, Rude & Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Moreover, since self-compassionate people accept themselves as imperfect human beings, they may be more prone to accept others' limitations (Neff & Beretvas, 2012), whilst the connected and emotionally balanced stance of self-compassion may also be associated with a greater ability to get along with others (Neff, Rude & Kirkpatrick, 2007). They do not meet the need for positive feelings by separating oneself from others but rather by incorporating appreciation of shared humanity into self-attitudes and treating oneself as others deserve to be treated (Neff et al., 2005). Common humanity, mindfulness, and self-kindness decrease emotional turmoil when attempting to decide how to resolve relationship conflicts. When relationship problems arise, these feelings help people to soothe the density of their negative emotions, so that they can solve their problems in a more balanced manner (Kelly, Zuroff & Shapira, 2009). Crocker and Canevello (2008) found in their study that as individuals with common humanity, mindfulness, and self-kindness tend to have more compassionate goals in their social relationships, they tend to provide social support and encourage interpersonal trust with friends (Neff & Beretvas, 2012).

Conversely, the isolation dimension of self-compassion, which was found negatively related to social safeness, may lead to a type of self-absorption that blocks social interactions. In addition, feelings of separation have been shown to be highly associated with maladaptive social outcomes such as submissive behavior (Akin, 2009), social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation (Werner et al., 2012), and loneliness (Akin, 2010b). And thus, it is understandable that a greater sense of self-kindness, awareness of common humanity, and mindfulness is linked to a greater sense of social safeness within relationships, while a greater sense of isolation is linked to decreased sense of social safeness (Yarnell & Neff, 2013).

Conclusions

There are several limitations of this study that should be taken into account when evaluating the findings. Firstly, perhaps the most important limitation is that the results obtained in this study should not be generalized neither to all university students nor to other student populations, since the data were collected at just one campus in Sakarya University, Turkey. Therefore, further study is required to assess the relationships between self-compassion and social safeness targeting other populations, so as to generate more solid relationships among the constructs examined in this study. Secondly, as correlational statistics were utilized, no definitive statements can be made about causality. Thirdly, the data reported here for self-compassion and social safeness are limited to self-reported data and did not use a qualitative measure of these variables.

Consequently, the present research provides important information about the predictors of social safeness and would further our understanding of the psychological process of social safeness, since the results suggest that self-compassion is associated with social safeness. The implications of these findings are that if people improve their sense of kindness towards themselves, perceive all human beings are error-prone, accept both their failure and successful experiences, and approach their emotions with a balanced manner then they will ensure that their social environment is safe and friendly. Thus, the benefits of self-compassion may not only be personal, but also interpersonal. For that reason, counselors who work with individuals experiencing relationship conflicts with family, friends, or romantic partners might consider encouraging self-compassion as a way to solve these interpersonal problems in a psychologically beneficial manner (Germer, 2009; Yarnell & Neff, 2013). Additionally, encouraging the development of self-compassion may be useful for individuals by helping them to counter destructive self-critical tendencies and deal with their negative emotions with greater clarity and equanimity (Neff, 2003a). Clearly, however, more research must be conducted in order to understand how self-compassion is linked to functioning in interpersonal environments and to comprehend the dynamics of self-compassion in different relationship types. Moreover future research should consider specific cognitive and emotional variables that may moderate the relationships of self-compassion with social safeness.

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