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Self-Compassion as a Relationship Moderator between Academic Burnout and Mental Health in Students

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Abstract

Background and purpose: College life is a challenging factor which affects the mental health and academic performance of students. Self compassion includes openness to and awareness of our sufferings, kindness to oneself and a non-judgmental view to our failures. The present study was conducted to investigate the moderator effects of self-compassion in the relationship between academic burnout and mental health in the students of Payam-e-Noor University of Delfan in the academic year of 2013-2014 (1392-1393).

Materials and methods: the research sample included 200 students from Payam-e-Noor University of Delfan in the academic year of 2013-2014 (1392-1393), who were selected through cluster and simple random sampling. The instruments included the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), Self Compassion Scale (SCS), and the academic burnout questionnaire (MBI-SS). The data were analyzed using SPSS18 through Pearson correlation, and Hierarchical Moderated Regression.

Findings: Findings showed that there is a negative relationship between academic burnout and self-compassion on one hand ($P < 0.01$), and academic burnout and mental health on the other ($P < 0.05$). Findings also showed that there is a positive relationship between self-compassion and mental health ($P < 0.01$). In addition, self-compassion can be a moderator between academic burnout and mental health, and can moderate the effects of academic burnout on mental health ($P < 0.01$).

Conclusion: Results emphasize the importance of self-compassion as a variable in self acceptance. In other words, self-compassion is a way to connect to ourselves despite failures, incompetence and flaws.

Keywords: Mediation, Self-Compassion, Academic Burnout, Mental Health.

Introduction

College is a critical stage with regard to changing roles and expectations. In Iran, being placed in this situation is coincident with stress and nervousness, and is accompanied by an inventory of stresses including being far from family, contact with the opposite sex, being unfamiliar with the new environment, lack of interest in the field of admission, and so on which make the ground for unhappiness and mental unadjustment in the students. Academic burnout is a result of these stresses which is accompanied by the experience of tension (Schneiderman et al., 2005).

Academic burnout in educational situation is defined as a feeling of exhaustion due to academic demands and requirements (exhaustion), having a pessimistic and an uninterested feeling to academic material and homework (lack of interest), and a feeling of poor personal development in academic and educational affairs (reduced personal self-efficiency) (Zhang et al., 2007). Major factors play a role in academic burnout including: scientific and group activities (such as class attendance, writing papers, studying and exams), different economical, individual and social pressures concerning the teachers and peers, professional expectations and hesitation regarding the usefulness of studies and future employment (Campos et al., 2011). People who have academic burnout usually experience symptoms like lack of enthusiasm in relation to syllabus material, poor attendance in classes, non-participation in class activities, a feeling of disability in learning the material, and academic underachievement (Naami, 2009). In addition, their mental health is exposed to risk (Koeske, & Koeske, 1998).

Mental health means the ability to maintain a harmonious relationship with others, correcting the surroundings and solving contradictions which results in constructive activities, communicating with other members of the society, the ability to adapt to changes, learning and self-confidence (Ahmadi et al., 2007; Ealati, & Abonajmi, 2006). Studies have shown that 22.7 percent of the students have mental problems (Koushan, & Waghei, 2006). Besides, mental problems result in disorders in doing homework, lower motivation, anxiety, fear and nervousness, and students spend a great deal of their thinking power on such problems (Alizadeh-Navaeim & Hosseini, 2014). A factor which can predict mental health, and be an alternative approach to improve issues related to mental health is self-compassion (Schneiderman et al., 2005). Self-compassion is a new concept in the field of personality psychology (Neff, 2003) which stems from Buddhism (Neff, 2003; Gilbert, 2005). Self-compassion involves three basic elements: being kind to oneself against judgments about oneself, human commonalities against loneliness, and an open mind against extremist simulation. These elements provide cognition and acceptance of reality and enhancing effective accountability to situations (Neff, 2003).

Studies conducted on the relationship between the variables related to psychological wellbeing have shown that self-compassion has a positive relationship with the symptoms of psychological well-being like self-acceptance, social relationships, self esteem, self-dependence, dominating the environment, purposefulness in life, wisdom, curiosity, happiness, and optimism (Neff, 2003).

Furthermore, a rise in self-compassion enhances mental health (Gilbert, & Procter, 2006) and reduces stress (Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005). In addition, there is a negative relationship between self-criticality, anxiety and depression (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2009), and is positively related to development and intrinsic motivation (Neff et al., 2007).

Self-compassion not only is related to mental health and psychological wellbeing, but it also acts as a moderator. Different studies have investigated the moderator effects of self-compassion among students. Among these is a study by Terry, Leary and Mehta (2012) aimed to study the moderator effects of self-compassion in the relationship between the students' perception of life conditions and homesickness and satisfaction with decisions made with regard to university. The results showed that the students who get a low score in self-compassion are more likely to become homesick when facing unfavorable conditions and have less satisfaction with their social conditions. But students who got a high score in self-compassion were not affected by their social problems. In Keyeong's study (2013) also self-compassion was studied as the moderator of the relationship between academic burnout and psychological health and depression of the students. Results showed that self-compassion is the moderator between academic burnout and psychological wellbeing. Self-compassion is also the moderator between academic burnout and depression. In the study by Samaie and Farahani (2011) also self-compassion was studied as a moderator in the relationship between rumination and stress in students.

Since studies on self-compassion are relatively new, studies which assess the relationship between self-compassion and psychological and educational variables like academic burnout are necessary. The main reason for using self-compassion as a moderator in the present study is that recent studies have shown that self-esteem causes a positive view in a neurotic personality. As self-compassion is a healthy view in the relationship between self and others, and also the epidemic of mental disorder between the people in society including students, and the newness of self-compassion, the present study seems necessary.

Materials and Methods

The present study is cross-sectional. Research population of the study included all the humanity students in Payame-e-Noor University of Delfan in the academic year of 2013-2014. According to Cochran's formula 200 students were selected as the sample through cluster sampling. The criteria for selection were field of study in the first stage and then class. Then to analyze the data Pearson correlation and hierarchical regression using Baron and Kenny (1986) at the significance level of 0.01 were used to study the effects of self-compassion. Research instruments are introduced below.

- a- General health questionnaire (GHQ): in the present study Goldberg's general health questionnaire was used to assess the mental health. The questionnaire includes 28 scales and is a 90-item questionnaire. The questionnaire included 4 scales of minor, physical symptoms of anxiety, social functioning disorders, and depression (Goldberg, & Hillier, 1979). Reliability of the scale was determined at 0.68 using the test-retest method and was evaluated as appropriate (Cheung, & Spears, 1994). In Iran, too, the reliability coefficient using the test-retest method, split-half and Chronbach's alpha is 0.70, 0.93, and 0.90, respectively (Taghavi, 2001). In the present study the Chronbach's alpha of the entire questionnaire was obtained at 0.71.

- b- The self compassion scale (SCS): this is a 26 item self-report scale which was constructed by Neff in 2003, and has 6 subscales. Responses always are located in a Likert scale which ranges from 0(almost never) to 4(almost always). This scale measures three bipolar components in the form of six subscales of Self-Kindness, self-judgment, Over-identified, mindfulness, Common Humanity, and Isolation (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). In Iranian studies, too, converging and diverging reliabilities of the self compassion scale was calculated through conducting the self-respect scale as well as Beck's depression and anxiety questionnaire (Momeni et al., 2014) with significant results ($p < 0.01$). In this study also the Chronbach alpha was obtained at 0.78.
- c- Maslach's academic burnout questionnaire (MBI-SS): This questionnaire assesses three areas of academic burnout, that is, academic exhaustion (5 items), academic uninterestedness (4 items), academic inefficiency (6 items), and include 15 clauses and is scored using a five point likert scale which range from totally disagreed (1) to totally agreed (5) (Schaufeli & Martnez, 2002). In the Iranian models the internal consistency of the overall scale has been rated as appropriate (shobani & Bazrafkan, 2011). In this questionnaire, too, the Chronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.78 was obtained.

Findings

Descriptive findings of frequency distribution of the demographic variables with regard to sex showed that 92 participants (46%) from the sample were males and 108 participants (54%) were females. In addition, marital status findings showed that 156 participants (78%) were single, and 44 participants (22%) were married. Furthermore, the age distribution of the sample included 108 participants (46%) between 18 and 22, 82 participants (41%) between 23 and 28, and 10(5%) participants were between 29 and 32. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the research variables.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of the Research Variables

	Statistical indices of the scale	Mean	Standard deviation
Self-compassion	Self-Kindness	15.40	3.94
	Self-judgment	16.57	3.96
	Common Humanity	13.02	3.19
	Isolation	12.32	3.1
Mental health	Mindfulness	12.98	3.01
	Over-identified	13.07	3.1
	Physical symptoms	4.92	7.93
	Disorders in social functioning	4.07	3.67
Academic burnout	Depression	5.45	4.21
	Anxiety	7.23	5.02
	Academic exhaustion	13.05	4.2
	Skepticism and pessimism	11.35	4.8
	Academic inefficiency	14.22	3.9

The results of Pearson correlation between the research variables showed that mental health is correlated with self-compassion at 0.62 ($P < 0.001$), and to academic burnout at -0.36 ($p < 0.05$). In addition, self compassion is correlated with academic burnout at -0.78 ($p < 0.0001$).

Figure 2. The matrix of the correlation between the research variables along with the mean and standard deviation.

order	Variable	Mean	Standard error	1	2	3
1	Self-compassion	83.06	14.27	1		
2	Mental health	21.67	11.187	0.62**	1	
3	Academic burnout	38.62	9.76	-0.78**	-0.36*	1

The results of the moderated hierarchical regression are presented in table 3. Analyses showed that there is no significant relationship between age, sex, and marital status and research variables. Hence, the demographic variables were removed from the regression analysis. After confirming the existence of the main assumptions of the moderated hierarchical regression (normal distribution, the linear relationship between the predicative variables, and error independence), this test was used.

Table 3. The results of the moderated hierarchical regression of self compassion in the relationship with academic burnout and mental health

	Variables	R2	F	Beta coefficient	Sig
First direction	Burnout	12.96	28.85	0.77	0.001
Second direction	Self-compassion	38.44	36.292	-0.364	0.001
Third direction	Academic burnout×self- compassion	51.78	20.48	-0.163	0.001

The results of the moderated hierarchical regression using Baron and Kenny (1986) Table3 show that in the first step, academic burnout only predicts 12.95 percent of the mental health variable. In the second step, the self compassion variable alone predicts 30.44 percent of the mental health variable. In the third step, introducing two variables of academic burnout and mental health together approximate the amount of the prediction of mental health from these two variables to 51.58 in a way that with the introduction of the self-compassion variable in the regression formula, the amount of R² increased remarkably, and given the degree of F and the significance level, it can be concluded that the self-compassion variable is moderating the relationship between academic burnout and mental health ($p < 0.001$, $F = 20.48$).

Discussion

This study aimed at studying the moderator effects of self-compassion in the relationship between academic burnout and mental health. Regression analysis showed that self compassion is the moderator in the relationship between academic burnout and mental health. In addition, findings showed that there is a positive relationship between self-compassion mental health, while it has a negative relationship with academic burnout. Different studies have investigated the moderator effects of self-compassion (Leary et al., 2007; Terry et al., 2012; Kyeong, 2013; Samaie & Farahani, 2011; Neff et al., 2005) which are in line with the present study. In a study by Kyeong (2013); Neff et al (2005), the effects of self-compassion on the variables related to academic purposes have been studied. The results of these studies are in line with the results of the present study. Neff and et Al (2005) also has been conducted on the moderator role of self-compassion with the assumption of the effects of emotions and negative cognitions in achieving academic purposes. It seems that in this study, emotions and cognitions are considered as a factor in achieving goals and it is assumed that through self-compassion negative emotions and cognitions as well as the self-criticism attitude can be reduced. In addition, self-compassionate people usually use strategies concentrated on emotion which in itself it is a factor in reducing the fear of failure and negative cognitions. The results of another study related to the moderator effects of self-compassion on homesickness, depression and dissatisfaction in the students who have recently entered university showed that self-compassion makes people act effectively when they face homesickness, depression and stressful situations (Terry et al., 2012). In the study by Kyeong (2013), too, the moderator effects of self compassion on the academic burnout was investigated with the difference that the population of the study include the students of a technical college. The results of this study also showed that self-compassion moderates the effects of academic burnout on mental health. People who suffer from academic burnout feel

pressure. Especially due to overacting in class activities and pessimism and a pessimistic attitude toward activities relating to education, and regarding them as meaningless, they feel unsuccessful and as a result experience sleep disorders and depression (Zhang et al., 2007). Self-compassion causes a positive attitude to self without a judgmental and critical attitude can alleviate the pain resulting from academic burnout, makes students see the issues as issues facing all students, and see all stresses and contradictions as aspects of human experiences with which everybody is facing. In addition, self compassion can reduce stress through reducing the negative reactions and cognitions concentrated on negative points and rumination. Therefore, in this way it improves people's performance in a way that people who have a positive attitude to themselves accept positive and negative events of their lives warmly. If thoughts like this are dominant, events like academic burnout can not threaten individuals' mental health. So, self-compassion is the moderator in reducing the effects of negative events like academic burnout on mental health. Also, self-compassion makes the acceptance of negative events easier, and makes self-judgment to be based on real performance of oneself rather than comparisons with others and an exaggerative view about oneself. So, people who have high self-compassion less often go through unfavorable experiences like academic burnout through normalizing experiences (the human commonalities component). Of other findings of this study is the positive relationship between self-compassion and mental health. The relationship between self-compassion and mental health has been the subject of many studies (Neff, 2003; Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2007; Samaie, & Farahani, 2011; Neff et al., 2005; Shapiro & Mongrain, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2001). For instance, the results of Neff, Rude and Kirkpatrick (2007) showed that self-compassion is positively related to happiness, optimism, positive emotions, positive attitude, extravert personality, and adaptation, and at the same time it has a negative relationship with negative emotions. In the study by Shapiro and Mongrain (2010) too, this effect was revealed with the difference that a experimental method was used. In this study, self-compassion was taught to students and the results showed that education in self-compassion resulted in an increase in optimism and personal efficiency. In this study the subjects were asked to write a self-compassion letter everyday for seven days, and the control group was asked to write diaries. The results of this study showed that compared with the control group, the experimental group reduced their depression for three months, and the happiness of the experimental group rose for six months. Neff, too, believes that self-compassion is negatively related with self criticism, depression, anxiety, rumination, repression of thoughts, and neurotic idealism, and is positively related with life satisfaction (Neff, 2003). Overall these studies have shown that there is a positive relationship between self compassion and variables related to mental health like happiness, optimism, and personal efficiency in a way that self compassion is the main source of happiness with the difference that happiness includes pleasure and pain avoidance while self compassion is not pain avoidance, but it is kindness and good will and a feeling of wellbeing which is rooted in human experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In addition, studies have shown that self-compassion is negatively related with depression, anxiety, neuroticism, too. The present study showed that there is a positive relationship between self-compassion and mental health.

As one of the components of self-compassion, mindfulness prevents pessimistic thinking towards self through concentrating on present and preventing judgmental thinking, and makes people judge themselves less strictly. It seems that self compassionate people experience a higher

mental health through self acceptance and getting along with negative feelings compared with those who are less self-compassionate, and encourage themselves toward changes in life, accept the painful events more easily, and their self evaluations and reactions are based on their real performances rather than their ideals. Therefore, given the high acceptance that these people have towards themselves, they are less likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, sleep disorders and so on.

From the peripheral results of the present study is the negative relationship between academic burnout and self compassion. The negative relationship between academic burnout with mental health is line with the study by (Kyeong, 2013). Academic Burnout results in rumination, anxiety, depression, disappointment, hostility, failure, less motivation to perform a duty, leaving jobs, too much absence from class and a reduction in health (Toppinen-Tanner et al., 2005). Low mental health of the students who have academic burnout is related to too much stress, long working hours accompanied by education, concerns about test scores, skepticism about future, low levels of control, low satisfaction with the balance between personal life and professional life, and the low level of support from peers and friends (Boudreau et al., 2004). Other factors involved in creating academic burnout include group and scientific activities like class attendance, writing papers, cramming and tests, economic, individual and social pressures related to teachers and classmates, professional expectations, and doubt about the usefulness of the studies and job future (Law, 2007) and competing with classmates (Moneta, 2011). Hence such a person has a critical attitude toward him and therefore, has a low self-compassion. In contrast, a person who has self-compassion less often compares himself with others.

Conclusion

To sum up the findings of the present study and other studies which have been carried out on self-compassion, it can be said that self compassion induces behaviors in line with maintaining and promoting mental health in a way that people who have higher self-compassion accept themselves, knowing that everybody makes mistakes. Like other studies, the present study had some limitations including external validity, and generalization should be made with caution. Given the newness of self-compassion, it is suggested that researchers expand the studies in this regard and use experimental methods to determine the effects of self-compassion on the academic burnout and mental health. In addition, it is suggested that counselors use self compassion to improve the programs in schools and universities for students who are facing academic burnout, since it probably affects academic burnout and mental health.

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