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## **EXAMINING THE PREDICTIVE ROLE OF SELF-COMPASSION ON SELF-DOUBT**

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### **Abstract**

*The goal of this research is to examine the predictive role of self-compassion on self-doubt. Participants were 308 university students (170 women, 138 men; M age= 19.9 yr.). In this study, the Self-compassion Scale and the Judgmental Self-Doubt Scale were used. The relationships between self-compassion and self-doubt were examined using correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis. In correlation analysis, self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness factors of self-compassion were found negatively and self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification factors of self-compassion were found positively related to self-doubt. According to regression results, self-doubt was predicted positively by self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification. Further self-kindness predicted self-doubt in a negative way. Self-compassion has explained 41% of the variance in self-doubt. The results were discussed in the light of the related literature and dependent recommendations to the area were given.*

**Keywords:** *Self-compassion, self-doubt, multiple regression analysis*

### *Self-compassion*

In recent two decades, many researchers have criticized self-esteem trainings suggesting that this kind of training has excessively emphasized the individual's ego, thus leading to narcissistic manners. As a consequence of these arguments the concept of self-compassion has been put forward by Neff (2003a). According to her conceptualization, self-compassion contains being gentle towards oneself in the face of hardship or perceived inadequacy and entails acknowledging that failure, suffering, and negative experiences are part of the human condition (Neff, 2003b; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Neff (2003a, b) described self-compassion as a three-dimensional construct: (a) Self-kindness vs. self-judgment (to behave kindly and understanding to one's self as opposed to harsh judgment), (b) Common humanity vs. isolation (to perceive one's experiences as part of the larger human condition instead of feeling separate and isolated), and (c) Mindfulness vs. over-identification (to aware mindfully painful experiences without over-identifying with them).

Self-kindness, the first dimension, means being gentle and understanding toward oneself in instances of difficult times rather than being harshly self-critical. If an individual with self-kindness notices some negative feature his/her personality the emotional tone of language used towards the self is soft and supportive (Neff, 2009). Common humanity, the second dimension of self-compassion, involves seeing one's happy or painful experiences as not personal, but as all human beings'. People with an awareness of common humanity recognize that all humans are imperfect and they fail (Neff, 2009). Having this kind of awareness, they perceive these experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than feeling isolated and alienated from the society (Neff, 2003a). Mindfulness, the last component of self-compassion, is a pre-conceptual awareness that helps individual to accept life's most painful emotions without being carried away by them (Gunaratana, 1993; Martin, 1997; Neff,

2003a; Nisker, 1998; Rosenberg, 1999). These three dimensions of self-compassion are experienced differently at the phenomenological level but they interact so as to mutually enhance and engender one another (Neff, 2003a). For instance if individuals tolerate their painful or distressful experiences and if they are gentle toward themselves, they may avoid suppressing their emotions and thoughts. And thus, if 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 consistently have demonstrated that self-compassion is associated with adaptive outcomes in a variety of domains such as affect, cognitive patterns, achievement, and social connections. Self-compassion was related positively to psychological well-being (Akin, 2008a), self-deception (Akin, 2011), life satisfaction, social relatedness (Neff, 2003b), social relationship, emotional intelligence, self-determination (Neff, 2003a), social support (Akin, Kayış, & Satıcı, 2011), reflective and affective wisdom, personal initiative, curiosity and exploration, optimism, positive affect, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness (Baker & McNulty, 2011; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007), learning-approach goals (Akin, 2008b), and relational-interdependent self construal (Akin & Eroglu, 2013). Contrarily, the other studies have proved that self-compassion is negatively associated with depression, anxiety, rumination, thought suppression (Neff, 2003b), submissive behavior (Akin, 2009), loneliness (Akin, 2010b), internet addiction (Iskender & Akin, 2011), automatic thoughts (Akin, 2012), performance-approach/avoidance goals (Akin, 2008b), social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation (Werner et al., 2012), interpersonal cognitive distortions (Akin, 2010a), and neuroticism (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007).

#### *Self-doubt*

Self-doubt refers to how certain a person feels about important abilities (Hermann, Leonardelli, & Arkin, 2002) and arises when individuals are uncertain about their level of efficiency or ability to appear competent in an evaluative situation (Arkin & Reich, 2006; Baumgardner & Arkin, 1985; Harris & Snyder, 1986). If a person has the sense that approval by important others is highly contingent upon the demonstration of his/her competence (Jones & Berglas, 1978), coupled with a concern that negative outcomes will be used as evidence to condemn one's competence, self-doubtful cognitions happen (Arkin & Reich, 2006). Moreover, people who distrust their judgment should usually find themselves relying on others to make decisions for them and so producing evidence in support of their belief that others are more skillful than they are (Mirels, Greblo, & Dean, 2002).

Self-doubt appears in various forms, ranging from concern about one's ability level to feeling that one's worth is determined almost completely by performance. Although most people experience doubt about their worthiness or competence at times, chronic self-doubting persons question their value every time (Oleson, Poehlmann, Yost, Lynch, & Arkin, 2000). They also ponder their own worth continuously and focus intently on their perceived imperfections. These individuals may experience self-doubt, and when facing upcoming tasks, be worry that they will fail (Oleson et al., 2000) and as they more prone to hesitancy and vacillation, self-doubters should, in fact, accomplish less than their more confident fellows (Mirels et al., 2002).

People who have high level of self-doubt experience themselves in danger of being undermined by their poor judgment and approach crucial decisions as trials in which they are likely to find themselves wanting or to be found wanting by others (Mirels et al., 2002). They are relatively ineffectual in determining the course of their lives and are uncertain about the causes of important life events. The sense that they don't have an adequate control on their lives can readily foster sad and depressive feelings, which are likely to be intensified by the demoralizing comparisons that self-doubters draw between their own judgment and the judgment of others (Mirels et al., 2002). As a result, doubt about one's judgment should be substantially linked to one's overall self-esteem, chronic level of anxiety, and proneness to dejection (Mirels et al., 2002).

A developing line of research has documented numerous costs of self-doubt and its relationships with psychological health. In their study Mirels et al. (2002) have found that self-doubt related positively to anxiety, depression, procrastination, causal uncertainty, decisional procrastination, fear of negative evaluation, and need for approval and negatively to self-esteem, need for cognition, decisional self-esteem, extraversion, conscientiousness, and emotional stability. In another study which investigated self-doubt and concern with performance it was demonstrated that self-doubt associated positively with defensive pessimism, public and private self-consciousness, self-handicapping, social anxiety, self-reflectiveness and negatively with achievement motivation, narcissism, internal state awareness, self-esteem and self-monitoring (Oleson et al., 2000).

#### *The present research*

Although increasing numerous research conducted with the self-compassion is encouraging, to date, however, no empirical research has examined whether self-compassion predicts self-doubt. Therefore the goal of the present research is to do this. Self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, adaptive dimension of self-compassion, involve turning compassion inward, facilitate reactions to distressing situations, and buffer individuals against the influence of negative self-feelings and failure experiences (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007), and entail being aware of both positive and negative emotions and feelings in a balanced way rather than over identifying with negative emotions (Raes, 2010). On the other hand, chronic self-doubters question and ponder their self-worth continuously (Oleson et al., 2000) and focus intently on their perceived imperfections. This means that they are lack of the advantages of self-compassion such as; behaving kindly to themselves or approaching to negative emotions in a balanced manner. Rather people who have higher level of self-doubt may have higher level of self-critical cognitions.

Moreover while self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness are found associated negatively with higher levels of anxiety, depression (Neff, 2003b), fear of negative evaluation, and social anxiety (Werner et al., 2012), while self-doubt is found related positively to (Mirels et al., 2002; Oleson et al., 2000) these variables. Therefore there may be inverse relationships between self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness and self-doubt. Based on the above suggestions and relationships of self-compassion and perception of self-doubt, it was hypothesized that self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, adaptive dimensions of self-compassion, would be associated negatively with self-doubt. It was also hypothesized that self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification, maladaptive dimensions of self-compassion, would be related positively to self-doubt.

#### Method

##### *Participants*

Participants were 308 university students (170 women, 138 men) enrolled in various undergraduate programs at Sakarya University Faculty of Education, Turkey. These programs were mathematics education ( $n=80$ ), science education ( $n=48$ ), social science education ( $n=85$ ), primary school education ( $n=52$ ), and computer and instructional technology education ( $n=43$ ). Of the participants, 83 were first-year students, 100 were second-year students, 75 were third-year students, and 50 were fourth-year student. Their ages ranged from 18 to 27 years old ( $M = 19.88$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) and GPA scores ranged from 1.90 to 3.87.

##### *Measures*

*Self-compassion Scale.* Self-compassion was measured by using Self-compassion Scale (Neff, 2003b). Turkish adaptation of this scale had been done by Akın, Akın, and Abacı (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 (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. The 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.

*Judgmental Self-doubt Scale.* Self-doubt was measured using the Judgmental Self-doubt Scale (Mirels, Greblo, & Dean, 2002). Turkish adaptation of this scale was done by Akin, Satici and Akin (2012). The Judgmental Self-doubt Scale is a 19-item self-report inventory and each item was rated on a 6-point scale (1=*strongly disagree* to 6=*strongly agree*). This scale is a summative scale, with items 14 and 18 being reversed scored. All answers given will be totaled to indicate the level of self-doubt, with a high number indicating a greater incidence of self-doubt. Results of confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the uni-dimensional model was well fit to Turkish population ( $\chi^2= 285.13$ ,  $df= 144$ , RMSEA= .059, NFI= .95, CFI= .98, IFI= .98, RFI= .95, GFI= .91, and SRMR= .050). The Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency coefficient of the scale was .90.

#### *Procedure*

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 measures, all participants were told about purposes of the study.

#### *Statistical Analysis*

In this research, multiple linear regression analysis and Pearson correlation coefficient were used to investigate the relationships between self-compassion and self-doubt. 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 Correlations*

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

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	-.37**	—					
3. Common humanity	.56**	-.24**	—				
4. Isolation	-.30**	.62**	-.16**	—			
5. Mindfulness	.71**	-.29**	.49**	-.24**	—		
6. Over-identification	-.39**	.63**	-.23**	.63**	-.36**	—	
7. Self-doubt	-.49**	.48**	-.32**	.46**	-.40*	.54**	—
Mean	15.46	12.15	11.86	10.24	13.24	10.34	55.72
Standard deviation	4.04	4.31	3.23	3.40	3.61	3.78	18.55
Alpha	.77	.85	.73	.68	.76	.80	.87

\*\* $p < .01$

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables. Self-kindness ( $r=-.40$ ,  $p<.01$ ), common humanity ( $r=-.32$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and mindfulness ( $r=-.40$ ,  $p<.01$ ) were found negatively and self-judgment ( $r=.48$ ,  $p<.01$ ), isolation ( $r=.46$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and over-identification ( $r=.54$ ,  $p<.01$ ) were found

positively associated with self-doubt. There were also significant correlations between dimensions of self-compassion.

#### *Multiple Regression Analysis*

Before applying regression, assumptions of multiple regression were checked. The data were examined for normality by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated normality of distributions of test scores for all tests in the current study. 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 outlier if the probability associated with its  $D^2$  is .001 or less (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Based on this criterion, eleven data were labeled as outliers and they were deleted. Multi-collinearity was checked by the variance inflation factors (VIF). All the VIF values were less than 10 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), which indicated that there was no multi-collinearity.

Multiple regression analysis was performed in which the dependent variable was self-doubt and the independent variables were dimensions of self-compassion (Table 2). As many of those predictor variables were dependent on each other, forward stepwise procedure, which includes one new explanatory variable at each step, specifically the most associated with the dependent variable while being, at the same time, independent of the explanatory variables already included in the model. The criteria to include the variables from the regression model were: criterion probability-of-F-to enter  $\leq .05$ .

Table 2

Summary of Forward Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Variable Predicting Self-doubt

Variables	<i>B</i>	Standart Error of B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Step 1				
Over-identification	2.647	.237	.539	11.184*
Step 2				
Over-identification	2.027	.240	.412	8.444*
Self-kindness	-1.498	.224	-.326	-6.683*
Step 3				
Over-identification	1.529	.289	.311	5.288*
Self-kindness	-1.380	.225	-.301	-6.140*
Self-judgment	.755	.251	.176	3.011*
Step 4				
Over-identification	1.294	.311	.263	4.167*
Self-kindness	-1.371	.224	-.299	-6.129*
Self-judgment	.562	.268	.131	2.098*
Isolation	.668	.334	.122	1.998*

According to the results of multiple regression analysis, summarized in Table 2, over-identification entered the equation first, accounting for 29% of the variance in predicting self-doubt ( $R^2=.29$ , adjusted  $R^2=.29$ ,  $F(1, 306)= 125,084$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Self-kindness entered on the second step accounting for an additional 9% variance ( $R^2=.38$ ,  $\Delta R^2=.09$ , adjusted  $R^2=.38$ ,  $F(2, 305)= 93,800$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Self-judgment entered on the third step accounting for an additional 2% variance ( $R^2=.40$ ,  $\Delta R^2=.02$ , adjusted  $R^2=.39$ ,  $F(3, 304)= 67,211$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Isolation entered last, accounting for an additional 1% variance ( $R^2=.41$ ,  $\Delta R^2=.01$ , adjusted  $R^2=.40$ ,  $F(4, 303)= 51,901$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Despite the initial regression design included mindfulness, common humanity, self-kindness, over-identification, isolation, and self-judgment as independent variables, the last regression models involved over-

identification, self-kindness, self-judgment, and isolation as predictors of self-doubt and accounted for 41% of the variance. The standardized beta coefficients indicated the relative influence of the variables in last model with over-identification ( $\beta = .26, p < .01$ ), self-kindness ( $\beta = -.30, p < .01$ ), self-judgment ( $\beta = .13, p < .01$ ), and isolation ( $\beta = .12, p < .01$ ) all significantly influencing self-doubt and self-kindness was strongest predictor.

### Discussion

The goal of the present study was to examine the predictive role of self-compassion on self-doubt and significant relationships were found. To our knowledge, this is the first study investigating the relationships between these two variables. As expected, self-kindness predicted self-doubt negatively. However mindfulness and common humanity did not emerge as significant predictors in the regression model. Self-kindness helps people to deal with challenging life events by behaving themselves with care and kindness and by not allowing themselves to be swept up by negative emotions (Neff, 2003a). People with self-kindness can also easily cope with the adverse effects of an array of negative experiences and since they approach themselves with warmth and kindness (Neff, 2009) when they are suffering, they can experience more positive and less negative emotions. Consistently, research shows that people who have higher self-kindness make more accurate self-appraisals (i.e., without self-enhancement or self-deprecation) than those lacking (Leary et al., 2007), suggesting that self-compassion provides the emotional safety needed to see the self clearly. In addition self-kindness removes the necessity to rely on illusions or defensiveness and requires a clear perception of one's characteristics, both good and bad. Thus individuals who have higher levels of self-kindness accept rather than deny their defects, while remaining gentle and understanding toward themselves and so they have more accurate self-perceptions (Leary et al., 2007). Conversely, self-doubtful people worry that they will fail (Oleson et al., 2000), they have more fear of negative evaluation, and they need more for approval of others to visualize themselves as a worthy person. Thus the inverse association between self-kindness and self-doubt is not surprising.

As anticipated, in the current research, self-doubt was predicted by self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification -maladaptive dimensions of self-compassion- positively. People with judgment, isolation and over-identification feel ashamed from their failures (Neff, 2003a), reject their own emotions and thoughts, ruminate on their defects (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007), become identified with and carried away by distressful feelings and thoughts towards themselves (Neff & Vonk, 2009), and often are exposed to psychological problems (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). They cannot ameliorate their negative feelings and transform them into positive feelings and vulnerable to more negative emotions such as hostility, irritability, or distress (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). In difficult times they feel isolated from the rest of humanity, thereby increasing feelings of interconnectedness. Likewise self-doubt is linked to social anxiety (Oleson et al., 2000) and this may clarify the positive associations between self-doubt and self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification.

There are several limitations of this study that should be taken into account when evaluating the findings. First, participants were university students and replication of this study for targeting other student populations should be made in order to generate a more solid relationship among the constructs examined in this study, because generalization of the results is somewhat limited. Second, as correlational statistics were utilized, no definitive statements can be made about causality. And third the data reported here for self-compassion and self-doubt are limited to self-reported data and did not include any observations of behavior.

Consequently, the present research provides important information about the predictors of self-doubt. An increment in self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification will increase self-doubt. Also encouraging the development of self-compassion should be useful 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 needs to be done to understand how self-compassion is linked to functioning.

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