Brief empirical reports

The role of self-compassion and control belief about learning in university students' self-efficacy

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the prediction of self-efficacy on the basis of self-compassion and control belief about learning. Participants included 216 university students, who were selected by multistage cluster-random sampling method. The measures of this study were the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS), Control Belief about Learning, and Self-Efficacy subscales of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ). Stepwise multiple regression revealed that while control belief about learning and mindfulness predicted self-efficacy positively, over-identification predicted self-efficacy negatively. Moreover, control belief about learning provided the largest contribution to predict self-efficacy. Correlations revealed that whilst self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness, and control belief about learning correlated positively with self-efficacy, isolation and over-identification associated negatively with self-efficacy. Surprisingly, control belief about learning not only correlated positively with self-kindness, but also related positively to self-judgment. We postulated that a cultural difference such as self-improvement motivation, which is common in interdependent cultures, may contribute to the positive relationship between self-judgment and control belief about learning. Finally, the limitations and implications of these findings were also discussed.

1. Introduction

Self-compassion, a concept based Buddhist philosophy, has been defined by Neff and McGehee (2010) as "put simply, self-compassion is compassion turned inward. Self-compassion refers to the ability to hold one's feelings of suffering with a sense of warmth, connection, and concern" (p. 226).

Neff (2003b) has operationalized self-compassion as being comprised of three main components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Although these three components are conceptually distinct, they interact substantially and can all prompt and strengthen one another (Neff, 2003b). Self-kindness, contrasted with self-judgment, refers to having a gentle and understanding attitude towards oneself instead of being relentlessly critical and judgmental. People tend to be kinder to others than themselves in instance of suffering (Neff, 2003b). Self-kindness can help in giving oneself the support and kindness one's needs. Common humanity, contrasted with isolation, involves considering one's pain and inadequacies as the part of the shared experience of human suffering instead of seeing oneself as alone and isolated in one's suffering and difficulties. Recognizing common humanity helps to view one's struggles and suffering as the shared lot of all human beings. Mindfulness, contrasted with over-identification, is a state of awareness through which one approaches one's thoughts and feelings in a nonjudgmental and open way, keeping them in perspective. In contrast, over-identification is a process by which people identify with their thought and emotions, which can lead them to lose perspective on situations and lead to adverse reactions. Over-identification can also restrain compassion toward the self: the more individuals absorb by their own emotions, the less the mental space provided to cultivate self-compassion (Neff, 2003b).

Neff, Rude, and Kirkpatrick (2007) demonstrated that self-compassion was strongly associated with optimism, happiness, positive affect, personal initiative, wisdom, curiosity and exploration, extroversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. It is also negatively associated with neuroticism and negative affect. Research has shown that the self-judgment and isolation subscales of self-compassion were predictors of symptom severity and quality of life (Van Dam, Sheppard, Forsyth, & Earleywine, 2011). Hollis-Walker and Colosimo (2011) found that mindfulness was linked to psychological well-being, conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, agreeableness, and low-neuroticism. They also showed that

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self-compassion was a significant attitudinal factor in the mindfulness–happiness relationship. Moreover, self-compassion was found to be significantly related to well-being among adolescents as well as adults. Furthermore, harmonious family functioning, maternal support, and secure attachment predicted self-compassion. Finally, self-compassion was predicted negatively by egocentrism, preoccupied and fearful attachment (Neff & McGehee, 2010).

Self-compassion has been linked to beneficial outcomes in the academic domain. For instance, research revealed significant positive correlation between self-compassion and mastery goals and negative correlation with performance goals. Self-compassion also was positively related to emotion-focused coping strategies and negatively related to avoidance-oriented strategies among student who failed in their midterm test (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005). Iskender (2009) showed that self-compassion was positively associated with self-efficacy. Williams, Stark, and Foster (2008) found that self-compassionate individuals tend to have less academic worry and procrastination tendency.

Self-efficacy is defined as an individuals' judgment of how well they can perform courses of action required to handle the prospective situation (Bandura, 1982). Self-efficacy was considered conceptually as the most central types of thoughts that affect the direction and activation of behavior (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy differs in three dimensions: generality, strength, and magnitude. Generality pertains to the range of activities or tasks for which individuals evaluate themselves efficacious. Strength refers to how determined an individual is to deal with a specific activity. The magnitude of self-efficacy refers to the actual difficulty of a specific activity or task (Bandura, 1977). It is important to note that self-efficacy beliefs vary across different domains (Zimmerman, 2000). For example, efficacy beliefs about taking a mathematic examination can be different from beliefs about taking a literature test.

Self-efficacy plays a noteworthy role in self-regulated learning. Students start learning activity in order to attain goals. Self-efficacy enhances when they feel satisfied with goal progress. Subsequently, goal attainment and increased self-efficacy motivate them to set new demanding goals. Moreover, compared with students who feel uncertain about their abilities, self-efficacious learners demonstrate more perseverance and less avoidance of challenging while encountering with difficulties and obstacles during learning activity (Schunk, 1990).

Research has shown that self-efficacy was positively correlated with learning goal orientation and internal locus of control and negatively related to performance goal orientation (Phillips & Gully, 1997). Studies demonstrated that self-efficacy could predict intrinsic motivation (McGeown et al., 2014), cognitive engagement (Walker, Greene, & Mansell, 2006), emotional and physical well-being (Hochhausen et al., 2007), and sexual activity (Steinke, Wright, Chung, & Moser, 2008).

Control belief about learning refers to students' beliefs about the contingency between their behaviors and their performance. Control belief about learning concerns how much perceived control one has to accomplish positive and desired outcomes. Perceiving internal control leads to higher persistence and expectation for attaining goals; in contrast, attributing control to the external factors such as teachers, may result in lower expectations of achievement (Pintrich, 2003). For instance, if students think their efforts can influence their exam results regardless of their actual ability and aptitude, they will be more likely to study effectively. On the other hand, if students believe that studying hard cannot make a difference to the exam's result, then they will be less likely to study for the exam. In this framework, Connell (1985) distinguished three aspects of control belief that pertain to students' control sources: an internal source, an external source or powerful

others, and an unknown source. It is postulated that students with internal source of control present higher level of performance in comparison with students with external or powerful others and unknown sources of control belief.

Individuals may give up trying if they become convinced that there is no relation between their behavior and results. Furthermore, they may demonstrate pessimism, procrastination, and poor performance (McKean, 1994). In such a situation, they are showing the features of learned helplessness defined by Maier and Seligman (1976) as a condition in which an individual recognizes that no action changes prospective outcomes. They also indicated that learned helplessness results in motivational, cognitive, and emotional deficits. In educational context, Butkowsky and Willows (1980) found characteristics of learned helplessness in children with reading difficulties since they showed lack of perseverance and considered success out of their own control.

Skinner, Wellborn, and Connell (1990) highlighted the role of teachers in enhancing children's perceived control in school settings. They found that providing the contingency and involvement by teacher can have a positive effect on children's perceived control. Contingency in their study refers to providing consistent feedback and clear guidelines by teacher for student's behavior in the context of school activities. Involvement refers to the extent to which teachers care about the student's interests and opinions. Moreover, they demonstrated that academic performance is affected by perceived control through increasing or reducing active engagement in learning activities. Ruthig, Haynes, Stupnisky, and Perry (2009) found that perceived academic control mediates the protective effects of optimism and social support against poor psychological health among freshmen students. Control belief about learning can also predict academic procrastination (Saddler & Buley, 1999), and students' metacognitive strategy use (Sungur, 2007), which refers to planning, monitoring, and regulating one's own cognition (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991).

Although the role of well-being as a facilitator of learning received a special attention recently (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009), given the strong relationship between self-compassion and well-being (Neely, Schallert, Mohammed, Roberts, & Chen, 2009), research on the role of self-compassion in educational context is still new and more research in this area is necessary. Also, regarding the cultural differences in experiencing self-compassion (Neff, Pisitsungkagarn, & Hsieh, 2008), studying self-compassion in different cultures may help to understand this construct better. Therefore, we want to contribute to fill these gaps by studying the role of self-compassion and control belief about learning in Iranian students' self-efficacy.

This study was conducted to investigate the prediction of self-efficacy on the basis of self-compassion components and control belief about learning. Because self-compassion was positively correlated with perceived competence and negatively related to fear of failure (Neff et al., 2005), we expect individuals who take an understanding attitude towards themselves, consider their pain and shortcomings as the part of the shared experience of human suffering, and evaluate their competence in a nonjudgmental and open way to be able to give themselves support and kindness when they are unsuccessful. Therefore, we wanted to determine if three components of self-compassion would predict self-efficacy.

Given Schunk (1982) suggestion that effort attributional feedback increases percepts of self-efficacy, we expect that students who believe that their effort can change the outcomes are more likely to perceive themselves as capable of performing the tasks. Therefore, we wanted to determine if control belief about learning would predict self-efficacy.

In addition, we were interested in examining the relationship between self-compassion components, self-efficacy and control belief about learning. Perhaps self-compassionate students