



## Self-compassion as a moderator of the relationship between academic burn-out and psychological health in Korean cyber university students

Lee Woo Kyeong\*

Department of Counseling Psychology, Seoul Cyber University, 193-15, Mia-dong, Gangbuk-gu, Seoul 142-700, Republic of Korea

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### ABSTRACTS

The moderating effect of self-compassion was examined in the relationship between academic burden and psychological health. The participants were students ( $N = 350$ ) from a cyber university in Korea. At the beginning of the fall 2011 semester, the participants were surveyed using items from the academic burn-out, self-compassion, depression, and psychological well-being measures. Multiple regression analysis showed that self-compassion moderated the relationship between academic burn-out and psychological well-being. And self-compassion also moderated the relationship between academic burn-out and depression. This study presents an empirical framework for the research through investigating the relationship among academic burden, self-compassion, and psychological health for cyber university students.

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### 1. Introduction

College life has many factors challenging students' psychological well-being, demanding that they manage academic goals as well as their emotional reactions to both academic success and frustration (Schneiderman, Ironson, & Siegel, 2005; Towbes & Cohen, 1996). Besides traditional learning, distance education courses such as e-learning have recently become widespread and are meeting the needs of many adult learners.

Korea's cyber universities, which started with nine universities and 6,220 students in 2001, are now developing at an incredible rate, awarding about 92,188 undergraduate degrees in February of 2010 (Korean Ministry of Education, Science, & Technology, 2010). Now a total of 21 cyber universities began to establish their identities and get to obtain legal status as higher educational organizations. The 54.7% of the Korean cyber university undergraduate students are adult learners in their thirties and forties. And the majority of the students (70.4%) have jobs (Ministry of Education, Science (2010). Therefore, these adult students suffer from various psychological distress and burdens especially inherent in both work and academic pursuit.

Many psychologists have endeavored to find factors buffering various forms of psychological distress. Recently, interest in the construct of self-compassion has been fueled by a larger trend towards integrating Buddhist constructs such as mindfulness with western psychological approaches. According to the definition proposed by Neff (2003a; 2003b), self-compassion entails three main

components which overlap and mutually interact: self-kindness versus self-judgment, feelings of common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification.

The construct of self-compassion offers an alternative approach to psychological well-being. Self-compassion can be a powerful predictor of psychological well-being and mental health (Neff, 2003b). It shows positive association with markers of psychological well-being, such as self-acceptance, life satisfaction, social connectedness, self-esteem, mindfulness, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, reflective and affective wisdom, curiosity and exploration in life, and happiness and optimism (Neff, 2003b). It has also demonstrated negative associations with self-criticism, depression, anxiety, rumination, thought suppression, and neurotic perfectionism (Kirkpatrick, 2005). Increased self-compassion has been found to predict enhanced psychological health over time (Gilbert & Procter, 2006), and to explain reduced stress following participation in a widely implemented stress-reduction program (Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005).

Self-compassion has been found to be positively related to mastery goals and negatively associated with performance goals, a relationship that was mediated by the lesser fear of failure and greater perceived competence. Self-compassion has also been found to have a positive correlation with academic success (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005).

In addition to these results, self-compassion can predict emotional and cognitive reactions to negative events in everyday life. It buffers people against negative self-feelings when imagining distressing social events, and moderates negative emotions after receiving ambivalent feedback, particularly for those who have low self-esteem. Researchers found that self-compassion predicted

\* Tel.: +82 02 944 5152.

E-mail address: [wisemind96@iscu.ac.kr](mailto:wisemind96@iscu.ac.kr)

emotional and cognitive reactions to negative events in everyday life and also that self-compassion buffered people against negative self-feelings when imagining distressing social events (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007). Leary et al. (2007) suggest that self-compassion attenuates people's reactions to negative events.

Findings using Neff's self-compassion scale with college students (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007) suggest that it is a strong and unique predictor of well-being, negatively related to depression and anxiety, and positively related to wisdom, happiness, optimism, extraversion and conscientiousness.

Taken together, our current study goals were to introduce self-compassion as a factor that might contribute to cyber university undergraduate students' well-being. We conducted this study to address whether students' psychological health would be moderated by self-compassion when faced with academic burn-out. Because the research on self-compassion is relatively new, studies that examine the relationships between self-compassion and psychological variables, academic burn-out, and psychological well-being are needed. The main reason for using self-compassion as a moderator in this study is that recent reviews of the research literature suggest that self-esteem may not be the panacea it is made out to be (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Crocker & Park, 2004). For example, self-esteem appears to be the result rather than the cause of improved academic performance (Baumeister et al., 2003). Another reason is that the concept of self-compassion is relatively new and study of this issue is in its infancy in Korea.

The aim in this research was to explore the moderating effects of self-compassion on the relationship between academic burn-out and psychological health. Being a supposedly stable cognitive and emotional orientation towards negative life experiences (Neff, 2003a, 2003b), self-compassion will reduce negative effects of academic burn-out on psychological health. Therefore, it is hypothesized that self-compassion may moderate the relationship between academic burn-out and psychological health. As indicators of psychological health, the authors used the widespread concepts of psychological well-being and depressive symptoms.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Study participants were 350 university students who were taking one of several undergraduate courses in counseling psychology (80 men, 270 women) at the Seoul Cyber University during the 2011 fall academic semester. Descriptive statistics of the subjects are presented in Table 1. 76.9% of the subjects were female and 22.8% were male. Mean age of the sample was 38.61 years ( $SD = 9.58$  years) old.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey (MBI-SS)

The authors used a 15-item version of the MBI-SS (Schaufeli, Martez, Marques Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002) to assess the level of stress or burn-out among students. In the present study, we used a version of the scale that had been translated into Korean (Bae, 2007). Bae reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .89.

#### 2.2.2. Self-Compassion Scale (SCS)

The SCS (Neff, 2003a) is a 26-item questionnaire designed to measure three components of self-compassion: self-kindness (being kind and understanding toward oneself rather than harshly self-critical), common humanity (viewing one's negative experiences as a normal part of the human condition), and mindful

**Table 1**  
Demographic variables.

Variables		Frequency (%), year
Gender	Male	80 (22.8%)
	Female	270 (76.9%)
Age		38.61 (9.58 year)
Grade	1st	50 (14.3%)
	2nd	59 (16.9%)
	3rd	150 (42.8%)
	4th	91 (26%)
Occupation	Professional	103 (29.4%)
	Clerical work	89 (25.7%)
	Full time wife	69 (19.7%)
	Others	89 (25.4%)
Religion	Christian	212 (60.5%)
	Buddhism	61 (17.4%)
	Mo religion	77 (22.1%)

acceptance (holding painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness rather than over-identifying with them). Neff reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .92. In the present study, we used a version of the scale that had been translated into Korean (Kim, Yi, Cho, Chai, & Lee, 2008). Kim et al. reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .87.

#### 2.2.3. Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)

The BDI (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961) is a self-rated scale that was developed to assess the severity of depression. Twenty-one items are rated on a 4-point scale with the total score obtained from the sum of all items. Lee and Song (1991) assessed the validity and the reliability of the Korean version of the scale. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the Korean version of the BDI was .92.

#### 2.2.4. Psychological Well-Being (PWB)

The PWB (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) is a self-report inventory that measures six dimensions of psychological well-being, such as environmental mastery, self-acceptance, purpose in life, and personal growth. We used the reduced 18-item version of the scale that had been translated into Korean (Kim et al., 2008). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the Korean version of the PWB was .89.

### 2.3. Procedure

This research was conducted during the fall semester of the 2011 academic year. The measures were administered to students via the internet during class periods. Permission for students' participation was obtained from the relevant heads of departments, and students participated voluntarily in the research. Completion of the questionnaires was anonymous and there was a guarantee of confidentiality. Prior to administration of the measures, all participants were told about the purposes of the study.

## 3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using multiple regression. Before conducting the regressions, we examined scatter plots of the data and tested for normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Results indicated that the assumptions needed for regression were met. All statistics were tested at an alpha level of .05. SPSS/PC version 18 was used for statistical analysis.

## 4. Results

The correlations among study variables are presented in Table 2. As expected, inter-correlations showed that academic burn-out

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