# The contribution of self-compassion and compassion to others to students' emotions and project commitment when experiencing conflict in group projects

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## ABSTRACT

Group project assignments have become popular in college-level instruction, making group chemistry and harmony crucial for students' learning. Because the nature of group projects highlights collaborative work, it is common for students to experience conflict among team members for various reasons, thereby hindering their learning and motivation to participate in the project. Such negative motivational consequences of what we termed *intragroup conflict* may be mitigated by group members' responses to the conflict. One such response may be a sense of compassion, either directed toward others or toward the self. This study explored the role of compassion (self-compassion and compassion to others) in college students' motivational and emotional experiences when intragroup conflict among team members was perceived. From an initial model of students' various motivational goals for the group project, measures of intragroup conflict (in a second step) and of self-compassion and compassion to others (in a third step) were added to predict students' project commitment and emotions. Three hierarchical multiple regressions showed that goals explained a significant amount of variance in project commitment and positive and negative emotions. A measure of conflict improved predictions significantly as did adding measures of self-compassion and compassion to others. The final model for project commitment showed that significant contributors were intragroup conflict (in a negative direction) and compassion to others (positive direction). Positive emotions were predicted only by self-compassion, whereas negative emotions were predicted by intragroup conflict (positively), self-compassion (negatively), and compassion to others (negatively).

## 1. Introduction

It is a common experience for college students to encounter some form of group project assignment making up an important component of a course, and in previous work, we studied how college students responded to this ubiquitous classroom activity (Schallert et al., 2016; Park, Choe, Schallert, & Forbis, 2017). With an interest in how students' goals influence their learning experience, we found that students' commitment to their group project and the positive and negative emotions experienced while accomplishing the project were predicted by the kinds of motivational and social goals they had for the project. By goals, we meant both the achievement orientation goals of Dweck's (1986) theory (mastery/learning vs performance goals) as well as social goals for group harmony and making friends. Specifically, project commitment was predicted by several motivational goals (e.g., wanting to do better than others in the group or wanting the group to do better than other groups). Similarly, positive and negative emotions

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were associated with these individual and group motivational goals and with students' social goals for the group project (e.g., wanting to make friends, wanting group members to work well together). When we added a measure of intraindividual conflict, by which we meant conflict between the group project and other obligations a person faces, there was a small but significant increase to the prediction of project commitment and a large change to the prediction of negative emotions. In a second project that included the same variables but now with a measure of intragroup conflict, that is, conflict among group members, results indicated that intragroup conflict improved the prediction of project commitment and negative emotions (Park et al., 2017).

These earlier findings, that conflict was a significant contributor to emotions and to project commitment, led to a more detailed view of how students approach group projects in their college coursework. For this study, we were interested in whether compassion, both toward others and toward the self, would contribute to predicting project commitment and positive and negative emotions beyond the contribution of a measure of intragroup conflict. Our interest in compassion came from considering why some students are more tolerant of the individual differences group members bring to a project whereas others report almost visceral responses to having their own vision for an academic task blocked by fellow group members' contributions (or lack thereof) to a project and by encountering conflict in group dynamics.

## 2. Relevant literature

Building on our previous two studies, the current study continues to examine how students' motivational goal orientations and their experiences of intragroup conflict predict their emotions and project commitment during the group projects they encounter as part of college coursework. With these as background, our focus was on how two other variables, compassion to others and to the self, would reduce the detrimental effects of intragroup conflict and maladaptive goals on project commitment and student emotions. Because they are newer constructs being added to the literature on students' experience in group projects, we begin by describing the constructs of compassion to self and others. Next, we move to the research on groups, with a focus on the influence of intragroup conflict and of goals group members may bring into a group project. We finish our literature review with work relevant to the outcome variables we were testing, academic emotions and project commitment.

### 2.1. Compassion to self and others

#### 2.1.1. Compassion to others

The construct of *compassion*, in the writings of the Dalai Lama (1995), refers to an openness to and understanding of the suffering of others with a commitment to help them. Psychological views of compassion have defined it as perceiving others' pain and feeling goodwill towards them, and as linked to perceiving, giving, and receiving social support (Cosley, McCoy, Saslow, & Epel, 2010; Crocker & Canevello, 2008). As Neff (2003) explained, compassion occurs when one recognizes another person is in pain, extends feelings of kindness towards them, and recognizes a shared humanity with the person in trouble.

Empirical research on compassion to others includes the development of a compassion scale to measure trait levels of the construct. This scale assesses individuals' tendency to be mindful of and kind towards others experiencing difficulty and to recognize a shared human experience (Pommier, 2010). Cosley et al. (2010) found that compassion predicted an increased ability to receive social support during socially stressful situations. Compassion is also associated with perceptions of similarity between the self and others, particularly when others are perceived to be vulnerable, with trait levels of compassion correlated with perceptions of being similar to specific social groups as well as to "others" in general (Oveis, Horberg, & Keltner, 2010).

Relevant to our study, researchers have examined compassion in academic environments. For example, Crocker and Canevello (2008) found that college freshmen who reported more compassionate goals for their friendships at the beginning of the semester (e.g., "make a positive difference in someone's life") and fewer self-image goals (e.g., "avoid being rejected by others") perceived themselves to have more social support at the end of the semester and to have formed closer connections with their friends. In contrast, students who started the semester with more self-image goals felt lonelier and experienced more conflict in their relationships throughout the semester. Compassion facilitates perceiving and benefiting from social support, which may lead to a decrease in the negative emotions that arise from goal conflict when working on collaborative projects, and an increase in positive emotions while working with others. Perceiving more similarity between the self and others may also be linked to a higher level of commitment to the collective endeavors in a group project.

#### 2.1.2. Self-compassion

A recent development in the literature on compassion is the work on *self-compassion*, described as "compassion turned inward," which includes being present to one's own pain or suffering (mindfulness), kind to oneself while feeling inadequate (self-kindness), and feeling connected to others in moments of difficulty (common humanity) (Neff, 2003). Neff explained these three aspects of self-compassion as having associated opposite qualities, with mindfulness set against avoidance and rumination, what she termed *over-identification*, self-kindness as opposed to self-judgment, and common humanity as opposed to feeling isolated from others.

In the academic domain, Neff, Hsieh, and Dejitterat (2005) reported that self-compassion was positively related to learning goals (that is, goals to learn as much as possible from an activity), and negatively related to performance avoidance goals (i.e., self-protective goals such as avoiding embarrassing oneself). These relationships were mediated by lower fear of failure and higher perceptions of competence of students with higher levels of self-compassion. It is likely that because self-compassion facilitates positive feelings of self-worth that are not contingent on comparisons to others or on external successes, self-compassionate individuals are more likely to pursue learning goals and less likely to fear mistakes. Zhang, Lou, Che, and Dwan (2016) similarly found