A Self-Compassionate Approach to Academic Evaluation

Sophie D.C. Garcia

University of British Columbia

Author Note

Sophie Garcia is a third year undergraduate student in the department of psychology. This paper

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Norenzayan.

Introduction

Self-esteem, a self-construct that refers to the overall positive or negative evaluation people have of themselves (Gilovich, Keltner, Chen, & Nisbett, 2018), extends to several aspects of life. It is often viewed as a stable trait (Gilovich et al., 2018), which may be why it can heavily influence our perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs. In particular, I believe that outlooks on self-esteem can have a significant impact on academic performance.

Some self-constructs within the dimension of self-esteem, such as self-enhancement, have potential negative consequences. Self-enhancement, viewing oneself positively while reducing negative aspects of oneself, may include difficulty handling criticism as well as egocentricity and narcissism (Norenzayan, 2019). On the other hand, self-improvement, recognizing imperfections in oneself and striving to improve them, may be linked to feelings of discontentment and or anxiety (Norenzayan, 2019). Perhaps a more medial self-construct is preferable. Dr. Kristen Neff has done ample research on the advantages of self-compassion as a self-construct and the results appear to be exceptionally beneficial, including in academic contexts.

To be self-compassionate is to acknowledge one's downfalls and respond mindfully with consideration and understanding, which includes recognizing that we are human and we

make mistakes (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005, p. 264). It is important to note that, according to

Neff (2005), self-compassion does not mean lowering one's individual standards, rather that

"performance evaluations are not personalized, and that the self is not valued according to the

outcome of evaluations" (p. 265). Therefore, academic results do not reflect who we are, nor do

they reflect our innate abilities. This approach may give off the impression that it equates to

being over-forgiving in light of failure, however, a person may actually be better able to bounce

back in the face of adversity due to the lack of internalization surrounding this approach. Overall,

self-compassion is about acceptance, depersonalization, and of course, compassion for oneself.

Self-compassion shares aspects of other beneficial perspectives such as the growth

mindset. The growth mindset stresses the idea that intelligence is not fixed or unchangeable and

it can be evolved and expanded with effort (Dweck, 2019, p. 21). Self-compassion embodies a

similar lack of internalization in regards to intelligence and suggests that the process is more

important than the result. Carol Dweck (2019), a psychology professor at Stanford University,

suggests that "a growth mindset can lead students to take on more challenges . . . or persist in the

face of setbacks" (p. 21). Self-compassion connects to this mindset by emphasizing a lack of

internalization of one's abilities as well as prioritizing personal, and in this case, academic

growth rather than purely results.

My Experience

During my time at university I have struggled to cope with the fact that, despite

continually improving my time management skills and modifying my study strategies, I usually

do not achieve the grades that I strive for. In my first two years I found it extremely difficult to

come to terms with this since I flourished in many areas of high school and rarely faced hardship

when it came to grades. Due to this lack of academic adversity, when I entered university I found

myself, in hindsight, adopting a mindset that involved plenty of self-loathing and self-blame. In

particular, I would find myself grieving my failures for days, rather than moving on and working

harder for the next assignment or exam.

Application

Since discovering the progressive mindset of self-compassion, I have made an

immense effort to adjust my outlook on academic evaluation. The first step I took was to be

gentler to myself. In response to academic adversity, I confided in compassionate friends and did

my best to really listen to what they were saying rather than brush off their advice and internalize

my misfortune. Attempting to take on an external outlook of yourself, as mentioned previously,

is a particularly helpful way to begin approaching self-compassion. I also tried to take these

experiences as an opportunity to learn, keeping in mind that this was a chance for me to improve.

Using aversive situations as an opportunity to learn from employs the growth mindset, which

goes hand-in-hand with self-compassion. So far, these steps in the direction of self-compassion

have produced a noticeable increase in resilience, however, I still struggle with my tendency to

allow hindsight bias to emerge after receiving evaluations. I go into an exam with the mindset

that I did my best to prepare for it, and even after the exam, I maintain the same mindset I

brought in with me. The real problem lies much later, once the results come out. After seeing that

I did not do as well as anticipated, I begin to think that I could have done a lot more preparation

before the exam. This is a different problem than going into an exam feeling prepared and

coming out of it with feelings of defeat. The difference is that the grade I received is dictating

how I feel, as opposed to taking the test and realizing the material was much harder than what I

had prepared for. I am still seeking a way to address this obstacle.

Furthermore, exploration in this area appears to be promising thus far. A study on

undergraduate students found that those who took on a self-compassionate approach were more

inclined to utilize coping strategies when facing academic adversity (Neff et al., 2005, p. 284).

Moreover, researchers have found that studies on programs for students that teach a growth

mindset indicate that the mindset can be learned and implemented with perhaps long-lasting

results (Dweck, 2019, p. 21). The possible longevity of learned self-compassion is particularly

optimistic since this approach may be applicable in many disciplines. Beyond academics, self-compassion appears to lend itself useful to mental health. Warren et al. (2016) state that:

> Greater self-compassion consistently has been associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety, with a large effect size. Of course, central to self-compassion is the lack of self-criticism, but self-compassion still protects against anxiety and depression when controlling for self-criticism and negative affect (p. 24).

Perhaps more research will uncover more areas where self-compassion is a favourable approach.

Conclusion

Identifying strategies that work best for academic performance is a continual challenge. There are no clear solutions and there likely never will be any, largely because different strategies work best for different people. Despite this, there are self-constructs that have greater pros and fewer cons than others. Self-compassion is an example of a construct with many benefits and few — if any —negative side effects. What is there to lose besides the tendency we have to overly self-criticize? We need to be kinder to ourselves.

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