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Fear of Compassion and Big Five Personality Traits in College Students

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ABSTRACT

Compassion and self-compassion have significant benefits for well-being and mental health. Recent literature has demonstrated that some individuals experience fear when receiving compassion from oneself or others. Fear of compassion from oneself, from others, and for others are separate but related constructs that have been strongly linked to self-criticism, depression, anxiety, and stress among college students. The present study examines how fears of compassion (measured by the Fear of Compassion scales) relate to Big Five personality traits (measured by the NEO Five Factor Inventory; Costa & McCrae, 1992) in college students. Bivariate correlational analyses revealed fear of compassion to be correlated positively with neuroticism and negatively with extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. These findings add to the literature in understanding which individuals harbor fear of compassion. Clinical implications and recommendations are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Fear of compassion; personality; self-compassion; college students; university counseling

Self-compassion is “unconditional kindness and comfort while embracing the human experience, difficult as it is” (Neff, 2011, p. 12). Self-compassionate individuals are kind to themselves, view their experiences as part of being human, and remain conscious of their difficult thoughts and emotions without being absorbed in them (Neff, 2003). Cultivating self-compassion helps students bolster emotional well-being and buffer against mental distress. For instance, self-compassion is negatively associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms and positively associated with life satisfaction in college students (Neff, 2011). It is also positively associated with wisdom, happiness, and optimism in college students (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). New college students with higher levels of self-compassion endorse less homesickness, fewer depressive symptoms, and more satisfaction with their college during the adjustment process (Terry et al., 2013). Self-compassion shields college students in situations involving shame, rejection, and disappointment (Leary et al., 2007). Self-compassion is also adaptive to the academic functioning of

college students by leading to higher internal motivation, lower fear of failure, and healthier coping behaviors after academic difficulties (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejjitterat, 2005).

However, some individuals are more resistant to treating themselves with compassion (Gilbert, 2000). Fear of compassion from oneself, from others, and for others are separate but related constructs that have been strongly linked to self-criticism, depression, anxiety, and stress in the college student population (Gilbert et al., 2012; Gilbert, McEwan, Matos, & Ravis, 2011). Despite the importance of affection, care, and warmth for physical and mental health (Depue & Morrone-Strupinsky, 2005; Gilbert, 2009), individuals fearing compassion may have aversive reactions to compassion (Gilbert, 2000), leading them to actively resist feeling, providing, or receiving it. Reasons for fearing compassion include fears of making oneself vulnerable to emotional pain and rejection, fears of losing one's motivation or competitive edge, fears of becoming too dependent on compassion, fears of losing an important aspect of one's identity, fears of losing an oft used coping strategy, fears of becoming less likeable, and feelings of inadequacy, shame, and unworthiness (Gilbert et al., 2011). Fear of compassion can be problematic for college counseling clinicians due to how it may affect the therapy process. For instance, in a sample of college students with anxiety, fear of compassion was related to treatment ambivalence and negative expectations for treatment (Merrit & Purdon, 2021).

The Five Factor Model of personality (FFM; McCrae & Costa, 1987) hierarchically organizes personality traits on five dimensions: Extraversion (E), Agreeableness (A), Openness to Experience (O), Conscientiousness (C), and Neuroticism (N). Relationships have been found between high levels of self-compassion and extroversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, as well as an inverse relationship between self-compassion and neuroticism (Neff et al., 2007). However, no published study has yet examined the associations among fear of compassion and these personality traits, which is the purpose of the current study. Fear of compassion is characterized by a fear of positive emotions that are likely to be represented in FFM dimensions (Arieti & Bemporad, 1980; Gilbert, 2010; Rockliff, Gilbert, McEwan, Lightman, & Glover, 2008). For example, Gilbert et al. (2011) defined fear of compassion specifically as a fear of the affiliative behavior that is characteristic of extroverted individuals. Additionally, the suppression of emotion-expressive behavior has previously been linked to lower scores on trait extroversion (Gross & John, 2003). Fear of compassion was therefore hypothesized to negatively correlate with trait extroversion in the current study.

Furthermore, fear of compassion is characterized by the presence of fearful emotions and produces a sense of threat rather than positive emotional response to affiliative emotions from the self or others (Gilbert et al., 2011). Fear of compassion is associated with anxiety and depression, and those with

high fear of compassion also experience the heightened levels of negative affect which are strongly linked to trait neuroticism (Gilbert et al., 2011). Among the traits in the FFM, self-compassion has exhibited the strongest relationship with neuroticism, such that those high in self-compassion are low in neuroticism (Neff et al., 2007). Fear of compassion was therefore hypothesized to positively correlate with neuroticism in the current study.

In terms of agreeableness, a positive correlation has been found between self-compassion and agreeableness (Neff et al., 2007). Neff (2003) proposes that the kind, interconnected, and emotionally healthy orientation among self-compassionate individuals may be associated with the ability to get along well with others. Fear of compassion for self, from others, and for others are each interrelated (Gilbert et al., 2011) such that those who fear compassion from the self and others also fear compassion for others. Thus, it can be expected that individuals fearing compassion would yield lower scores on trait agreeableness. Fear of compassion was therefore hypothesized to negatively correlate with agreeableness in the current study.

Lastly, self-compassion has been associated with conscientiousness. Neff et al. (2007) suggested that the emotional stability found among self-compassionate individuals may allow them to engage in more responsible behavior. Conscientiousness and mindfulness have been found to be associated (Gilbert, 2009), and the mindful component of self-compassion may be similar to conscientiousness as defined by the FFM. Since fear of compassion is linked to low self-compassion (Gilbert et al., 2011) and low mindfulness (Gilbert et al., 2012), fear of compassion was hypothesized to negatively correlate with conscientiousness in the present study.

Fear of compassion was not predicted to display a relationship with openness to experience, consistent with the previously demonstrated absence of a relationship between self-compassion and openness (Neff et al., 2007). In sum, fear of compassion was hypothesized to exhibit a positive relationship with neuroticism, as well as negative relationships with conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extroversion. These potential linkages may help further illuminate the inner experience and functioning among those who harbor fear of compassion. Additionally, these findings may help college counseling clinicians identify which clients may demonstrate ambivalence and negative expectations for treatment (Merrit & Purdon, 2021) and initiate early discussion about expectations and potential barriers to treatment.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from 204 undergraduate students at a midsize public university in the northeastern United States, which exceeded the 200

participants sought based on the power analysis. Among the participants, 115 identified as female (56.4%), 87 as male (42.6%), and 2 as other gender (1.0%). The average age of participants was 19.1 years ($SD = 1.07$), with a range of 18 to 24 years. Information on race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation is not available for participants due to technology issues during data collection. All participants with complete data were included in the analysis on a scale-by-scale basis. For example, the data from a participant who omitted one or more items on the fear of compassion for others scale would not be included in the analysis, whereas completed data from the same participant on the fear of self-compassion scale would be included in the analysis.

Measures

Fear of compassion scales

The Fear of Compassion Scales (Gilbert et al., 2011) are three self-report scales designed to measure fear of compassion for self (15 items), from others (13 items), and for others (10 items). On the Fear of Compassion for Others scale, participants rate their degree of agreement with statements about expressing kindness and compassion toward others using a scale of 0 (don't agree at all) to 4 (completely agree). Sample items include, "Being too compassionate makes people soft and easy to take advantage of," and "I fear that if I am compassionate, some people will become too dependent on me." Good internal consistency for this scale has been demonstrated (Gilbert et al., 2012, 2011). On the Fear of Compassion from Others scale, participants rate their degree of agreement with statements about wanting and accepting kindness and compassion from others using a scale of 0 (don't agree at all) to 4 (completely agree). Sample items include, "Feelings of kindness from others are somehow frightening," and "When people are kind and compassionate towards me, I feel anxious or embarrassed." This scale has also received support for good internal consistency (Gilbert, McEwan, Catarino, Baião, & Palmeira, 2014; Gilbert et al., 2011). Lastly, on the Fear of Self-Compassion scale, participants rate their degree of agreement with statements about expressing kindness and compassion toward oneself using a scale of 0 (don't agree at all) to 4 (completely agree). Sample items include, "If I really think about being kind and gentle with myself it makes me sad" and "I fear that if I become too compassionate to myself, I will lose my self-criticism and my flaws will show." Prior studies have found good internal consistency of these scales (Gilbert et al., 2014, 2011). In the current study, the internal consistency coefficients were .86 (Fear of Compassion for Others), .90 (Fear of Compassion from Others), and .94 (Fear of Self-Compassion).

NEO five factor inventory

The NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992) is a self-report measure of the personality traits of the Five Factor Model and uses

a five-point Likert scale for item response, ranging from one to five. Twelve items are used to measure each of the five traits. Sample items include “I often feel tense and jittery” and “I work hard to accomplish my goals” for Neuroticism and Conscientiousness, respectively. It has demonstrated good test-retest reliability (Robins, Fraley, Roberts, & Trzesniewski, 2001) and internal consistency (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The NEO-FFI is among the most widely used measures of FFM traits (Zillig, Hemenover, & Dienstbier, 2002). It has demonstrated strong internal consistency when applied to a sample of university students (Anisi, Majdiyan, Joshanloo, & Ghoharikamel, 2011). In the current study, the internal consistency coefficients were .83 (N), .85 (E), .73 (O), .79 (A), and .83 (C).

Procedure

Study recruitment information was posted on the Psychology Research Participation System of the university after obtaining approval (#17-101) by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were undergraduate students taking an introductory level psychology course and were able to earn credit toward the course’s research requirement via their participation in the study. Participants were scheduled to come to a laboratory setting and utilized an online survey system, Qualtrics, to provide their responses. Upon agreeing to participate, students completed a consent form, demographic measure, and study instruments. Participants followed an anonymous link to respond to the study’s survey measures, which were counterbalanced. Following participation, they received a printed debriefing form and list of mental health resources. Information from respondents was stored anonymously and electronically.

Data analysis

Identifying information was separated from participant responses to ensure confidentiality. Qualtrics responses were downloaded to an Excel file which is readable by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the software through which the final analyses were conducted. Hypothesized relationships between fear of compassion and personality variables were tested via bivariate correlations, of which 15 were conducted in total.

Results

Descriptive analyses

The subscale scores (see [Table 1](#)) for the fear of compassion for others, fear of compassion from others, and fear of self-compassion were computed into

sums and converted to mean scores. Means and standard deviations for this undergraduate sample were consistent with those previously reported (e.g., Gilbert et al., 2012, 2011). No gender differences were found for any of the fear of compassion scales via one-way ANOVA (see Table 2). The subscale scores (see Table 3) for neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were computed into sums and converted to mean scores. Means and standard deviations for this undergraduate sample were also consistent with those previously reported (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1992). Strong and moderate correlations were found among the fear of compassion scales. Fear of compassion for others correlated significantly and positively with fear of compassion from others and fear of self-compassion, and fear of compassion from others also exhibited a significant positive correlation with fear of self-compassion (see Table 4). Consistent with prior research (Gilbert et al., 2011), these data suggest that each is a conceptually and empirically unique but related variable.

Main analyses

To test hypotheses regarding the relationship between fear of compassion and personality variables, a series of Pearson's correlations were performed (see Table 5). As predicted, neuroticism showed a significant positive association with fear of compassion for others, fear of compassion from others, and fear of

Table 1. Means, SD, & reliability coefficients of the fear of compassion scales.

Subscale	N	M	SD	Cronbach's α
FOC For Others	198	2.06	.74	.86
FOC From Others	189	1.32	.73	.90
FOSC	191	1.11	.82	.94

FOC For = fear of compassion for others; FOC From = fear of compassion from others; FOSC = fear of self-compassion.

Table 2. Mean scores & one-way ANOVA on fear of compassion scales by gender.

	Female (N = 115)	Male (N = 87)	Non-binary (N = 2)	F
FOC For	2.01 (<i>SD</i> = .748)	2.13 (<i>SD</i> = .736)	2.00 (<i>SD</i> = .566)	.682 (p = .507)
FOC From	1.35 (<i>SD</i> = .761)	1.27 (<i>SD</i> = .698)	1.46 (<i>SD</i> = .218)	.279 (p = .757)
FOSC	1.06 (<i>SD</i> = .900)	1.18 (<i>SD</i> = .710)	0.63 (<i>SD</i> = .047)	.842 (p = .432)

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. FOC For = fear of compassion for others; FOC From = fear of compassion from others; FOSC = fear of self-compassion

Table 3. Means, SD, & reliability coefficients of the NEO-FFI-3.

Subscale	N	M	SD	Cronbach's α
Neuroticism	197	2.13	.70	.83
Extraversion	191	2.37	.62	.85
Openness	195	2.44	.54	.73
Agreeableness	195	2.49	.57	.79
Conscientiousness	188	2.38	.56	.83

Table 4. Bivariate correlations among fear of compassion scales.

	FOC For	FOC From	FOSC
FOC For	-	.506 **	.377**
FOC From	.506**	-	.705**
FOSC	.377**	.705**	-

*p < .05. **p < .01. FOC For = fear of compassion for others; FOC From = fear of compassion from others; FOSC = fear of self-compassion

Table 5. Bivariate correlations among fear of compassion scales and factors of NEO-FFI-3.

	FOC For	FOC From	FOSC
Neuroticism	.239**	.375**	.412**
Extraversion	-.070	-.215**	-.172**
Openness	-.041	.107	.096
Agreeableness	-.149*	-.260**	-.310**
Conscientiousness	.071	-.183*	-.257**

*p < .05. **p < .01. FOC For = fear of compassion for others; FOC From = fear of compassion from others; FOSC = fear of self-compassion

self-compassion. Extroversion showed a significant negative association with fear of compassion from others and with fear of self-compassion, consistent with hypotheses. The hypothesized negative relationship between extroversion and fear of compassion for others, however, was not supported. No relationship was predicted between openness and the three fear of compassion scales, and indeed no significant association among them was found. Agreeableness demonstrated a significant negative association with fear of compassion for others, fear of compassion from others, and fear of self-compassion, consistent with hypotheses. Lastly, the hypothesized negative relationships between conscientiousness and fear of compassion from others and fear of self-compassion were supported, whereas that between conscientiousness and fear of compassion for others was not supported. Most of the significant correlations are considered small, whereas medium correlations were found between fear of self-compassion and both neuroticism and agreeableness, as well as between fear of compassion from others and neuroticism (Cohen, 1988, 1992).

Discussion

Fear of compassion and personality

The current findings support the notion that college students fearing compassion operate differently in several overarching domains than those who do not. As expected, fear of compassion for others, from others, and for oneself showed significant negative correlations with trait agreeableness and positive correlations with neuroticism. Fear of compassion from others and fear of self-compassion also both exhibited the hypothesized negative correlations with

extraversion and conscientiousness. However, fear of compassion for others failed to show the predicted relationships with extraversion and conscientiousness. Therefore, students harboring fear of compassion seem to show stable personality styles (i.e., lower extraversion, higher neuroticism, lower agreeableness, and lower conscientiousness) differing from those without fear of compassion. These differences in core personality traits may support the assumption that fear of compassion are developed gradually and from a young age alongside overall personality development. It may be that individuals who exhibit this personality profile are more vulnerable to develop fear of compassion by the time they reach the undergraduate age range.

The findings of this study are largely consistent with the relevant literature that reports that individuals fearing compassion struggle to experience and express positive emotions while also experiencing heightened levels of negative emotions, especially those pertaining to a sense of threat (Gilbert et al., 2014, 2012). Those fearing compassion appear more susceptible to emotions of anger, anxiety, and fear at baseline. This susceptibility may be developed from early experiences with threat and submissiveness (Gilbert, 2005). Lowered levels of extraversion among those fearing compassion from others or from oneself are consistent with the notion of positive affiliative emotions eliciting distress and being avoided or resisted (e.g., Gilbert et al., 2012). Moreover, underdeveloped abilities to process and receive compassion could help explain the appearance of a less extraverted personality style. College students fearing compassion also exhibit lower levels of agreeableness. Those fearing compassion are likely to have experiences which may produce difficulties being able to trust the affection of others. Lower levels on the agreeableness subfacets of altruism and trust may be especially implicated. Fear of self-compassion is associated with lower levels of affiliative behavior toward oneself and in response to others, which appears consistent with a less agreeable orientation toward others.

Conscientiousness was negatively related to fear of compassion from others and for oneself, but not to fear of compassion for others. A potential avenue of research is further investigating the proposed role of conscientiousness in mindful abilities (Neff et al., 2007). Ability to engage in mindfulness is considered a necessary component for self-compassion. Among those fearing compassion, mindfulness skill deficits may impair one's receptivity to compassion from others or from oneself by limiting the recognition of opportunity or need for such affect regulation. Without active awareness of one's current emotions, one may not consciously recognize compassion or self-compassion to be a potentially beneficial experience. The alexithymia associated with fear of compassion (Gilbert et al., 2012) may be understood in this context as well. Limited ability to identify, understand, and verbalize one's emotions could make affiliative emotions feel threatening. Conversely, having developed

abilities to self-regulate and experience social safeness may likewise allow for development of conscientious personality traits and skills in mindfulness.

Clinical implications

Compassion from others, for others, and for oneself has significant psychological benefits. Yet those who develop fear of compassion not only have limited access to these benefits but also experience additional difficulties, which extend beyond those associated with low self-esteem and low self-compassion alone (Gilbert et al., 2011; Kelly, Carter, & Borairi, 2014; Kelly, Carter, Zuroff, & Borairi, 2012). College students fearing compassion are among those most able to benefit from cultivating and practicing self-compassion (Dupasquier, Kelly, Moscovitch, & Vidovic, 2018; Kelly et al., 2014; Mayhew & Gilbert, 2008). The array of negative outcomes tied to fear of compassion offers several domains to be ameliorated through the practice of self-compassion. Dupasquier et al. (2018) conceptualized self-compassion as less threatening than social support among those fearing compassion from others and found self-compassion to lower the correlation between fear of compassion from others and the perceived risk of making emotional disclosures to others. Perhaps the practice of self-compassion could heighten the degree to which college students fearing self-compassion express affiliation through their behavior, which could allow for the formation of closer relationships.

The combination of low self-compassion with high fear of self-compassion also merits consideration, as it has been found to partially mediate the respective relationships between anxious attachment and depression and between avoidant attachment and depression (Joeng et al., 2017). The same authors found the combination of low self-compassion with high fear of self-compassion to fully mediate the relationship between anxious attachment and anxiety, while partially mediating the relationship between avoidant attachment and anxiety. Those with high levels of attachment anxiety have limited abilities to self-soothe (Pepping, Davis, O'Donovan, & Pal, 2015), and it may be that experiencing compassion from others or for others would require self-soothing for those fearing self-compassion. Learning to tolerate and practice self-compassion may therefore facilitate reduction of the association between attachment anxiety and anxious symptoms. College students fearing compassion could ultimately form closer relationships to their peers through this practice.

The findings of this study are also beneficial in supporting the assumptions behind compassion-focused theory, which has benefitted individuals resistant to compassion (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Gilbert & Procter, 2006). Fear of self-compassion was found to be linked to low levels of social safeness and low levels of extraversion, which suggest that individuals fearing compassion may

be less likely to seek out others for support. It appears that feared affiliative emotion facilitates isolation from others rather than social connection. College counselors would likely benefit from recognizing the ways in which a fear of compassion might be presented, so as to select more targeted forms of treatment, like that proposed by compassion focused therapy (Gilbert, 2009). Compassionate mind training may help college students with underdeveloped abilities to process compassion cultivate such abilities, in turn reducing sensitivity to internal and external social threats and facilitating opportunities to access the psychological benefits associated with receiving and giving compassion.

Given that fear of compassion is related to treatment ambivalence and negative expectations for treatment (Merrit & Purdon, 2021), it is especially important for clinicians to help clients set appropriate expectations early in therapy. Students with a fear of compassion, which might be exhibited through the more observable personality traits described in this study, may perceive treatment as not worthwhile or distressing. They may even drop out of individual therapy, interpersonal process groups, or skills-based groups that emphasize developing more positive relationships to oneself or others. Fearing compassion may even predispose students to not seek treatment in the first place since it would involve receiving interpersonal warmth.

Limitations

This study involves several limitations. First, the concepts investigated pertaining to fear of compassion remain in the early stages of their development. Further empirical research is needed to guide the literature and the focus of the associations discovered. On a similar note, the findings of this study relied on self-report survey methodology, and their generalizability is likely limited due to a lack of behavioral observation. These findings may not reflect participants' behavioral experiences in their everyday interpersonal interactions. Additional points of data may be needed to better contextualize these results, whereas current interpretations are based on participants' descriptions of their own perspective of their personal experiences on surveys in a laboratory setting. Lastly, information on race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation was not available for participants due to technology issues during data collection. It is possible that lived experiences of individuals from historically marginalized populations (e.g., discrimination; trauma) may impact fear of compassion for others, from others, and for oneself.

Future research directions

A promising realm for future study is the *combination* of high fear of self-compassion with low self-compassion. Some studies have investigated the

detrimental effects of this combination thus far (e.g., Dupasquier et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2012). Integrating measures of self-compassion and of fear of self-compassion may offer deeper insight into the relationships found in the present study. For instance, those with lower capacities for self-compassion (i.e., both low self-compassion and high fear of self-compassion), may fall at more extreme ends of personality scales. Additional future research directions include examining the relationship between fear of compassion and mental health outcomes, as well as interpersonal experiences and behaviors. Lastly, future research can examine whether therapy techniques grounded in compassion-focused theory are especially effective for the college students with the personality profile identified in this study to be vulnerable to fear of compassion.

Disclosure statement

We have no know conflicts of interest to disclose. This study was not preregistered. Materials and analysis code for this study are not available

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