Examining Life Satisfaction and Self-Compassion Among Students Attending a Historically Black College and University in the U.S.

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To cite this article:

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Abstract

This study aims to examine the relationship between life satisfaction and self-compassion among university students attending a historically black college and university (HBCU) in the U.S. Southeast. A non-experimental descriptive research design, which included a self-report questionnaire using the Satisfaction with Life Scale and Self-Compassion Scale was applied to this study. A total of 148 university students enrolled in leisure and health courses at the HBCU participated in the study. A significant association was found related to life satisfaction and measures of self-compassion. The association of life satisfaction and self-compassion was also measured by controlling for gender, GPA, and perceived health, thus indicating sub-scale of self-kindness may be a predictor of life satisfaction.

Keywords: Self-Compassion, Life Satisfaction, College Students, Health

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of the first two articles on the topic of self-compassion (Neff, 2003a; Neff, 2003b), over 200 articles and research projects have been produced on the subject (Neff & Dahm, 2015). Research supports the correlation of self-compassion with psychological health (Dimitra et al., 2020) and life satisfaction (Jennings & Tan, 2014; Yang et al., 2016). Despite the growing literature related to self-compassion, minimal research is currently available related to life satisfaction and self-compassion among Black or African Americans, with even fewer studies examining the experiences of undergraduate students.

Self-compassion is the ability to extend compassion to one's self in instances of personal inadequacies, failures, or mistakes that may cause physical, mental, or emotional suffering and take-on a non-judgmental understanding experiences are part of common humanity (Neff, 2003a; Neff, 2003b). The dimensions of self-compassion – self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification must be implemented in order to achieve self-compassion. More specifically, self-kindness is understanding and supportive of one's self through encouraging and nurturing dialogs instead of with self-judgment, common humanity is recognizing individual imperfections are not experienced in isolation and part of the human experience, and mindfulness in the awareness of the need for balance in negative emotions and thoughts to avoid overidentifying with painful feelings and thoughts (Neff, 2003a; Neff, 2003b). Each component works in conjunction with the other.

Life satisfaction is the self-perceived satisfaction of an individual's quality of life and overall well-being, measured by the emotional and judgmental components of well-being (Diener et al., 1985). While several existing studies have supported the concept of self-compassion as a link and contributing factor to life-satisfaction, few studies have been conducted on the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between self-compassion and life satisfaction (Jennings & Tan, 2014; Neff et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2016). Furthermore, life satisfaction was found to be positively associated with self-compassion (Li et al., 2021).

Although the benefits of self-compassion are established, the impact on students attending historically Black colleges and universities are not well-known (Blanden et al., 2021). By understanding the associations of self-compassion and life satisfaction among African American students, the present study intends to serve as a preliminary analysis to bring awareness to the importance of self-compassion and well-being to faculty and high education administrators.

METHOD

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the association between life satisfaction and self-compassion. More specifically, the study will explore the levels of life satisfaction among undergraduate students attending a historically Black college and university. An exploration of participants levels of self-compassion will also be examined to determine the association with life satisfaction. Furthermore, the study examines individual factors, such as gender, GPA, and perceived health to determine whether differences and associations exists in levels of life satisfaction and self-compassion.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study: (a) What are differences in participants satisfaction with life by gender, GPA, and perceived health? (b) What is the association between satisfaction with life and measures of self-compassion? (c) Does self-compassion predict levels of life satisfaction when controlling for gender, GPA, and perceived health?

Research Design

A non-experimental descriptive research design was applied to the study. A self-report questionnaire was administered to measure satisfaction of life and self-compassion among Black and African American undergraduate students attending a HBCU. Subject demographic information also included gender, grade point average (GPA), and perceived health.

Sampling

A convenience sample was used to select participants for the study, which consisted of students between the ages of 18-24 years old enrolled in undergraduate health, physical education, and recreation related courses. A total of 148 university attending a HBCU participated in the study. Of the students who participated in the study, 77% (n = 114) were women and 23% (n = 34) men. Half (n = 74) of the participants were 1st year college students and the other 50% (n = 74) consisted of 2nd-4th year college students. All participants identified as Black or African American.

Before administering the survey, approval was granted by the Florida A&M University Institutional Review Board. Participants were also provided with written informed consent prior to administering the questionnaire.

Data Collection Tools

For the purposes of this study, the three major sections examined include measures of life satisfaction, self-compassion, and demographic characteristics. The first section of the questionnaire consisted of five items adapted from the Satisfaction with Life Scale to measure life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985). The Satisfaction with Life Scale consists of a Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree using five items (Diener et al., 1985). The results of the Cronbach's alpha in this study was .813, which indicates the scale is reliable measure for this study and supported by previous research (Blanden et al., 2021). The second section of the questionnaire asked participants to report levels of self-compassion using the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion is assessed with 26 items that includes sub-components of self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness, self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = almost never to 5 = almost always (Neff, 2003a). The responses in the current study indicate an acceptable to good level of internal consistency for measures of self-compassion (α = .790), self-kindness (α = .746), common humanity (α = .763), mindfulness (α = .720), self-judgment (α = .761), isolation (α = .747), and over-identification (α = .693). The Cronbach's alpha levels for the self-compassion subscales are consistent with previous studies related to the psychometric properties of the Self-Compassion Scale among African Americans (LoParo, 2018, Zhang et al., 2019). The third section of the study reported demographic information related to race, gender, age, and perceived health.

Data Analysis

SPSS 27.0 was used to analyze the data to include descriptive statistics and associations. More specifically, Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the reliability of select items (Cronbach, 1951). Pearson chi-square and independent t-tests were used to determine prevalence and frequencies as well as significant associations of discrete variables (Huck, 2012). Binary logistic regressions were conducted to predict outcomes explored in the study (Huck, 2012), which required dichotomizing variables to high and low levels of satisfaction of life, self-compassion, and perceived health. By splitting the distribution of median scores, variables related to satisfaction of life, self-compassion, and GPA were dichotomized.

FINDINGS

To determine the differences in participant satisfaction with life, a series of Pearson Chi-squares were conducted to determine associations by gender, GPA, perceived health, and self-compassion variables (see Table 1). Significant associations were found between levels of satisfaction of life and overall self-compassion ($x2 = 11.28$, $p < .01$), self-kindness ($x2 = 12.426$, $p < .01$), common humanity ($x2 = 6.201$, $p < .05$), and mindfulness ($x2 = 9.581$, $p < .01$). There were no statistically significant associations between gender, GPA, perceived health, self-judgment, isolation, and overidentification.

Table 1. Participants level of satisfaction with life by self-compassion and covariates.

Variables	Low Satisfaction with Life	High Satisfaction with Life	x^2	p
Gender				
Female	21 (77.8%)	85 (77.3%)	.003	.995
Male	6 (22.2%)	25 (22.7%)		
GPA				
3.2 or lower	15 (55.6%)	50 (45.5%)	.887	.346
3.3 or higher	12 (44.4%)	60 (54.5%)		
Perceived Health				
Fair/Poor	9 (33.3%)	27 (24.5%)	.864	.353
Excellent/Good	18 (66.7%)	83 (75.5%)		
Self-Compassion				
Low	22 (81.5%)	50 (45.5%)	11.285	.001*
High	5 (18.5%)	60 (54.5%)		
Self-Kindness				
Low	22 (81.5%)	48 (43.6%)	12.426	.001*
High	5 (18.5%)	62 (56.4%)		
Self-Judgment				
Low	15 (55.6%)	50 (45.5%)	.887	.346
High	12 (44.4%)	60 (54.5%)		
Common Humanity				
Low	19 (70.4%)	48 (43.6%)	6.201	.013*
High	8 (29.6%)	62 (56.4%)		
Isolation				
Low	15 (55.6%)	41 (37.3%)	2.998	.083
High	12 (44.4%)	69 (62.7%)		
Mindfulness				
Low	21 (77.8%)	49 (44.5%)	9.581	.002*
High	6 (22.2%)	61 (55.5%)		
Over-Identification				
Low	17 (63.0%)	50 (45.5%)	2.659	.103
High	10 (37.0%)	60 (54.5%)		

Bivariate correlation was conducted to determine the significant associations between gender, GPA, and perceived health as well as satisfaction with life and measures of self-

compassion (see Table 2). Gender was negatively associated with perceived health (r = -.247, p = .01), self-judgment (r = -.167, p = .0), over-identification (r = -.181, p = .05), and positively associated with GPA (r = .200, p = .05). Satisfaction with life was positively associated with self-kindness (r = .301, p = .01), common humanity (r = .213, p = .05), and mindfulness (r = -.264, p = .01). Self-kindness was positively associated with self-judgment (r = .269, p = .01), common humanity (r = .283, p = .01), and mindfulness (r = .406, p = .01). Self-judgement was positively associated with isolation (r = .505, p = .01) and over-identification (r = .455, p = .01). Common humanity was positively associated with mindfulness (r = .446, p = .01) and both isolation (r = .511, p = .01) and mindfulness (r = .163, p = .05) were positively associated with over-identification. No significant associations were found among remaining variables to include GPA and perceived health.

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations of Cv, Life Satisfaction, and Self-Compassion

	Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Gender	.200*	-.247**	-.005	.047	-.167*	.086	-.161	-.032	-.181*
2	GPA		-.116	.080	.094	-.069	.108	.038	.041	-.069
3	Perceived health			-.125	-.054	-.109	.149	-.084	.081	.054
4	Satisfaction with Life				.301**	.080	.213*	.148	.264**	0.139
5	Self-Kindness					.269**	.283**	.160	.406**	.025
6	Self-Judgement						.145	.505**	.109	.455**
7	Common Humanity							.060	.446**	.065
8	Isolation								.056	.511**
9	Mindfulness									.163*
10	Over-Identification									

*p < .05, **p < .01

To analyze whether self-compassion predicts levels of life satisfaction when controlling for gender, GPA and perceived health, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted (see Table 3). Gender, GPA, and perceived health were entered in Step 1 as control variables. Step 2 included the self-compassion subscales. The self-compassion subscales explained 11.3% of the variance in satisfaction with life.

Table 3. Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting satisfaction with life

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	**SE B**	**β**	**B**	**SE B**	**β**
Gender	-.003	.086	-.003	.-001	.084	-.001
GPA	.072	.070	.090	.033	.068	.042
Perceived health	.079	.088	.088	.055	.078	.061
Self-Kindness				.195	-.076	.246*
Self-Judgement				-.086	.081	-.108
Common Humanity				.086	.075	.108
Isolation				.073	.083	.090
Mindfulness				.075	.081	.094
Over-Identification				.100	.081	.126
R^2		.014			.641	
F for change in R^2		.152			3.441**	

*p < .05, **p < .01

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The purpose of the study is to examine the association between life satisfaction and self-compassion. The present study extends the body of knowledge related to self-compassion and life satisfaction among students attending a historically Black college and university. While previous research indicates students with high levels of satisfaction with life tend to also have high GPAs (Lyons & Huebner, 2016), no association was found between satisfaction with life, self-compassion, and GPA in the current study. The lack association of association between self-compassion and GPA is consistent with current findings among sport science students in Jordan (Al-Awamleh, 2020).

Current research examining different demographics characteristics and self-compassion across different cultures is limited; however, a recent study (Tóth-Király & Neff, 2021) found higher levels of self-compassion among Spanish, Brazilian, and Australian adults and decreased levels of self-compassion among the United Kingdom and Greece. Students from the U.S., Canada, and Norway found no differences in levels of self-compassion (Tóth-Király & Neff, 2021). In addition, the results from the study (Tóth-Király & Neff, 2021) supports the association of satisfaction with life and self-compassion found in the current study. These findings are supported by a study on recent graduates in Jakarta, which found higher levels of self-compassion is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction (Yunita & Lee, 2021). Similarly, self-compassion is positively associated with life-satisfaction among university students in China (Li et al., 2021), South Korea (Shin, 2019), and first year students in the U.S. (Booker & Dunsmore, 2019).

While research on self-compassion and life satisfaction among students attending a historically Black college and university is limited, a recent study conducted at Virginia State University, which is a public historically Black land-grant university in the U.S., found associations between self-compassion subscales and life satisfaction among African American students (Blanden et al., 2021). This finding is consistent with the current research, which found positive associations with the sub-scale of self-kindness. More specifically, findings from the hierarchical regression analysis is aligned with previous research related to self-kindness as a predictor of increased life satisfaction (Blanden et al., 2021; Neff & Davidson, 2016), indicating higher quality of life is likelier among people who are kinder and understanding to oneself.

CONCLUSION

The current study found significant associations related to satisfaction of life and self-compassion among undergraduate students attending a historically Black college and university. Self-compassion should be considered as higher education leaders and faculty continue to increase efforts to support the well-being of students. The results of the study extend the body of knowledge related to life satisfaction and self-compassion among university students attending an HBCU. Self-compassion may be a potential intervention to impact life satisfaction while attending university.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations were present in the study. The ability to generalize the study across populations is limited due to the use of convenience sampling and cross-sectional data collection. The overall sample size of the study included a limited number of males. The sample

is also limited to Black or African American students who attended a historically Black college or university and does represent the ethnicities of all students. Participants were also limited to undergraduate students enrolled in health, physical education, and recreation related courses.

Based upon the findings from this study, future studies related to self-compassion and life satisfaction should consider the inclusion of students who attend historically Black college and universities throughout the U.S. In addition, interventions that focus on self-compassion, such as Mindful Self-Compassion Training, should be considered to determine the potential impact on life satisfaction as a means to improve student well-being. Conducting a longitudinal study may also be considered to determine causal relationships between the variables. Examining other variables related to health and well-being among students is also needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of self-compassion. Furthermore, future studies should consider examining mediators related to the relationship between self-compassion and life satisfaction.

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