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Gender and Students' Self-Compassion Level

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ABSTRACT

It is believed that self-compassion is an essential component for any human being to survive in their environment. Self-compassion is the ability to entertain and care for oneself in suffering, failure, and imperfection rather than taking part in self-criticism. This research attempts to find out the level of self-compassion in vocational higher education students and to explore the differences in terms of self-compassion between male and female students. Employing Neff's Self-Compassion Scale (short form) measurement tool, this study was conducted through a descriptive survey technique. The results show that female students had a slightly higher level of self-compassion than males. Regarding the significant elements of self-compassion, which are self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, it was found that there are differences in the dominant component of self-compassion between male and female students. This finding shows that female students were dominated by self-kindness rather than mindfulness and common humanity. It can be said that female students have a more dominant ability to understand and accept themselves as well as to give tenderness. It was also found that male students were dominated by common humanity rather than mindfulness and self-kindness. Male students have a more dominant ability to perceive difficulties and problems which are part of human life, and these are things that everyone experiences and they always realize that they do not experience it by themselves. Based on the results of the study, it is expected that appropriate mechanisms should be formulated to improve the students' self-compassion at all levels. It could be done by providing the educational environment that can encourage the students to accept who they are, to express gratitude, and to be mindful.

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INTRODUCTION

Self-compassion is the ability to entertain and care for oneself in suffering, failure, and imperfection rather than taking part in self-criticism. It consists of three components, namely common humanity, self-kindness, and mindfulness. This ability is needed to strengthen someone's motivation since it influences his life quality. The difference in how every person overcomes problems is the indicator of his mental health. It is often found that on several occasions, someone feels that he is the only person who deals with problems. In fact, in general, people encounter the same issues. In another situation, a person tends to do the self-blaming for any difficulties that happen to him. In reality, problems can be generated by many different reasons. Many times a person will be subjective when it comes to handling obstacles that should be faced objectively. It indicates that having the ability to care for himself will affect someone's life. Therefore, it is necessary to point out the level of someone's self-compassion, so it will assist him in becoming a positive person.

There have been many types of research on self-compassion in several fields, such as psychology, health, and education. According to Neff and McGehee (2010), self-compassion is an adaptive way of relating to the self when considering personal inadequacies or difficult life circumstances. In terms of the education field, the researches about self-compassion mainly concern with the belief that self-compassion is essential for both male and female students to survive in the process of education. Several studies have proved that self-compassion can increase motivation in a person; in this case, the student to face the difficulties and mistakes without self-criticism (Peklaj and Levpuscek, 2006; Breines & Chen, 2012). In completing their studies, the students are required to have confidence in their ability and perseverance to accomplish every task. The students are also entailed to be able to pass through their academic difficulties, and they need to have high endurance to overcome the problems. It indicates that students need to have high self-compassion. In other words, the students must have high motivation to overcome the various academic demands and obstacles that arise in completing the study period well and on time.

Concerning vocational higher education, the system of its education is more challenging. Becoming a student in vocational higher education means that someone must be willing to take a full academic program that requires him to finish the study in 3 years. It can be said that for vocational higher education students, the demand to have self-compassion is higher since they are required to accomplish many academic assignments and practices at the same time. It indicates that for these students, having high motivation will lead them to succeed in their studies. To achieve students' high motivation involves many indicators, and one of them is self-compassion. Having a high level of self-compassion will make students more resilient with any problems they may face during their studies.

The previous researches conducted by Ariyani (2013) and Sadikin et al. (2016) studied the general description of the soft skills index of vocational higher education students in Indonesia. The results showed that students obtained a median value of 3.11 from the scale of 4. There were eight dimensions of soft skills measured, i.e., motivation, flexibility, willingness to learn, integrity, relationship building, teamwork & cooperation, leadership, and communication skills. Surprisingly, leadership (2.96) and motivation (2.99) are two aspects of skills received the lowest attention compared with other elements, although the values are still within a reasonable range

(Sadikin, 2016). This evidences that motivation is the ability that should be improved, and it can be performed by developing the students' self-compassion.

Based on the results of previous work, motivation is considered a low aspect of soft skills experienced by the students. This phenomenon can be problematic since motivation has a central role in students' academic work and their achievement (Peklaj and Levpuscek, 2006). It can be perceived from the students' choices of completing learning tasks, the duration and effort they devote to be successful academically, in their commitment to the learning tasks, and the way how they manage the problems encountered in the learning process. It can be stated that motivation is fundamental to support the students' success in learning. This fact is also notified by another study related to the relationship between self-compassion and reaction to academic failure among students with poor midterm grade scores. The result showed that there is a positive correlation between self-compassion and positive and negative coping emotion-focused strategies focusing on negative emotions (Neff et al., 2005). A research conducted by Breines & Chen (2012) has also proved that self-compassion can increase motivation in a person. The study reported that the students were able to face the difficulties and mistakes made without criticizing themselves. In completing his studies, the student is required to be confident in his ability and perseverance to complete each task. When faced with academic difficulties, students must be able to pass through and have the endurance to overcome the problems. It is, therefore, necessary for students, both male and female students have a high level of self-compassion. Self-compassion, in this case, focuses on the degree of the individual in terms of self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness (Neff, 2003).

Another study on self-compassion in vocational higher education students found that more than half of students (78%) exhibited low self-compassion, and the other 22% had high self-compassion (Ariyani & Hadiani, 2018), but the findings have not mentioned in detail in terms of gender. Further study by Yarnell et al. (2015) about a meta-analysis of gender differences in self-compassion revealed that males had an indefinitely higher level of self-compassion than females. This difference was considered more significant in samples with a higher percentage of ethnic minorities. They further suggest that these group differences should be taken into account in future studies and interventions focused on self-compassion by not overemphasizing gender differences in self-compassion as being significant (Yarnell et al., 2015). It can be stated that students with high self-compassion would be able to control their self-doubt and academic anxiety better. Students will be stronger and can face problems in their process of education. Self-compassion is needed to help students complete their studies well according to the demands of the institution without sacrificing their mental health (Ariyani & Hadiani, 2018). Therefore, the researches about self-compassion are necessary to be conducted to support the students' mental health.

As previous studies mainly involved with the analysis of self-compassion based on the general participants, this study intends to identify the level of self-compassion in vocational higher education students and to find out whether there are differences between the self-compassion of male and female students. It focuses on the dominance of self-compassion based on a gender perspective. The results are expected to contribute to the study of self-compassion in terms of gender. Furthermore, the information in this study can be a guidance for future researches on the same interest.

METHODS

The descriptive method is employed to describe a state at the time of research. This research uses a survey technique with a questionnaire that is collecting data from several units or individuals at the same time to know the description of the individual, which in this research to view the level of self-compassion of students, both male and female.

Participants

The participant of the research is the students of one state vocational higher education in Bandung, Indonesia. The purposive sampling is used in the process of selecting the subject that complies with the best position to support the required information. The subjects of this study are students of grades I, II, and III as many as 255 students, which are 211 males and 44 females in the range of 18 to 20 years old. The description of subjects can be seen in the following tables.

Quantity	Sex	Percentage
211	Male	83%
44	Female	17%
255	Total	100%

Table 1: Description of Subjects Based on Gender

Year	I	II	III
Male	93	40	78
Female	34	3	7
Quantity	127	43	85
Percentage	50%	17%	23%

Table 2: Description of Subjects Based on Level of Study

Procedures and Survey Measures

In collecting data, the measuring tool used is Neff's Self-Compassion Scale (short form), which consists of 12 statements to measure the level of the main components of self-compassion in terms of self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness (Raes et al., 2010). Example items used in this study are: “I try to see my failings as part of the human condition” and “I’m intolerant and impatient towards those aspects of my personality I don’t like.” Subjects are asked to give a mark on one of the columns ranging from ‘never’ up to ‘always.’ The data analysis technique uses the average value of the total score on each self-compassion component to determine the high and low categories of self-compassion in both male and female students. Self-compassion is high if the three components are in the high category. Diversely, if one of the components belongs to a low category, it is considered as low self-compassion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section attempts to describe the level of self-compassion in vocational higher education students and to elaborate on whether there are differences in terms of self-compassion between male and female students.

The result found that female students (23% of high self-compassion) had a little higher level of self-compassion than male students (22% of high self-compassion) so that it showed the general picture of the level of the students' self-compassion as seen in table 3 below.

Self-compassion	High Category		Low Category	
	Quantity	Percentage	Quantity	Percentage
Male	47	22%	164	78%
Female	10	23%	34	77%

Table 3: Description of Students' Self-Compassion on Gender

Based on the findings shown in Table 3 above, it can be interpreted that male students have a slightly lower self-compassion degree than female students. This information indicates that male students tend to be harsher in self-criticizing against their mistakes and shortcomings compared to female students. Surprisingly, it is not in line with the findings of several studies (Neff, 2003 and Yarnell et al., 2015), which state that males' self-compassion is higher than females. This phenomenon is probably due to differences in the background of the study participants, such as several samples, age, environment, and culture, where the current research is conducted. This finding is in line with the study conducted by Goetz et al. (2010) that shows how compassion shapes moral judgment and action, varies across different cultures and engages specific patterns of neural activation.

Nevertheless, both male and female students generally have a low self-compassion degree. This evidence is in line with the findings of a study conducted by Missiliana & Polla (2013). They are more likely to generate weak judgment and give harmful self-appraisal on themselves. As a result, they cannot take their weaknesses and consider it as a self-judgment. Students also tend to be subjective and focus on their deficiencies, so they feel weak and worthless. They find they are the only ones experiencing failure and suffering, and this is considered harmful since it can lead to a sense of isolation. Students are often overwhelmed by their problems, and it seems that they concerned too much about the dissatisfaction condition in their lives. They are likely not aware of experiences that should be confronted by a balanced and positive attitude and always try to see lessons from a subjective perspective. It indicates that the students tend to see themselves negatively as they still consider themselves as inadequate persons.

Each component of self-compassion is then examined more in some depth. The results about the level of each element of self-compassion on both male and female students can be seen in Tables 4 and 5 below.

Self-Kindness		Common Humanity		Mindfulness	
High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
28	16	22	22	25	19
64%	36%	**50%**	50%	**57%**	43%

Table 4: Description of Level of Self-Compassion Components on Female Students

Self-Kindness		Common Humanity		Mindfulness	
High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
99	112	116	95	111	100
47%	53%	**55%**	45%	**53%**	47%

Table 5: Description of Level of Self-Compassion Components on Male Students

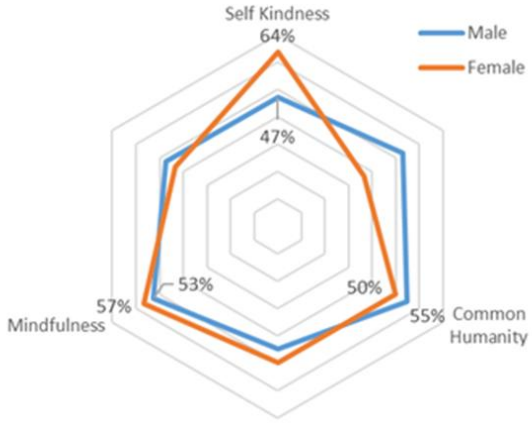


Chart 1: The comparison of each high degree components of self-compassion on male and female students.

Based on data in table 4 and chart 1 about the level of self-compassion components on female students, it shows that female students have high self-kindness (64%), mindfulness (57%), and common humanity (50%). It can be said that female students have a more dominant ability to understand and accept herself as well as to give tenderness, which is relevant with self-kindness involving to have a useful role in managing care and warmth toward oneself (Bluth et al., 2016). They also can see things, to accept, and face reality without judging. Additionally, they act to see things experienced with an objective perspective rather than to realize that they should perceive difficulties, problems, and challenges, which are parts of human life. When viewed from the participants in this study are young females, and the results of all components of self-compassion achieve a high degree. This finding is in line with the research conducted by Bluth et al. (2016), who claims that older females have a lower level of self-compassion than younger females.

Based on finding shown in table 5 and fig.1, the dominant components of self-compassion on male students indicate that they have high common humanity (55%), mindfulness (53%), and self-kindness (47%). Male students have a more dominant ability to perceive difficulties and problems which are part of human life, and these are things that everyone experiences and they always realize that they do not experience it by themselves, but others do, too. As suggested by Bluth et al. (2016), that gives a high appreciation of the common humanity aspect of the belief that there are universal human emotions that we all experience during a challenging time connect us to other people (Bluth et al., 2016). It can be said that having a good sense of common humanity will make someone able to see his deficiency as a part of life. But the other side more than half of the male students were in the low category of self-kindness (53%). The male students who belong to this group tend to blame themselves if they encounter problems. Instead of finding a solution, they are likely to be harsh on themselves. This could be caused by the students' lack of understanding of how to accept failure. They also likely have low self-confidence, so they easily

feel down when confronted with problems. Students with low self-kindness can lower the degree of common humanity and mindfulness components. Students who criticize and feel that they do not have excellent academic skills when experiencing difficulties will tend to withdraw themselves from the environment and will center on negative thoughts and feelings to display extreme emotion. The preferable solution is to arrange the educational setting that can assist the students in accepting who they are, to express gratitude, and to be mindful.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown the level of self-compassion of vocational higher education students. There are two relevant findings related to the level of self-compassion and gender domination in the students' self-compassion. First, in terms of the degree of self-compassion, in general, vocational higher education students, both male and female students, have a low degree of self-compassion. It can be recognized from the fact that the students are still judging themselves and assessing themselves negatively. They feel that they are the only humans who are experiencing difficulties and failures that make them withdraw from the environment. They also tend to assess the experience subjectively and focus on their weaknesses and shortcomings. Secondly, regarding gender domination in the students' self-compassion, it is also found that females have a slightly higher level of self-compassion than males. Concerning the main components of self-compassion, which are self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, there are differences in the dominant of a component of self-compassion between male and female students. Female students have high self-kindness compared to a component of mindfulness and common humanity. It can be said that female students have a more dominant ability to understand and accept themselves as well as to give tenderness. Male students have great common humanity compared to a component of mindfulness and self-kindness. It means that male students have a more dominant ability to perceive difficulties and problems which are part of human life, and these are things that everyone experiences and they always realize that they do not experience it by themselves. By having this information, it is expected that proper handling mechanisms can be formulated to improve the students' self-compassion so that they become better adjusting individuals in the future. Since this study mainly concerns with a gender perspective, further research can identify the students' self-compassion, in terms of culture, age variation, education background, and other indicators.

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