

## Self-Compassion and Aggression in College Students

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The growing number of violence among Indonesian college students demanded further attention. Thus, a study is needed to understand the predictors of aggression among college students. The author proposed that self-compassion was related to aggression. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between self-compassion and aggression in college students. This study involved 300 college students from three different universities in Jakarta and Depok as research participants. Data collection was conducted using self-report measures. It was found that there was a significantly negative relationship between self-compassion and aggression in college students. The result indicates that high self-compassion was related to low aggression in college students.

*Keywords:* self-compassion, aggression, college students

Fenomena kekerasan di kalangan mahasiswa memerlukan perhatian lebih lanjut dari masyarakat umum. Oleh sebab itu, penyelidikan lebih lanjut dibutuhkan untuk mengetahui prediktor agresivitas pada kelompok mahasiswa. Penulis menduga bahwa *self-compassion* berkaitan dengan agresivitas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui hubungan antara belas-diri (*self-compassion*) dan agresivitas pada mahasiswa. Penelitian ini melibatkan 300 mahasiswa dari tiga universitas berbeda di Jakarta dan Depok sebagai partisipan penelitian. Pengumpulan data penelitian dilakukan dengan menggunakan kuesioner laporan diri. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa ada hubungan negatif dan signifikan antara belas-diri dan agresivitas pada kelompok mahasiswa. Hal ini berarti belas diri yang lebih tinggi berkaitan dengan agresivitas yang lebih rendah pada mahasiswa.

*Kata kunci:* belas-diri (*self-compassion*), agresi, mahasiswa

Indonesian mass media has documented the rising cases of violent behavior by college students. For example, a brawl between college students from different departments in a public university in Makassar had resulted in a university building being burned (Fatir, 2013). A female college student in East Java murdered her own friend with the help from her spouse because she needed the friend's money to pay her debts (Surya, 2013). The police arrested the suspects in their hiding place in Central Java. A college student studying at a public university in Jogjakarta has been recently arrested due to murdering his own baby (Kristiawan, 2013). The student murdered his baby because he could not stand his constant crying. Considering all cases, the author argued that there is a need to address aggression issues in Indonesian col-

lege students. There is also a consensus among psychological researchers and practitioners that further studies are needed to understand the predictors of human aggression (Perez, Vohs, & Joiner, 2005). Understanding the predictors of aggression is beneficial to avoid human aggression in its most extreme form, such as the persecution of Jews during the World War II, happening again (Anderson & Bushman, 2002).

Aggression is defined as various behaviors directed towards other individuals to harm them (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). The perpetrators need to have the belief that their behaviors will harm the victims and the victims are motivated to avoid the perpetrators' action. Based on this definition, accidentally harming other people could not be considered aggressive behavior because the perpetrator do not have the intention to harm them (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Helping behaviors that inflict pain on or danger other people, such as dentist treatment, could not also be considered the form of aggression. Participants in sado-masochistic activities could not be categorized as

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The author gratefully acknowledges his alma mater: Faculty of Psychology Tarumanagara University; and a special gratitude goes to Monty P. Satiadarma, who supervised the preparation of this article.

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aggression perpetrators because their behavior target (the masochist) has no motivation to avoid the perpetrator's (the sadist's) behavior.

### **Self-Compassion and Aggression**

Self-compassion is a psychological concept that is adapted from Buddhism teaching. Self-compassion is defined as individuals' ability to show kindness and compassion towards themselves during suffering, to realize that every experience they have gone through are also experienced by other people, and to avoid exaggerating their painful experiences during difficult times (Neff, 2003a). People with low self-compassion tend to criticize and beat up themselves when they experience pain or fail at something important to them. They also tend to overemphasize the pain or suffering they experience. They sometimes feel that they are the only ones experiencing hard times, thus isolating themselves from other people.

Neff (2003a) proposed that there are three dimensions of self-compassion: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-kindness is individuals' willingness to show compassion towards themselves when they experience difficult times. Self-kindness means that individuals avoid harshly criticizing themselves when they are unable to do something important. Common humanity is the ability to see their experiences as something that every human has to undergo. They avoid seeing their suffering as something that they are the only ones who can experience it because every human has to undergo suffering in his or her life. Common humanity also allows individuals to be connected with other human and avoid self-isolation. Mindfulness is a form of awareness that allows individuals to see all their painful feelings and thoughts as they are. Mindfulness means that all distressing thoughts and feelings are not avoided, over-identified, or suppressed by the individuals.

Anger and resentment often arise when individuals receive criticism from other people (Baron, 1988). Therefore, some theorists have argued that human aggression might occur when individuals feel threatened by other people's negative evaluation (Baumeister, Smart, and Boden, 1996). It is common for individuals, especially those who have a very positive and unrealistic evaluation of themselves, to feel insulted after receiving negative evaluation. Aggression is used to stop the criticism. The author argued that this negative consequence could be prevented if they develop self-compassion. Developing self-kindness allows individuals to soothe themselves after receiving ne-

gative evaluation from other people (Neff, 2003a). Additionally, the common humanity component of self-compassion allows individuals to see criticism as a process that every person has to undergo. Lastly, being mindful allows individuals to prevent themselves from dwelling on negative emotions that usually arise after being criticized.

Recent research and literature have shown that self-compassion is related to various aspects of healthy psychological functioning and could be developed through daily meditation practices (Neff, 2011a). A study by Kelley and Lambert (2012) has shown that there is a relationship between high mindfulness, an aspect of self-compassion and low aggression in undergraduate students majoring in criminal justice. Therefore, we hypothesized that there was a significantly negative relationship between self-compassion and aggression. In our best knowledge, no study has been conducted to examine the relationship between both concepts; thus, this research is needed to confirm the relationship between self-compassion and aggression in Indonesian college students.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This study was a descriptive and correlational study. Data collection period lasted from February to March 2014. Undergraduate students from two private universities in Jakarta and a public university in Depok were approached by the researchers to participate in this study. We recruited 300 undergraduate students from five faculties in the three universities: the Faculty of Economics, Faculty of Psychology, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Engineering, and Faculty of Medicine. Data were collected using paper-based questionnaires. Before completing the questionnaires, participants completed informed consent forms. The participants completed the questionnaires under the supervision of researchers. The supervision was done to ensure that participants answered all questions. In the end, all data that were collected could be used for the analysis. The demographic information of participants is described in Table 1.

### **Measures**

**Translation procedure.** The psychological scales utilized in this study were translated into Bahasa Indonesia by the author. For example, the statement

Table 1  
*Research Participants' Demographic Characteristics*

Characteristic		N	%
Gender	Male	156	52
	Female	144	48
Age Range	19.77 ± 1.399		
Ethnicity	Chinese	133	44.3
	Javanese	54	18
	Batak	37	12.3
	Mixed	17	5.7
	Minangkabau	12	4
	Sundanese	12	4
	Betawi	8	2.7
	Ambonese	5	1.7
	Palembang	4	1.3
	Malays	3	1
	Balinese	2	0.7
	Buginese	2	0.7
	Minahasan	2	0.7
	Acehnese	1	0.3
	Arabs	1	0.3
	Banjarnese	1	0.3
	Banten	1	0.3
	Bima	1	0.3
	Gorontaloan	1	0.3
	Lampung	1	0.3
Timorese	1	0.3	
Toraja	1	0.3	
Religious Affiliation	Islam	92	30.7
	Protestant	82	27.3
	Catholic	81	27
	Buddhism	33	11
	Hinduism	2	0.7
	Confucianism	2	0.7
	No Religious Affiliation	8	2.7
Faculty	Faculty of Economics	60	20
	Faculty of Engineering	60	20
	Faculty of Law	60	20
	Faculty of Medicine	60	20
	Faculty of Psychology	60	20
	Faculty of Economics	60	20
School Year	First Year	62	20.7
	Second Year	109	36.3
	Third Year	83	27.7
	Fourth Year	37	12.3
	Fifth Year	7	2.3
	Sixth Year	2	0.7
Current GPA Range	3.198 ± 0.421		
Family Structure	Two Parents	280	93.3
	Single Parent	20	6.7
Monthly Expense (IDR)	Less than 700.000	55	18.3
	700.001 - 1.000.000	68	22.7
	1.000.001 - 1.500.000	77	25.7
	1.500.001 - 2.000.000	53	17.7
	2.000.001 - 3.000.000	27	9
	3.000.001 or more	20	6.7

“I’m disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies” was translated into “*Saya menyangkal dan mengkritik kelemahan dan ketidakmampuan saya*”. The translation were discussed with

a senior clinical psychologist (Monty P. Satiadarma) to elicit expert judgment. The author also conducted a cognitive interview with five undergraduate students to ensure that the translation was easily understood. The result of cognitive interview showed that the undergraduate students could easily understand the scales. Finally, the scales were back-translated by an independent translator. We concluded that there was no substantial loss of information when comparing the original and back-translation scales; thus, the scales were ready to be used.

**Self-compassion.** Self-compassion was measured using a modified version of the Self-Compassion Scale developed by Neff (2003b). The Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) used in the study had 22 items instead of 26 items of the original scale, with response alternatives from 1 (Almost never) to 6 (Almost always). Items with low corrected inter-item correlation (under .2) were removed from the scale. In this study, the SCS had an acceptable Cronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha = .801$ ). A study in Turkey found that the SCS was a unidimensional scale (Deniz, Kesici, & Sumer, 2008); thus, we calculated only the total score for data analysis. The total score was then converted into mean item response. The SCS used in this study is available in Appendix A.

**Aggression.** Aggression was measured using a modified version of the Aggression Questionnaire (AQ) by Buss and Perry (1992). The AQ used in the study had 26 items instead of 29 items of the original scale, with response alternatives from 1 (Extremely uncharacteristic of me) to 6 (Extremely characteristic of me). The items with low corrected inter-item correlation (under .2) were removed from the scale. In this study, the AQ had an acceptable Cronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha = .874$ ). The AQ subscales that consists of Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Anger, and Hostility, had also acceptable Cronbach’s alphas ( $\alpha = .712 - .823$ ). We used mean item response for analysis, and not the total score. The AQ used in this study is available in Appendix A.

**Demographic information.** We collected participants’ demographic information consisting of gender, age, ethnicity, religious affiliation, faculty, year level, current GPA, type of family structure, and monthly expense.

## Data Analyses

The author utilized descriptive statistics to describe participants’ demographic characteristics and levels of self-compassion and aggression. The inde-

pendent sample *t*-test and ANOVA test were used to compare participants' levels of self-compassion and aggression based on demographic characteristics. We also employed Pearson's correlation test and Spearman's correlation test to analyze the relationships between the variables in this study. Data were processed using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 22.

## Results

We found that on average, participants had a high level of self-compassion ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ) based on the SCS score. We also found that they had a low level of aggression ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ) based on the AQ score. The highest and lowest average scores in the Aggression Questionnaire were the scores of verbal aggression ( $M = 3.47$ ;  $SD = 0.84$ ) and physical aggression ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ), respectively (Table 2).

Based on Shapiro-Wilk's normality test, self-compassion and aggression had normally distributed data. However, normality assumptions were not met for participants' age and current GPA. For this reason, data analyses for both variables were performed using non-parametric tests (i.e., Spearman correlation tests).

Based on Pearson's correlation test, we found that there was a significantly negative and moderate correlation between self-compassion and aggression in college students ( $r = -0.389$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This means that high self-compassion was related to low aggression in college students; likewise, low self-compassion was related to high aggression. Further analysis showed that there were significantly negative correlations between self-compassion and physical aggression, anger, and hostility in college students ( $p < .05$ ). However, we did not find a significant correlation between self-compassion and verbal aggression ( $p > .05$ ). We found that there were significantly positive correlations between the total score of the AQ and all subscale scores (see Table 2).

In this study, we also examined the associations of self-compassion or aggression with demographic factors. When we analysed differences in self-compassion based on the demographic factors, we found that none of the demographic factors were related to self-compassion.

Using an independent sample *t*-test, we found that there was a significant difference in the level of aggression based on participants' gender ( $t = 2,779$ ,  $p$

$< .05$ ). Male college students ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) had significantly higher levels of aggression compared to female college students ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ). No other demographic factors were related to participants' level of aggression.

Spearman's correlation tests were used to examine the associations of self-compassion or aggression with participants' current GPA and age as both demographic factors did not fulfil normal distribution assumption. It was found that there were no significant correlations between self-compassion or aggression and current GPA ( $p > .05$ ). Similarly, no correlations were found between self-compassion or aggression and age ( $p > .05$ ).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between self-compassion and aggression in college students. We found that there was a significantly negative relationship between self-compassion and aggression in college students. This means that high self-compassion was related to low aggression in college students, and vice versa. This result is not surprising because there is a growing number of studies that showed the positive contribution of self-compassion to human psychological functioning (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Self-compassion is also related to the ability to build healthy interpersonal relationships (Yarnell & Neff, 2013). Research by Kelley and Lambert (2012) found that mindfulness, a dimension of self-compassion, had a significantly negative correlation with aggression among undergraduate students.

Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) proposed that aggression occurs when a person's self-evaluation is threatened by negative evaluation of other people. People who evaluate themselves in a very positive and unrealistic way tend to feel insulted and angry when they receive criticism from other people around them. They often use aggression as a way to reject and stop the negative evaluation they received from others. This situation could be avoided by cultivating self-compassion. Cultivating self-compassion allows people to provide themselves with kindness when receiving negative evaluation from others (Neff, 2003a). It would also allow them to see criticism as something that every human has to face in daily life. The mindfulness component of self-compassion allows individuals to receive the negative evaluation objectively. The negative feelings that ac-

Table 2

*Correlation between Self-Compassion and Aggression in the Research Participants*

	SCS	PA	VA	A	H	AQ
<b>SCS</b>	<i>M</i> = 3.81; <i>SD</i> = 0.51					
<b>PA</b>	<i>M</i> = 2.76; <i>SD</i> = 0.84	-.241 *				
<b>VA</b>	<i>M</i> = 3.47; <i>SD</i> = 0.84	.024	.346 *			
<b>A</b>	<i>M</i> = 2.99; <i>SD</i> = 0.99	-.412 *	.431 *	.280 *		
<b>H</b>	<i>M</i> = 3.27; <i>SD</i> = 0.89	-.418 *	.387 *	.273 *	.446 *	
<b>AQ</b>	<i>M</i> = 3.09; <i>SD</i> = 0.65	-.389 *	.777 *	.585 *	.726 *	.778 *

Note. \* $p < .05$ .; SCS = Self-Compassion Scale; PA = Physical Aggression Subscale; VA = Verbal Aggression Subscale; A = Anger Subscale; H = Hostility Subscale; AQ = Aggression Questionnaire.

company criticisms were not exaggerated and this allow the individuals to receive criticism with a clear mind. Developing self-compassion also seems to allow humans to see themselves in a more objective way and avoid seeing themselves in a very positive, yet unrealistic way.

One of the interesting findings in this study is that self-compassion was related significantly to all sub-dimensions of aggression, except verbal aggression. We expected that developing self-compassion would lead to low verbal aggression. However, the result showed that cultivating self-compassion did not contribute to lower verbal aggression. This might be related to the way the scale items were worded in this study. After inspecting the items, we found that the scale did not include questions related to verbal behaviors that were harmful to others (i.e., insulting other people). This is not in line with the operational definition of aggression proposed by Bushman and Anderson (2001). Thus, this is perhaps the reason there was no correlation between verbal aggression and self-compassion in this study.

This study also found that there were no significant differences in the levels of self-compassion based on demographic factors among college students. Based on the current self-compassion literature, no demographic factors were found to be related to self-compassion. The author argued that every human has the same opportunity to practice self-compassion, particularly when facing challenges in life. This is in line with Neff's opinion (2011b) that self-compassion is not dependent on external factors, it is available for everyone even when they are in their worst condition. People from various backgrounds seem to have an equal chance to develop self-compassion even though they are in the lowest point of their life.

We found that male college students had higher aggression levels than female college students. A huge body of psychological literature have shown that males are more aggressive than females (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). The result has been expected prior

to this study. However, surprisingly, no other demographic factors, except gender, were related to aggression. This is different from the current literature of aggression. For example, aggression was found to be related to academic performance (Loveland, Lounsbury, Welsh, & Buboltz, 2007). This study found no correlation between participants' GPA and aggression. The possible explanation might be due to different grading employed by the universities involved in the studies. Different grading system could affect the result of this study. A previous study has also shown that children from single parent families showed higher aggression than children from two parents families (Rodríguez, Del Barrio, & Carrasco, 2013). The reason for no difference in aggression based on family structures in this study might be due to unequal number of participants between the two groups of family structure. The number of participants from single parent families were only 20 students, whereas the number of participants from two parent families were 280 students. A similar methodological issue might occur with other demographic factors, and thus, this could be used to explain the unexpected results in this study. Based on the author's anecdotal record, the three universities involved in this study had a very limited history of student violence. This might also explain why the college students that participated in this study tended to have low levels of aggression.

### Limitations and Future Directions

The results in this study should be interpreted by considering the limitations of this study. Firstly, the cross-sectional nature of this study does not allow cause-and-effect predictions. Future research might address this issue by utilizing a longitudinal design. Participants in this study were not recruited using a random sampling technique. Additionally, participants came from the universities that had only a small number of students involved in violence. Therefore, the results of this study could not be generalized to

college students from the universities that had frequently student brawl. Future research should recruit more college students from various university backgrounds. Further investigation on the psychometric properties of the scales used in this study is also important. Providing scales with good psychometric properties will be beneficial for future research in this area. In light of the non-significant finding in the relationship between self-compassion and verbal aggression, it might be beneficial to use a different aggression measure in the future. The measure should include items that directly measure the behaviors that verbally harm other people. One of the potential measures is the Verbal Aggressiveness Questionnaire developed by Infante and Wigley (1986).

### Conclusion and Implications

This study is among the first to explore the psychological benefits of self-compassion in Indonesia. The result of this study showed that cultivating self-compassion was related to lower aggression in Indonesian college students. As previously mentioned, there are many ways for college students to cultivate self-compassion, for example, by doing daily meditation (Neff, 2011a). There is also a psychological intervention developed by Neff and Germer (2013) which is called Mindful Self-Compassion Program that can be used to increase human psychological well-being. Daily meditation practices and Mindful Self-Compassion Program seem to have the potential to be used to increase self-compassion and reduce aggression in the Indonesian college student population. However, further research is needed before employing the intervention to a larger number of people. We expect that this study could encourage more researchers to investigate issues related to self-compassion and aggression in Indonesia. Finally, we expect to see a reduction in violence incidents among Indonesian college students in the near future.

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## Appendix A

### The Indonesian Self-Compassion Scale and Aggression Questionnaire

Both scales are kept by the author. Interested readers may contact the author to obtain the scales.