

EXPLORING FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SELF-
COMPASSION AMONG LOCAL STUDENTS IN A
MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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COMPASSION AMONG LOCAL STUDENTS IN A
MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
SCS	Self-Compassion Scale
IFR	Index of Family Relations
SCS-R	Social Connectedness Scale-Revised
HPLP II	Health-Promoting Lifestyle Profile II
PALS	Pattern of Adaptive Learning Scale
SWLS	Satisfaction with Life Scale
CGPA	Cumulative Grade Point Average

LIST OF SYMBOLS

M	Mean
SD	Standard Deviation
N	Frequency
Y	Total score summated
N_c	Number of completed items
df	Degree of Freedom
F	F- distribution
p	P-value
r	Pearson correlation coefficient
R^2	Coefficient of multiple determination
β	Standardized coefficient
B	Unstandardized coefficient
$SE B$	Standard Error of Unstandardized coefficient

**MENEROKA FAKTOR YANG BERKAITAN DENGAN BELAS KASIHAN
TERHADAP DIRI DI KALANGAN PELAJAR TEMPATAN DI UNIVERSITI
AWAM MALAYSIA**

ABSTRAK

Belas kasihan terhadap diri melibatkan bersikap baik hati terhadap diri sendiri, bersikap terbuka terhadap penderitaan, kegagalan dan ketidaksempurnaan sendiri (dengan menganggapnya sebagai satu pengalaman yang dikongsi oleh semua manusia di dunia ini), dan melihat aspek-aspek negatif kehidupan ini dalam perspektif yang lebih seimbang. Dalam konteks psikologi positif, belas kasihan terhadap diri merupakan salah satu atribut positif yang berpotensi untuk membawa manusia ke arah kesejahteraan psikologi dengan meningkatkan tahap kebahagiaan, optimis, perasaan hubung kait dengan orang lain dan tahap inisiatif di samping mengurangkan emosi-emosi negatif. Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menguji tahap belas kasihan terhadap diri dalam kalangan pelajar universiti tempatan dan mengenal pasti hubungkait di antara belas kasihan terhadap diri dengan faktor-faktor lain. Antara faktor-faktor lain termasuk latarbelakang demografi, kefungisian keluarga, pertalian sosial, corak pembelajaran, pengawalan diri dalam tingkah laku kesihatan, belas kasihan terhadap orang lain dan kepuasan hidup. Faktor-faktor ini telah dikaji oleh kajian-kajian sebelum sebagai mempunyai kaitan dengan belas kasihan terhadap diri tetapi tidak pernah dikaji secara komprehensif dan di dalam konteks Malaysia. Kajian ini dijalankan dalam sebuah universiti tempatan di Malaysia, melibatkan 691 orang pelajar universiti tempatan dari latar belakang yang berbeza. Kajian ini

dijalankan secara kuantitatif, yaitu menggunakan soal selidik dalam pengumpulan data. Instrumen-instrumen yang digunakan dalam kajian ini termasuk *the Index of Family Relations*, *the Health-Promoting Lifestyle Profile II : Health Responsible Subscales*, *the Satisfaction With Life Scale*, *the Social Connectedness Scale-Revised*, *the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales: Personal Achievement Goal Orientation Subscale*, *the Self-Compassion Scale*, dan, *the Compassion Scale*. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa terdapat perbezaan jantina, kumpulan etnik dan agama yang signifikan dalam belas kasihan terhadap diri. Selain itu, hasil kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa kefungisian keluarga, pertalian sosial, corak pembelajaran berorientasikan penguasaan (*mastery orientated learning pattern*), pengawalan diri dalam tingkah laku kesihatan, belas kasihan terhadap orang lain dan kepuasan hidup mempunyai hubungan yang positif dan signifikan dengan belas kasihan terhadap diri. Seterusnya, model regresi pelbagai (*multiple regression*) menunjukkan bahawa kefungisian keluarga dan pertalian sosial adalah peramal signifikan kepada belas kasihan terhadap diri. Hasil kajian mencadangkan beberapa implikasi teori dan praktikal. Lebih spesifik lagi, kajian menunjukkan bukti menyokong ide bahawa belas kasihan terhadap diri sebagai satu konstruk positif yang patut ditingkatkan lagi di kalangan semua terutamanya golongan muda.

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ABSTRACT

Self-compassion involves being kind to oneself, being opened to one's suffering, nonfulfillment and imperfection (by treating them as common human experiences), and viewing these negative aspects of life in a more balanced perspective. From within the context of positive psychology, self-compassion is one of the human positive attributes that can potentially bring about psychological well-being for people by promoting happiness, optimism, sense of connection to others and initiatives while demoting negative emotions. The aim of this study is to assess self-compassion among local university students in Malaysia and to identify the factors that are associated with this construct. These factors include demographics, family functioning, social connectedness, learning pattern, self-regulation of health behaviour, compassion towards others and life satisfaction. These factors have been shown to be connected to self-compassion, but have not been studied comprehensively and in Malaysian context. This study was conducted in a public university in Malaysia with a sample of 691 local university students from different backgrounds. This study took a quantitative approach by using questionnaire for data collection. Instruments used in current study include the Index of Family Relations, the Health-Promoting Lifestyle Profile II: Health Responsible Subscales, the Satisfaction With Life Scale, the Social Connectedness Scale-Revised, the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales: Personal Achievement Goal Orientation Subscale, the

Self-Compassion Scale, and the Compassion Scale. Results showed that there were significant gender, ethnicity and religion differences in self-compassion. Results also showed that family functioning, social connectedness, mastery orientated learning pattern, self-regulation of health behaviour, compassion towards others and life satisfaction were positively and significantly associated with self-compassion. Furthermore, the multiple regression indicated that family functioning and social connectedness were significant predictors of self-compassion. Findings suggested some theoretical and practical implications. More specifically, this study found evidence that self-compassion is a positive construct that is related to other positive attributes and should be further promoted and cultivated, particularly among young people.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Neff (2003a) defined self-compassion as “being touched by and opens to one's suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to soothe one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness”. Self-compassion brings about the psychological well-being of people by promoting positive capacity of coping with stress, happiness, optimism, sense of connection to others and initiatives while demoting negative emotions (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff, 2009; Neff, 2010; Terry & Leary, 2011). There are three major components in self-compassion. The first component is self-kindness, which promotes the extension of kindness and understanding towards oneself. The second component is common humanity, which involves seeing one’s experiences, either positive or negative, as common experiences shared by human beings, rather than seeing them separately. The last component of self-compassion is mindfulness. Instead of over-identifying one’s painful thought or experience, mindfulness involves viewing the painful experience in a balanced perspective (Neff, 2003).

Previous studies on self-compassion have shown relationships between self-compassion and social factors such as demographics, family functioning and social connectedness. Family experiences such as maternal, paternal and peer support help individual to develop self-compassion. When people experience negative events, they face these unhappy incidents the way their family members do, especially

parents as the role model of the family. Therefore, individuals who have warm and helpful family members become more self-compassionate in adulthood (Neff, 2010).

On the other hand, whether demographic factors predict self-compassion remain uncertain. Currently, there are mixed findings regarding this issue (Neff, 2003). In addition, previous researches have shown positive correlations between self-compassion and other positive qualities such as mastery orientated learning pattern, self-regulation of health related behaviour, compassion towards others and psychological well-being. Conversely, previous studies have also shown negative correlations between self-compassion and depression, anxiety, and self-criticism (Neff, 2003; Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005; Wei, Liao, Ku & Shaffer, 2011; Terry & Leary, 2011). Neff et al. (2005) showed that individuals with higher levels of self-compassion set mastery goals in their academic achievement. Through correlation test, Wei et al. (2011) showed that self-compassion positively correlated with subjective well-being, while negatively correlated with attachment anxiety.

The main focus of the current study is self-compassion among young adults who are local university students in Malaysia. Local university students represent a group of young adults who are given the opportunity to participate in tertiary education. They demonstrate higher levels of academic performance (at least in the national examinations) compared to their peers. They are educated to be equipped with the essential high-competency skills for specific fields (e.g. educators, medical practitioners, public servants, engineers, sociologists, entrepreneurs, scientists, and etc.). They are also trained to display the capacity and analytical skills to play an important role in driving the growth of local economies, educating future generations, leading the government effectively, and making vital decisions. They

are expected to make substantial contributions to develop Malaysia. As such, local university students represent an important group in the society.

However, young adults in university are still establishing their own identities and they might lack life experiences to recognize and understand the connection between their own and others' suffering (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Marcia, 1994). In addition, the process of pursuing knowledge and skills may come with challenges such as lack of motivation, financial problems and daily hassles. As such, the current study introduces self-compassion as a positive approach to help young adults in coping better with their negative experiences in life. As university students are the assets of our society, it is important for them to be equipped with certain personal strengths to deal with stressful or negative events. Self-compassion helps young adults in university to cope better with life challenges and eventually achieve personal, academic and later, career fulfillment.

Current study views self-compassion as a new construct within the field of positive psychology. It is a positive attribute that can be further explored to see its potential effect on human well-being and personal development. This study is also looking at a more comprehensive picture of self-compassion by examining how it is related to demographics, family functioning, social connectedness, mastery orientated learning pattern, self-regulation of health related behaviour, compassion towards others and life satisfaction in the context of Malaysian. Current study views self-compassion as an approach to help university students in particular and other young adults in general, to enhance their overall well-being.

1.2 Problem Statement

University is an institution that offers young adults a chance to participate in higher education and research in various academic fields. It is also a small community consists of people such as academic staffs, technical staffs, general staffs, students and etc. Being able to attend university is a very appealing experience that offers not only satisfaction to young adults but also improvement in terms of knowledge, social skill and even physical well-being (Elias, Mahyuddin & Uli, 2009). However, students face challenges during their time in university. According to Smith and Renk (2007), university students encounter various overwhelming experiences such as dealing with examinations and assignments, struggling to achieve professors and parents' expectations, choosing a major, planning for the future, and financial problems. In addition, daily interactions between university students and people around them will lead to self-evaluation and social comparison, which might induce negative feelings (Benson & Elder, 2011). Most of the time, university students get into negative moods over unhappy event, for example, poor academic performance, non-ideal body image, and losing of romantic partner (Neff, 2009).

Referring to a previous research conducted at a local public university in Malaysia, among the major problems faced by local university students were financial difficulties (e.g. delays in receiving funding from the sponsor / provider or insufficient funds to cover the expenses of the study), academic problems (e.g. obstacles in course registration, reluctant to attend lecture early in the morning, or troubles in understanding reference books written in English), and finally health problems where they are less concern about their health or lack of ability to take care of themselves (Ahmad, Fauziah, Azemi, Shaari & Zailani, 2002). All of these

problems might be causing university students to experience negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, stress and pessimism (Neff, 2003). A research conducted on 506 students between the age of 18 and 24 years old from four public universities in Klang Valley, Malaysia, showed that among the sample population, 27.5% had moderate, and 9.7% had severe or extremely severe depression; 34% had moderate, and 29% had severe or extremely severe anxiety; and 18.6% had moderate and 5.1% had severe or extremely severe stress scores based on the DASS-21 inventory (Shamsuddin et al., 2013).

Young adults in general represent an important group. Their youth symbolizes their potential in future development. University students in particular can be considered as a group of young adults who does better academically, and are equip with more knowledge and potential compare to their peers. They are more likely to graduate from the university and continue to hold important positions in the workplace and society. They may also be making important decisions later on that can affect many people. It is important for these young people to be equipped with not only the academic training, but also positive constructs that can help them to deal with life challenges and eventually become happy, healthy and functioning adults who can make contributions to the society.

This study views self-compassion as a construct that can ultimately help Malaysian local university students to achieve psychological well-being. Given the findings showed that self-compassion can promote happiness, optimism, sense of connection to others and initiatives while demote negative emotions such as distress, depression, anxiety and guilt, which stem from negative events during university life (Leary et al., 2007; Pauley & McPherson, 2010; Terry & Leary, 2011), it would

seem that an exploration of self-compassion among Malaysian local university students is an important endeavour.

Previous researches on self-compassion focused more in the Western contexts. Limited research on self-compassion was done in the context of Asian. Hence, there is an urge to explore self-compassion in Asia. To date, no study had been done to explore self-compassion among local university students in Malaysia. Therefore, this study will investigate the level of self-compassion among local university students in Malaysian public university, for a better understanding of self-compassion in the context of Malaysian.

Previous researches on self-compassion were less comprehensive. Researches on self-compassion have been done on the contribution of self-compassion to overall well-being, relationship between self-compassion with a few variables such as stress, anxiety and maternal support, and, comparison between self-compassion with other self-values (e.g. self-esteem and self-pity) (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003; Neff, 2010; Pauley & McPherson, 2010). While these studies are important and have successfully expanded the study of self-compassion, they do not offer a complete picture. In addition, none of the studies on self-compassion have investigated whether the dynamic of the relationship between self-compassion and other constructs holds true among local university students in Malaysia. There might be changes in the patterns of relationship between self-compassion and other constructs in different culture. There is a need to explore the relationship between self-compassion and other constructs in non-Western context in order to increase our understanding of this concept. Hence, this study will investigate the relationship between self-compassion and demographics, family functioning, social

connectedness, mastery orientated learning pattern, self-regulation of health related behaviour, compassion to others and life satisfaction in the context of Malaysian.

Previous studies on gender differences in self-compassion often yielded different findings. Certain studies found out that male university students were more self-compassionate than female university students (Neff & Vonk, 2009; Raes, 2010) while other studies that involved university students in the United States, Taiwan, Thailand and Turkey showed no significant gender differences in the level of self-compassion (Neff, Pisitsungkagarn & Hsieh, 2008; Iskender, 2009). Hence, the effect of gender in self-compassion remains unclear. There is a need to further explore gender differences within self-compassion in order to strengthen the theory proposed for this construct.

1.3 Significance of Study

The result of this study is important because it helps the authorities of universities, parents, lecturers and the Ministry of Higher Education to gain a better understanding of self-compassion, by investigating the level of self-compassion among local university students in Malaysia. This study views self-compassion as a potentially useful element to help local university students to achieve psychological well-being.

Previous findings suggested self-compassion as a teachable skill (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). This has pointed to the value in exploring self-compassion as it relates to Malaysian local university students, a population which is certainly in need of effective treatment interventions to foster self-compassion for their own psychological well-being. Without exploratory studies that identify the role of self-compassion among young adults, however, an intervention focus on self-compassion

with local university students cannot possibly be implemented. A comprehensive study of self-compassion and its relationship with other student related constructs is needed.

While studies on self-compassion have mostly been done in Western context, this study investigates self-compassion and explores factors that associate with or predict self-compassion among non-western respondents (local university students from Malaysia). This study addresses the problem of limited studies on self-compassion in non-western samples. The results of this study help psychologists to understand self-compassion in the context of Malaysian and allow them to compare self-compassion among young adults in different societies, such as Asian vs Western societies and Collectivistic vs Individualistic societies.

The current study is also important because it explores the relationship between self-compassion with other variables (i.e. family functioning, social connectedness, mastery orientated learning patterns, self-regulation of health behaviour, compassion towards others and life satisfaction). Findings from this study offer a more comprehensive picture of self-compassion and further understanding of the construct.

Another issue to address in this study is gender differences in self-compassion. The patterns of gender differences in self-compassion remain uncertain due to the contradiction in previous findings. The current study, which takes place in Malaysia, contributes to the literature on gender differences in self-compassion. The current study might discover the similar patterns of gender differences in self-compassion as in previous researches, which further strengthen the existing theory of gender differences in self-compassion, or discovers new patterns of gender differences in self-compassion in the context of Malaysian. This in turn highlights

the significance of this study by contributing to the body of knowledge, particularly within the subject of self-compassion.

1.4 Objectives

1. To assess the level of self-compassion among local students in a Malaysian public university.
2. To explore the relationship between self-compassion and demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion, academic results and monthly family income.
3. To explore the relationship between self-compassion and other variables such as family functioning, social connectedness, mastery orientated learning pattern, self-regulation of health behaviour, compassion towards others and life satisfaction.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What is the level of self-compassion for local students in a Malaysian public university?
2. What is the relationship between self-compassion and demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion, academic result and monthly family income?
3. What are the relationships between self-compassion and other variables such as family functioning, social connectedness, master orientated learning pattern, self-regulation of health behaviour, compassion towards others and life satisfaction?

1.6 Scope of Study

The current study aims to address the gap of knowledge of self-compassion in different cultural contexts. The current study focuses on assessing the level of self-compassion among Malaysian local university students from different year of study and background, who attended a university wide course. The current study also aims to investigate the relationship between self-compassion and other variables such as demographics, family functioning, social connectedness, mastery orientated learning pattern, self-regulation of health behavior, compassion towards others and life satisfaction. The current study is conducted in a Malaysian public university.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, literature review of relevant topics is discussed. First, this chapter reviews the definition, theories and conceptions of self-compassion for a background understanding on self-compassion. Second, this chapter compares self-compassion with self-pity and self-esteem. Third, the development of self-compassion as an approach in Positive Psychology is explored through previous studies in order to understand the latest trend of researches with self-compassion. In addition, this literature also reviews the studies of self-compassion in Asia or non-Western countries to understand the patterns of self-compassion in different cultures. Next, reviews on correlated constructs to self-compassion are presented. Lastly, the final section of this chapter focuses on theoretical frameworks, conceptual framework, conceptual and operational definitions, and hypotheses.

2.1 Self-Compassion

Generally, people treat themselves far unkind than they would treat others during a negative moment in their life, credited to negative self-evaluation, self-critic and self-judgement that occur consciously or subconsciously, which further induce negative emotions such as depression, anxiety and sadness (Neely, Schallert, Mohammed & Chen, 2009; Terry & Leary, 2011). In order to demote the above-

mentioned negative emotions, self-compassion has been introduced to western psychology as a relatively new concept (Neff, 2009).

Self-compassion is a concept that stems from compassion (Neff, 2003; Neff, 2003a). The general definition of compassion serves as a basis to the conceptualisation of self-compassion. Gilbert (2005) defined compassion as “a non-defensive and non-judgmental way of accepting others and own suffering, with a cognitive comprehension of suffering and the motive and action to relieve suffering”. Wispe (1991) defined compassion as “being moved by and connecting to others’ suffering which in turn induce the urge to show kindness to those in needs; practicing non-judgmental understanding towards others’ incompetence and imperfections, and treating failure or suffering as common human experience”. Applying compassion to self, Neff (2003a) defined self-compassion as accepting, connecting and moved by one’s suffering, giving rise to the desire of easing one’s pain with self-kindness, practising non-judgmental understanding towards one’s incompetence and/or non-fulfilment and imperfections, and viewing one’s experience as a shared human experience. Self-compassion enables people to care and have compassion towards themselves during the hardest time in their life and offers them a sense of warmth, connectedness and comfort (Neff, 2010; Wei et al., 2011).

Although self-compassion is still a novel concept of western psychology, many researches have been conducted to investigate the psychological benefits of it. The main reason behind this is in part due to the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) developed by Kristin Neff. The SCS measures the behaviour tendency of people engaging in self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus overidentification (Neff, 2003).

The self-kindness component of self-compassion is the ability to treat oneself with care and understanding, rather than with self-criticism and self-judgement. The common humanity component of self-compassion recognizes imperfection of oneself as common human experiences, rather than feeling disconnected from the surroundings on the account of one's failures. Finally, the role of mindfulness in self-compassion is to view painful experiences in a balanced perspective, or with a peaceful state of mind, rather than emphasizing or magnifying the dramatic storyline of one's negative encounters (Neff, 2003; Terry & Leary, 2011; Wei et al., 2011).

Self-kindness refers to the attitude we adopt to deal with negative events in our life. Self-kindness involves exhibiting forgiveness, tolerance, clemency, warmth, agreement and sensitivity to our own actions, feelings, thoughts, and impulses (Gilbert & Irons, 2005; Neff, 2003a). People who are self-kind view their worth as unconditional, display understanding towards themselves, and do not ignore, criticise, judge or feel angry with themselves, even though they are facing pain, failure and suffering (Ellis, 1973; Maslow & Lowry, 1968; Neff, 2003). Self-kindness suggests that one deserves love, happiness, and affection, even after experiencing sore failures.

Common humanity views failures, sufferings, imperfections, sorrows, and weaknesses as negative experiences that are shared by everyone. While individuals might withdraw from others when they feel ashamed of themselves, their failure or their emotion, common humanity involves accepting oneself for being imperfect and being limited in capability, and that everyone faces negative experiences at some point in their life (Neff, 2003a). This is related to the perspective of Buddhism that views human as all are intimately connected and they seek for connection constantly throughout their life. Buddhism also believes that viewing oneself as separated from others is merely an illusion.

Meanwhile, instead of reacting negatively to thoughts and emotions, mindfulness involves observing and labeling them (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness helps one to deeply experience and learn from the present without the distractions of self-evaluations or worries about the past or future. Neff (2003) defined mindfulness as “the readiness to view our negative thoughts, emotions, and painful experiences openly and clearly, in a balanced perspective”. Mindfulness is a state of mind where individual observes and accepts thoughts and feelings without judging them or trying to ignore and suppress them (Neff, 2003).

Though the three components of self-compassion are different in concept, they are interrelated. They interact and engender one another (Neff, 2003). Certain level of mindfulness is necessary to enhance the feelings of common humanity and self-kindness. The non-judgemental part of mindfulness encourages self-understanding and lessens self-criticism in people, inducing the occurrence of self-kindness (Jopling, 2000). Moreover, mindfulness also contributes to common humanity by increasing the feelings of being connected, where the balanced state of mind counters the egocentrism that causes one to feel isolated from the rest of humanity (Neff, 2003).

Mindfulness can also be enhanced by practising self-kindness and common humanity. Common humanity highlights the fact that pains and failures happen not only in one but also in the whole of humanity. Recognition of common humanity prevents one from overidentifying negative events and enhances the mindfulness (Fredrickson, 2001). Individuals experience self-acceptance when they stop self-critic and self-blaming, which enables them to face negative emotions and feelings honestly, achieving a balanced state of mind (Neff & McGehee, 2010).

Lastly, common humanity and self-kindness affect one another as well. When individuals see failures and pains as common experiences shared by others, the degree of self-blame and self-judgment will decrease. Decrement in self-blame and self-judgement induce understanding and kindness to those who are in pain, including themselves. On the other hand, self-kindness buffers high degree of self-consciousness (a result of critical self-judgement) and thus enhances the connection between individuals and the common humanity (Neff, 2003).

The research on self-compassion is still insufficient, with the knowledge of association between the three components remains less clear. Neff (2003) suggested that self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness are interrelated and induce one another. A study by Hollis-Walker and Colosimo (2011) further suggested that the development of each component in self-compassion has the ability to enhance one another. Hollis-Walker and Colosimo (2011) examined mindfulness, happiness and self-compassion among 27 men and 96 women ($n = 123$), with 59% ($n = 73$) were university students and 41% ($n = 50$) were demographically similar community members. All the respondents completed the survey, which consisted of the Five-Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ), the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB), SCS and NEO-PI-R which measured the five-factor model of personality. The results showed the role of self-compassion as partial mediator in the relationship between mindfulness and happiness (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011). Findings proposed the possibility for enhancing one component by developing the other. However, more researches are needed to investigate the function and the direction of relationships between the three components in self-compassion.

Previous studies have shown that individuals with higher level of self-compassion experience greater psychological well-being, including happiness,

optimism, personal initiative, environmental mastery, life satisfaction, autonomy, personal growth and social connectedness, compared to individuals with lower levels of self-compassion (Iskender, 2009; Leary et al., 2007; Pauley & McPherson, 2010; Terry & Leary, 2011). In addition, self-compassion induces well-being by making individuals feel being concerned, affiliated and emotionally calm (Wei et al., 2011). Self-compassion has also shown negative correlation with anxiety, depression, self-criticism, neuroticism, thought suppression, and neurotic perfectionism (Akin, 2009; Iskender, 2009). Individuals who are self-compassionate do not magnify the suffering and failures in their life and they do not have the feelings of being isolated from the rest of humankind (Neff, 2003). By applying self-compassion in their daily life, self-compassionate individuals prevent themselves from immersing in the pain of messy and suffering situation in the first place. Individuals with self-compassion prevent themselves from injurious behaviours and motivate themselves to solve the obstacles in life in order to pursue overall well-being. Therefore, self-compassionate individuals behave in a way that enhances psychological well-being, leading them to better psychological health (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion also acts as a psychological buffer from the impact of negative life events by helping individuals to evaluate themselves and their life experiences more accurately (Pauley & McPherson, 2010). Self-compassion enables individuals to view themselves acutely without fear of self-accusation, allowing individuals to be aware of, and make an effort in changing negative thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

The concept of self-compassion is not without its criticisms. Researchers questioned self-compassion as it might attenuate individuals' motivation or lead individuals to self-indulgence once they are over self-compassionate. However, self-compassion cultivates the desire for well-being, and is correlated with greater

personal initiative to make necessary changes in life. Self-compassionate people are more open to their mistakes, correct the futile behaviours and work on the next challenge because they do not criticise themselves when they fail (Neff, 2009). Therefore, self-compassion does not demotivate individuals or lead them to self-indulgence.

Thus, self-compassion can be considered as a positive construct. This study views self-compassion as a potential construct that can help local university students in coping with stress and negative events in their daily life. High level of self-compassion has been proven by previous reviews to positively correlate with psychological well-being, physical health and achievement goals in academy (Neff, 2009; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Neff et al., 2005). In addition, self-compassion is also expected to lead local university students to positive and sustainable development in their future life.

In general, there are limited studies about self-compassion. Much of the reviews in this study has been done based on previous researches by Neff, who pioneered the research on self-compassion, and other psychology researchers such as Barnard, Glibert, Leary and Zabelina. As such, there are limited debates on how to define self-compassion. Researchers within this area tend to adopt a similar definition of self-compassion.

In this study, self-compassion is conceptualised as a multi-dimensional construct that can be divided into three components: self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness; and examined through the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS). The SCS consists of 26 items in six subscales, Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgment, Common Humanity vs. Isolation, and, Mindfulness vs. Over-Identification (Baker &

McNulty, 2011; Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003). Higher score indicates higher level of self-compassion.

2.2 Self-Compassion vs Other Self-Themes

In the process of conceptualising self-compassion, it is vital to understand how it is identical to, but more benefiting and comprehensive than other self-themes that were formerly explored in the field of psychology. It is also equally important to compare self-compassion with self-esteem and self-pity to highlight the differences between these self-themes.

2.2.1 Self-Compassion vs Self-Pity

Self-compassion and self-pity are two different self-themes (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987). Individuals are highly disconnected from others when they feel pity for others. They feel lucky that they are not the one being unfortunate. When individuals feel pity for themselves, they focus solely on their own problems and are not aware of people around the world who face the same problem. They become disconnected with others, assuming themselves as the only person suffering in the world. Individuals with self-pity emphasise on their own problems, and separate themselves from others, which is a sign of losing common humanity and mindfulness. In contrast, individuals with compassion feel connected to others and understand suffering as a normal process in life, which faced by majority of people. Individuals with self-compassion see related experience between oneself and other, which make them feel connected to the rest (Neff, 2003).

Another difference between self-compassion and self-pity is the way individuals identify their own negative experiences. People who practise self-pity usually get carried away by their own feelings. They become extremely immersed in negative emotions, until they cannot access other capabilities, such as the capability to retreat from the deadlock or view problems in a balanced perspective, which might help them to overcome the problems or negative emotions. This situation is termed as “overidentification” (Bennett-Goleman, 2001). In contrast, self-compassionate individuals do not overidentify their negative emotions. They allow kindness for oneself and recognize negative emotions as the shared experiences in humanity. Besides that, self-compassion encourages individuals to accept painful feelings by acknowledging and feeling compassion for their experiences in the first place (Neff, 2003).

2.2.2 Self-Compassion vs Self-Esteem

Self-compassion has always been compared to self-esteem by researchers. Previous studies showed that self-compassion might contribute to psychological benefits as many as self-esteem, with fewer drawbacks (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff & Vonk, 2009). Self-compassion encourages self-kindness and self-caring, which helps individuals to foster productive behaviours and prevent them from maladaptive effects of self-judgement (Horney, 1950). Self-compassion does not evaluate one and others based on their performance, or whether one is achieving own ideal state. Instead, self-compassion focuses on feelings of compassion towards oneself and sees one’s own experiences as shared experiences in humanity rather than critical self-judgement (Neff, 2003).

Self-esteem is fostered on continual positive evaluations of oneself. It operates mostly at the level of representational self-concept (Harter, 1999). Individuals with high self-esteem view themselves as the special one, standing out in a crowd. In other words, self-esteem is built when one evaluates self as superior than the others from the surroundings, which is a total contradiction with self-compassion because self-compassion encourages the connectedness of oneself with the rest. There is no doubt that self-esteem causes positive evaluation of self. However, it is a quality that has to be maintained through continuous evaluation of self with others, which will ultimately lead to narcissism and self-centeredness (McMillan, Singh & Simonetta, 1994).

Self-esteem is relatively harder to foster, compared to self-compassion because self-esteem might be fostered through unrealistic self-evaluation or by unrealistic praise from others whereas self-compassion does not require individuals to adapt into it. Previous researches have indicated that people like to get positive feedback. However, they prefer feedbacks that are consistent with reality or feedback that verify their self-view rather than unrealistic praise (Swann, 1990). Moreover, unrealistic praise might blind one from seeing his/her own wrong and weakness. In contrast, self-compassion allows people to accept and see their weaknesses clearly, and enables them to change their harmful patterns out of the motive of caring and kind (Neff, 2009).

Neff and Vonk (2009) investigated self-compassion and self-esteem and their relationship to different aspects of psychological functioning. Participants in this study were recruited by means of articles in magazine, newspapers, advertisements and links to Internet sites. A total of 4202 participants began the first series of questionnaires and 8 months later the study ended with the 12th assessment, which

was the self-compassion test. At this point, there were 2187 participants left who shared the same characteristics with those started the study. Participants consisted of 26% men and 74% women, ranging in age from 18 to 83 years old. Most of them had professional college (44%) or university degrees (35%), and the majority of them were employee with pay (63%). Data collection, which included 12 separate data assessment was done over 8-month period, started with background questions, followed by the first series of questionnaire (T1) until the last questionnaire (T12). Participants received a reminder email when the next series of questionnaire was available. Measurements used in this study were the Self-Compassion Scale, Global Self-Esteem, Self-esteem stability, Contingent Self-Esteem, Contingencies of self-worth, Social Comparison Orientation, Self-Rumination, Narcissism, Anger Response Inventory and Need for Cognitive Closure. Data was analysed using zero-order correlation and standardised regression. Results showed that self-compassion predicted more self-worth than self-esteem and stronger negative relation with public self-consciousness, anger, self-rumination, social comparison and need for cognition. Self-esteem is positive associated with narcissism, but not self-compassion (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Findings from Neff and Vonk suggested that self-compassion might be a stronger inducement for psychological well-being than self-esteem with no drawback such as narcissism to self-esteem.

2.3 Development of Self-Compassion as an Approach to Positive Psychology

Self-compassion is a concept well-known in Buddhist philosophy centuries ago. However, being discovered by Western psychologists just recently, self-compassion is novel to Western psychology, compared to other concepts such as

empathy and compassion (Zabelina & Robinson, 2010). For the past decades, there is a trend of idea interchanging between Buddhism and psychology, further widening the current understanding of mental well-being (Epstein, 1995; Neff, 2003a; Watson, Bathelor, & Claxton, 1999). However, studies on self-compassion have been conducted globally over the years by researchers from different cultures and nationalities, such as Turkish, Iranian Muslim and Asia. They have explored the impact of self-compassion on different aspects of human well-being (Iskender, 2009; Ghorbani, Chen & Norballa, 2012).

Over the years, clinical psychologists have become more interested in developing interventions that might cultivate self-compassion, such as compassionate mind training, and mindfulness meditation programs (Gilbert, 2005; Gilbert & Procter, 2006). Besides that, researchers have also explored a traditional Buddhist meditation practice named loving-kindness meditation (LKM). The LKM is a mindfulness meditation practice that induces positive changes in attitude such as unconditional love, kindness, self-compassion, compassion towards others, connectedness and self-acceptance, through the growth of love and acceptance (Boellinghaus, Jones, & Hutton, 2012; Hofmann, Grossman, & Hinton, 2011).

Boellinghaus and colleagues (2012) reviewed the effectiveness of loving-kindness meditation (LKM) in developing clinicians' self-compassion and other-focused concern. They conducted a literature search on databases such as PsycINFO, Assia and Web of Science for 3 weeks by using the keyword 'loving-kindness' in order to explore studies that evaluated LKM, but no studies that focused solely on clinicians' sample were found. Therefore, they included studies that evaluated the efficiency of LKM on self-compassion or other-focused concerns. As a result, Boellinghaus and colleagues (2012) found a study by Weibel (2007), which showed

the effectiveness of the LKM in increasing self-compassion and compassion towards others, relative to the control group (Boellinghaus et al., 2012).

The study by Weibel (2007) compared a loving-kindness intervention to a non-intervention control group in a sample of 71 university students from a public Midwestern university, who attended psychology courses. The participants were assessed at three time points (pre, post, two month follow-up). The sample population was 78% Caucasian, 17% African-American, 3% Hispanic and 2% others, with 77% of female and mean age of 19.1 years. In the study, participants were randomized into the loving-kindness or control group. Participants' group status was recorded and they were offered by the researcher of which night to take part in the LKM or to complete the post-intervention surveys in the control group. At the end of each four sessions, the participants were requested to write a weekly meditation diary to measure how much time they spent meditating outside the group. The loving-kindness intervention was a 90-minute sessions with 10-12 participants per group and was carried out for 4 weeks. The measurements used in this study were the Self-Compassion Scale, the Compassionate Love Scale – Humanity Version, the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory- Trait Form, the Weekly Meditation Check, and the Post Intervention Survey. Data analysis showed that the loving-kindness group experienced significantly greater increment in self-compassion and compassionate love, compared to the control group. At two-month follow-up, significant greater increment in self-compassion was still detected in the loving-kindness group (Weibel, 2007).

Researches conducted on self-compassion have shown the correlation between self-compassion with well-being of individual (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007a; Neely et al., 2009; Patsiopoulos & Buhanan, 2011).

Self-compassion promotes well-being by turning off the threat system (related to self-criticism, defensiveness and insecure attachment) and turning on the self-comfort system (related to safety, oxytocin-opiate system and secure attachment) (Gilbert & Irons, 2005). Through increasing the feelings of safety and interconnectedness, and reducing the feelings of threat and isolation, self-compassion fosters greater emotional balance.

Neff and colleagues (2007a) studied the relationship between self-compassion and positive psychological health. In the study, they randomly recruited 57 male and 120 female university students with educational-psychology background from a southwestern university in the United States. The mean age of the sample was 20.02 years and the ethnic composition of the sample was 56% Caucasian, 25% Asian, 14% Hispanic, 5% Mixed Ethnicity and 1% Other. Also in this study, the participants were requested to complete a self-report questionnaire in a meeting of not more than 30 per group. The questionnaire included instruments such as the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS), the Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale, the 9-item Personal Growth Initiative Scale, the Curiosity and Exploration Inventory, the 4-item Subjective Happiness Scale, the 6-item Life Orientation Test-Revised, the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule and the 60-item NEO Five-Factor Inventory. Data analysis wise, zero-order correlations between the SCS and other variables showed significant positive correlation. Results showed that self-compassion positively and significantly correlates with happiness, optimism, positive emotion, wisdom, personal initiative, curiosity and exploration, while negatively correlated with negative emotions (Neff et al., 2007a).

Another study that shows the correlation between self-compassion and well-being would be the research by Neely and colleagues (2009). Neely and colleagues