

Difficulties generating self-compassion: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

Kendisine anlayış göstermekte zorlanan bireyler hakkında yorumlayıcı fenomenolojik analiz

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to make an idiographic investigation about the difficulties that are encountered by people who self-identify as having difficulties with self-compassion. Although a growing number of studies have been carried out concerning the concept of self-compassion, most research designs were quantitative. Based on this gap, the current study expanded the scope to include a qualitative dimension of the recent literature on self-compassion and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted as methodological preference, which particularly monitors the lived experience of participants. In consequence of four in-depth semi-structured interviews, four super-ordinate themes emerged; the double-edged-sword: perfectionism, the flaws of compassion, the effects of a third person, and the advantages of self-criticism. In line with pre-existing research, these findings explored the reasons behind self-undermining behaviours and misconstructions about self-compassion, which are a barrier to gentle self-talk. Furthermore, unfavourable effects of the social environment prime participants to maladaptive perfectionism and excessive self-criticism, which are considered a success formula by the participants. This study's purpose is to present a detailed roadmap about the self-destructive journey of the people with low self-compassion. It will help researchers and clinicians to develop future interventions in order to cultivate kind and encouraging attitudes in self-critical people.

Keywords: Self-compassion, compassion, positive psychology

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı, kendilerine öz-anlayış göstermekte zorlandıklarını beyan eden bireylerin özgün deneyimlerini araştırmaktır. Öz-anlayış alanında yapılan çalışmaların sayısı her geçen gün artış gösteriyor olsa da, metodolojik oranların çoğu kantitatif araştırma yöntemlerine aittir. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, alandaki kalitatif çalışmaların da kapsamını genişletebilmek adına, katılımcıların yaşamış deneyimlerinin incelendiği Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analiz metodunu kullanmıştır. Dört yarı-yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmenin sonucunda elde edilen, dört üst tema şu şekildedir; iki ucu keskin kılıç: mükemmeliyetçilik, anlayışın kusurları, üçüncü kişilerin etkisi ve özeleştirenin avantajları. Önceden yürütülmüş araştırmaların sonuçları ile paralel şekilde, bu araştırmanın bulguları da kişilerin nazik bir içsel konuşmaya sahip olmasını engelleyen iki önemli etmenin nedenlerini ortaya koymuştur; kişilerin öz-anlayışa ilişkin sahip oldukları yanlış yorumlamalar ve kendilerine karşı sergiledikleri yıpratıcı tavırlar. Ayrıca, bu araştırma kapsamında sosyal çevrelerinin yarattığı olumsuz etkilerin, katılımcıları maladaptif mükemmeliyetçiliğe ve aşırı öz-eleştiriye yönelttiği; bunların da katılımcılar tarafından başarı formülü olarak tanımlandığı tespit edilmiştir. Bu çalışmanın hedefi öz-anlayış seviyesi düşük bireylerin, kendi kendilerine zarar veren bu yolculukları hakkında detaylı bir yol haritası sunabilmektir. Elde edilen bilgiler, özeleştirel kimselerin daha sevecen ve cesaretli tutumlar sergilemesini sağlayacak uygulamaların oluşturulması için araştırmacılara ve klinisyenlere katkı sağlayacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Öz-anlayış, merhamet, pozitif psikoloji

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Introduction

Positive psychology, the scientific discipline that celebrates the strengths and virtues of average people aims to assist in living a richer and more satisfying life (Diener, 2000; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In this respect, as the quest to improve the functioning of human beings (Sheldon & King, 2001), positive psychology is closely interwoven with the concept of self-compassion (Shapira & Mongrain, 2010). To start it is illuminating to examine the etymological roots of self-compassion. The Latin word of *compati* is the origin of compassion and its „com“ part means „together with“, whereas „pati“ refers to „suffer with“ (Burnell, 2009). In other words, compassion can be depicted as the realization, alleviation and prevention of the emotional pain, which is experienced by self and others (Tsering, 2008). In a broad sense, the definition of self-compassion goes hand in hand with the description of compassion (Neff, 2004). In Buddhist tradition the prerequisite of showing kindness to others is self-compassion (Brach, 2003).

Self-compassion refers to the process of giving emotional support to yourself in a moment of suffering (Terry & Leary, 2011). Self-compassion includes the dimensions of self-kindness versus self-criticism, common humanity versus a sense of separation and mindfulness versus over-identification (Neff, 2004). The first facet highlights behaving kindly and warmly towards oneself rather than judgmentally. The second component is about perceiving one’s fallibility as being human rather than feeling isolated. The last one revolves around holding painful experiences with mindful awareness instead of rejecting or over-identifying with them (Neff, 2003a).

Compassionate behaviours ensure a balanced relationship with ourselves and other people that is needed for optimal psychological functioning, which is doctrine of positive psychology (Blatt, 1995). Contrary to the negativity bias of traditional psychology, positive psychology puts human strengths and potentials at the heart of its philosophy (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In accordance with this appreciative perspective, cultivation of self-compassion leads to important qualities central to positive psychology such as kindness, happiness, optimism, wisdom, curiosity, equanimity, and hope (Neff, Kirkpatrick & Rude, 2007a). Furthermore past research and relevant literature has revealed that developing self-kindness and openness towards our stress also decreases anxiety, depression, shame, burnout and fear of failure by increasing life satisfaction, social connectedness and emotional intelligence (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack & Sabiston, 2014; Potter, Yar, Francis & Schuster, 2014).

Despite the fact that self-compassion is rooted in ancient Buddhist thought, it has gained prominence in Western psychology recently. Although self-compassion has far-reaching constructive impacts on mental health, it has only been explored by correlational analysis and the absence of other methodologies has been underlined frequently by scholars ((Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, 2003a). In this context, choosing a phenomenological approach provides the opportunity to examine the process and functioning of self-compassion by expanding the experience of self-compassion (Neff, 2003a). Apart from the aforementioned benefits of this life skill, some people have doubts about possible pitfalls of self-compassion and believe that displaying self-kindness may give way to undesirable consequences and harm their character (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987) The prominent figures in the area of self-compassion, points out three conceptual confusions that people have when generating self-compassion namely self-indulgence, self-pity and self-centeredness(Germer & Neff, 2013)

Despite extensive research efforts, any phenomenological based qualitative study concerning this particular topic hasn’t been employed up until now. For instance there were no studies featuring the phrases of difficulties while cultivating self-compassion on following literature search engines; PsycINFO, Embase, Medline, Pubmed, Isi-Web of Science, Google Scholar, Psycarticles, Wiley, Jstor, Taylor- francis, Eric, Sage, Proquest thesis). In order to grasp the reasons of continuous self-judgment, this study aimed to examine personal difficulties in generating self-compassion by utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith,

1995). Owing to the distinctive design of IPA, micro and macro factors that influence the cultivation of self-compassion were uncovered. This may present a valuable reference for future studies with respect to the diversity and variability of the self-compassion experience that has been overlooked by the relevant quantitative literature (Willig, 2001). Before giving the accounts of participants, who identify themselves as having difficulties with self-compassion, it is essential to take a close look at the three handicaps that were mentioned in the existing body of research.

Previous Research in the Field

When self-compassion was popularized in Western psychology, it triggered an academic discussion about its potential traps such as narcissism, self-absorption, an excessive focus on oneself by disregarding others (Seligman, 1995), distorted self-consciousness (Sedikides, 1993), upward prejudice towards out-groups (Aberson, Healy & Romero, 2000) and offensive tendencies in the event of ego threats (Baumeister, Smart & Boden, 1996). Even though recent emerging evidence has suggested numerous positive effects of self-compassion on emotional well-being in direct contradiction with the hypotheses above, Neff (2003a) asserts that on a community level people hold back from feeling self-compassion due to three reasons.

The first reason why people are reluctant to be self-compassionate is the belief that self-bullying drives them to reach their goals, whereas self-compassion causes self-indulgence by siding with faults (Neff, Kirkpatrick & Rude, 2007b). Moreover, they think that critical internal language protects them from becoming a slave to their hedonic impulses (Neff, 2012). According to research findings it is the other way around; feeding self-criticism decreases motivation and triggers procrastination and underachievement (Powers, Koesnter & Zuroff, 2007). On the contrary self-compassion is a supportive force that enables examining failures mindfully, accept imperfections as part of humanity and change (Neff, 2003b). Therefore, it essentially differs from self-indulgence, which leads to harmful habits like over-eating or drug addiction (Neff, Kirkpatrick & Rude, 2007b).

Immersion in suffering and adopting a “poor me” attitude is another barrier on the way to self-compassion (Neff, 2004). Over-dramatization of pain prevents leaning into problems with open eyes, which runs counter to self-compassion (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987). Indeed self-compassion does not share any common point with self-pity, whereas it anchors attention and relieves suffering by diminishing self-absorption and isolation (Neff, 2003b).

Lastly self-centeredness is one of the significant impediments when people question the concept of self-compassion. In reality self-compassion encourages social connectedness and compassion rather than self-oriented and selfish manners (Barnard & Curry, 2011). The very people afraid of selfishness leave room to their inner-critic and which ironically gives way to a detached sense of self (Brown, 1999). Instead self-compassion gives unconditional affection to the shared experience of suffering by recognizing it (Neff, 2003b).

As all of these self-constructs were obtained via quantitative research they reflect only dominant and significant barriers regarding self-compassion. However, the cookie-cutter nature of these studies fail to reveal insight into the subjective experience of self-compassion including participants’ raw words (Brodsky & Faryal, 2006). Although these specified constructs are important pathfinders, the “one-size-fits-it-all” approach does not work in order to make a vivid portrait of these factors that undermine self-compassion. That’s why research that touches on idiosyncratic differences in relation to self-compassion is needed (Neff, 2012). With the intention of contributing to future research and interventions on self-compassion, this study sought to understand the reasons people avoid self-compassion by asking the following research question: „Why do some people find it difficult to generate self-compassion?“

Methodology

This research project aimed to explore the experience of people who define themselves as low in self-compassion and have trouble showing kindness to themselves in case of painful events such as failures, inadequacies, mistakes or misfortunes. In order to discover how participants are making sense of their personal and social world and the meanings that are attributed to those particular situations, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was found to be the most appropriate design. (Smith, 2008; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Furthermore, owing to the theoretically flexible structure of IPA, the researcher and participants engaged in an analytic dialogue within the framework of double hermeneutics, known as the two-stage interpretation process (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Thus both sides were involved in the interpretation of data with their collaborative efforts by making sense of the participants' world (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The researcher accepted participants as experiential experts and solely focused on the statements of participants by bracketing her own world including personal feelings and biases (Merriam, 2002). Then the analytic process which, reflected the mutual evaluation of both the analyst and the participants, demonstrated how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). One-to-one semi-structured interviews were arranged to allow participants to speak, think and to be heard without the limitation of highly structured interviews (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005).

Participants

According to the methodology of IPA, homogeneity and intentional selection are crucial characteristics of samples whose participants have common experiences about specified conditions (Willig, 2008). To ensure a rigorous analysis of each case Smith and his colleagues (2008) recommend a sample size that covers 3 participants for the students who apply IPA for the first time (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Research indicated that higher numbers are not indicative of better work, which is why four participants were recruited who were between 25 to 31 years old (Smith et al., 2009). Participants were chosen in accordance with the „snowballing technique“ by starting with friends and acquaintances who define themselves highly self-critical and low in self-compassion. Participants chose the place of the interview either in public areas, their office or in their own home in Istanbul. All participants were Turkish citizens and the numbers of males and females were equal (See table 1 for participants' demographics). Much of the literature has focused on the Western part of the world and research concerning self-compassion has generally been conducted in US. Only a few of Turkish studies discussed the subject of self-compassion among Turkish society Akın & Akın, 2014; İskender, 2009; Deniz, Kesici & Sümer, 2008). However, carrying out a study in Turkey, which is a cultural bridge between the East and the West, enriches the literature for future qualitative studies on self-compassion, which should emphasize diverse populations (Barnard & Curry, 2011).

Table 1. *Participant Demographics*

| Participant Alias | Age | Gender | Ethnic Origin | Education |
|-------------------|-----|--------|---------------|----------------------|
| Meriç | 25 | Female | Turkish | Postgraduate Degree |
| Barış | 31 | Male | Turkish | Undergraduate Degree |
| Timur | 29 | Male | Turkish | Postgraduate Degree |
| Ferah | 25 | Female | Turkish | Postgraduate Degree |

Data Collection

The data was obtained through in-depth individual semi-structured interviews. Nine open-ended and non-directive questions along with stimulating prompts were included in the interview schedule (See Appendix C) (Willig, 2001). The research questions were prepared in compliance with unanswered questions that were highlighted in the future directions part of current self-compassion studies (Yarnell & Neff, 2013). Prior to the interviews, an information sheet, which covered the aim and scope of the study and a consent letter, which specified the right to withdraw and the research process were provided. For IPA studies the key to successful research depends on two dynamics; the rapport between researcher and participant and qualified and realistic knowledge (Alderson, 2004). To this end, the researcher established an honest relationship with the participants and articulated the objectives of the study by informing them at each step of the research process, gathered their consent and informed them about next steps. Each interview lasted between approximately 60 minutes and was recorded with the consent of the participants. Interviews were made in Turkish for collecting richer and more genuine data owing to fact that native Turkish speakers could express themselves in their mother tongue (Coolican, 2004). Just before the interview researcher emphasized that the participant is the authority of his/her experience, so no right or wrong answer exists (Smith et al., 2010). After the interview, as soon as the transcription of the recordings were finished, they were sent to the participants to for a final decision regarding their participation prior to the analysis of the data.

Data Analysis

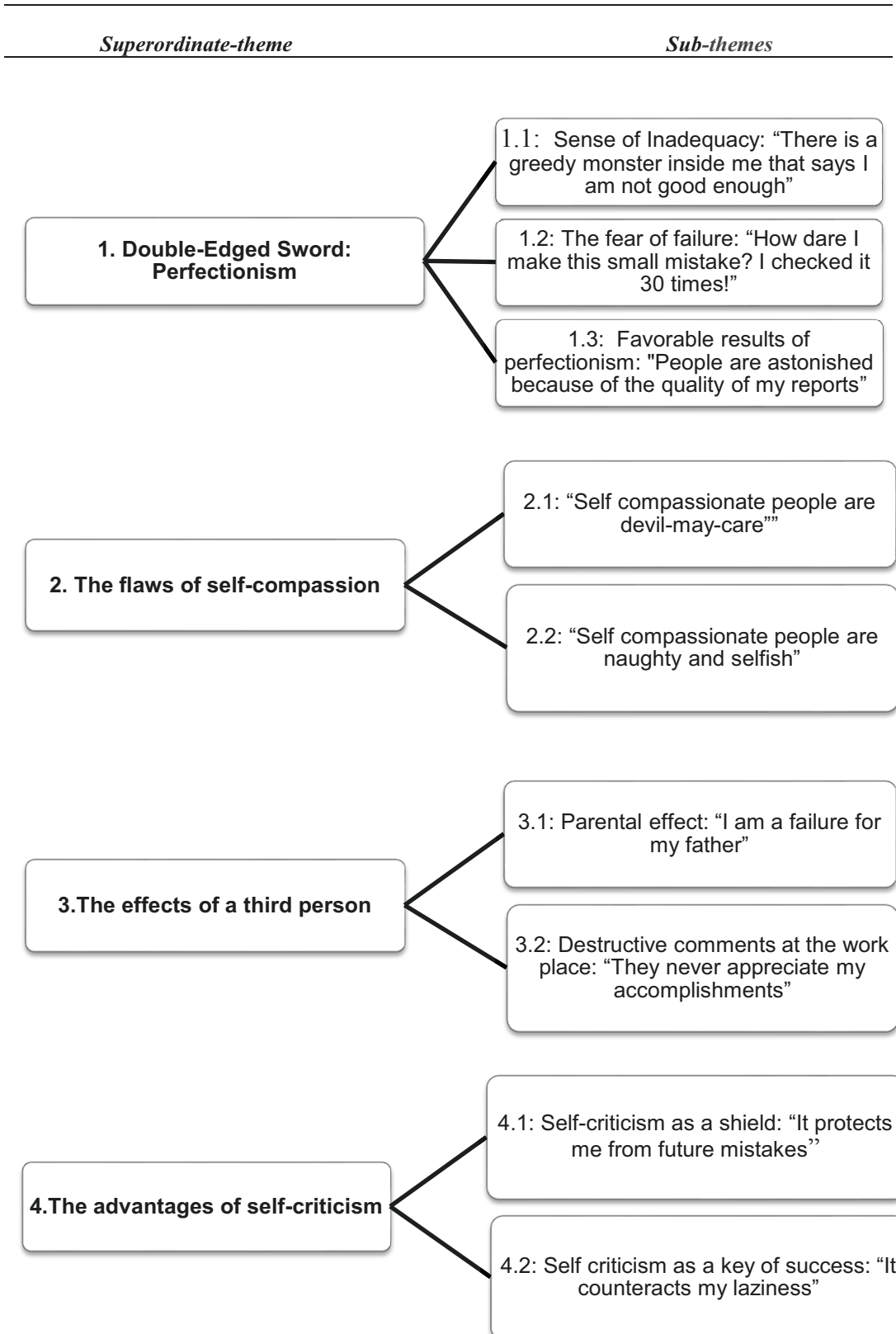
The systematic and practical principles of IPA were implemented while analysing phenomenological data (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The researcher embarked on the analysis by considering that each experience represents different psychological worlds and gives distinctive voices about shared experiences (Smith et al., 2010). That's why it was a priori assumption that each concrete experience requires peculiar idiographic commitment and phenomenological analysis (Giorgi, 2006). To accomplish this task, the researcher listened to every recording at least once and read verbatim transcriptions over and over again to capture the semantic content of each individual and actively engage in the social and mental world of each participant (Smith et al., 2010). After line-by-line reading, initial notes were taken which produced an inclusive and detailed set of notes in the right hand margin (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This kind of interpretative note-taking on abstract concepts such as the usage of language and key phrases illuminated the concerns of the participants (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Thus the familiarity of the researcher with the story of the participants grew (Smith & Osborn, 2008). During the process of this dynamic dialogue, the analyst engaged with each line of transcript as an insider who discovers the experience from the participants' standpoint and an outsider who makes sense of the participants' world in accordance with the principles of IPA (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). Therefore every word, phrase or sentence that contributed to the emerging themes were identified and labelled from two perspectives in the left hand margin (Willig, 2001). Then for the next step, the raw data was reduced via connecting the relevant emerging themes across cases within clusters and super-ordinate themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Results

Four superordinate themes and nine subthemes emerged. These superordinate themes aimed to capture the kind of obstacles encountered by people who identify themselves as self-critical towards their mistakes and imperfections. To this end, each theme was supported with verbatim extracts that illustrated the underlying causes of participants' negative self-talk. In order to facilitate readability and prevent any anonymity violation, utterances, hesitations and pauses of

participants were replaced by dotted lines (...) and words, which might expose identity, were eliminated.

Table 2. Overview of superordinate and sub-themes



1. Double- Edged Sword: Perfectionism

This theme addresses participants' accounts of their perfectionist tendencies and how they have difficulty to leave space for their imperfections and personal flaws as parts of common humanity, namely the third component of self-compassion. In the context of the present theme, they underlined that they spend hours perfecting something regardless of its importance and how much they value excellence despite of its self-destructive impacts.

1.1: Sense of Inadequacy: "There is a greedy monster inside me that says I am not good enough"

Throughout the interviews, three of the four participants repeatedly described their sense of inadequacy and their inability to acknowledge their limits. Timur's account provides a clear demonstration of self-imposed unrealistic targets and the vicious cycle of trying harder:

"For instance I am a nut about reading history. When I concentrate on a period of time...Let's say Emperor Augustus" times in Rome...You know I am literally absorbing all resources...Like consuming them... There is no pleasure in it any more. After a certain point, I am like a machine. Everything... Inside my memory... It is really weird, it becomes like a monster in my mind."

As demonstrated in the above quote Timur symbolically equates the monster with his perfectionism. The words he stresses such as "absorbing", "consuming" are also critical indicators of his excessive perfectionist attitudes. While consuming sources of history, at the same time, he consumes his own psychological resources and all his gratification is swept away by feeling like a machine, which is designed to reach unattainable goals in Timur's terminology. The following excerpt from Ferah seems to hint at a similar mentality, which fights with the monster of perfectionism:

"When I meet a goal, it is not the end for me... Indeed, I abandon one incompetence and for another one. And I never feel saturated."

Within Ferah's account, the never-ending circle of inadequacy mentioned above, can be observed easily. Her perfectionist monster always feels hungry and seeks other inadequacies. While participants wrestle with feelings of inadequacy, their perfectionism was also nurtured by the fear of making mistakes, which is what the second sub-theme revolves around.

1.2: The fear of failure: "How dare I to make this mistake? I checked it 30 times!"

This sub-theme was one of the most pronounced in all participants' narratives that focused on the assumption participants' had: „Mistakes equal failure.“ As illustrated in the extract below, Ferah emphasizes the troubling effects of a current mistake that she made at work. Furthermore throughout the interview she explained her anxious feelings that were elicited because of her mistakes.

"I miscalculated something recently and this result was sent to every user at work. Then one of my colleagues showed me my mistake. At that moment, a chill ran down my back. Cos it was my mistake. I felt unsuccessful. This was a very small mistake... I could not throw in towel because of such a tiny mistake. How could I have miscalculated? It was so easy..."

Similar to other respondents, Ferah also talked about the tedious workload and great responsibilities. However, for her, these conditions cannot be excuses for being gentle with

herself. Even a slight fault cannot be accepted and led her to feel terrible. To avoid these kinds of minor imperfections, Timur and Meriç reported that they write down everything to not forget any single detail. However, inevitably their belief that „I must do everything without mistake“ collapses and following extracts show their initial reaction to these faults:

Meriç:

“Everything should be alright... I should not make any mistake... But it really challenges me... You should see my office... My calendar, my reminders etc. But despite of this, sometimes I miss something... I say myself: “How could you forget? How dare you do that? Why your mind is such a big mess?”

Timur:

“You need to ponder many tasks you know... When everything besieges your brain, I am not able to prioritize. I try to do everything at the same time, but nothing happens at the end. Even though I get my hands on something, something is missing. And when it occurs, I feel stupid...”

Both participants don't consider mistakes as part of the learning process and inevitable aspect of common humanity. Their self-criticism adds fuel to fire and removes them from realistic self-appraisal. Therefore they ignore their accomplishments and they label themselves unsuccessful or foolish because of trivial mistakes. However the flip side of perfectionism trap lures participants in and so they downplay the downsides of perfectionism as shown in the following theme.

1.3: Favourable results of perfectionism: “People are astonished because of the quality of my reports”

Even though all participants have a successful career and high abilities in diverse areas of interest, they tend to devalue their uniqueness and focus on errors. Generally they take over high responsibilities but a slight misfortune obliterates their success. On the other hand, reactions by others to their excellent work serve as motivation for them to be perfectionist. Timur's extract was most striking in this respect:

“When I prepare a report at work, people are astonished... My reports are extremely ordered... Even an idiot can understand it with ease. This is how I am at work... I like to work in that way...”

The above quote reflects how Timur is unconsciously motivated by external validation. It feeds his perfectionism. Actually the feeling which forces him to call himself stupid and the sense that reinforces him to create defect-free report originates from same the source, namely perfectionism. Although all participants are very sensitive to making mistakes, they are not able to notice the invisible saboteur behind their over-the-top achievements, which is maladaptive perfectionism. When the questions addressed the role of self-compassion in their life, participants pointed out that perfectionism eliminates self-kindness by isolating them from humanity because of their mistakes.

2. The flaws of self-compassion

Three salient sub-themes were grouped in order to construct this superordinate theme that highlights the assumptions and misconceptions of participants concerning self-compassion. In the following passages, participants describe their subjective perspective about possible pitfalls of self-compassion.

2.1: “Self compassionate people are devil-may-care and justify themselves no matter what”

Even though each account is unique beyond dispute, all participants mentioned that being insightful and understanding of mistakes might be a characteristic of reckless people. This misperception of self-compassion was very prevalent in Barış’s account:

“For me, a self-compassionate person is one who does not care a button. You know... Without a care in the world... This type of person always forgives himself... Is always tolerant... Because, he always blames others... Or life forces him to make mistakes...”

This extract seems to indicate that, according to Barış’s perspective, cultivating an authentic intimacy with your faults undermines your honest and mindful evaluation of the circumstances. Moreover from Barış’s standpoint, self-compassion is like an escape route for oblivious and unconcerned people who are inclined to accuse others or life conditions for their personal faults in an irresponsible manner. In a similar vein Meriç described her views about one of her friends that she calls an extremely self-compassionate person:

“For instance one of my friends from our department, I think she is the most thick-skinned and care free person ever! Sometimes I sigh and want to be like her... Then I recognize that I don’t like her temperament... She always forgets and behaves very superficially... After that I ask myself, whether accepting your faults or neglecting them like her gives way to being untidy, unsystematic and unsuccessful or not...”

This narrative again draws our attention to the participants’ reluctance concerning self-compassion. Her understanding of self-compassion corresponds to being soft-headed, shallow and inconsistent performance. Early in the interview she also expressed her fear of neglecting destructive aspects of the situation by showing self-kindness towards her mistakes. Below, we will see how other misconceptions about self-compassion alienate participants from gaining an empathetic understanding of themselves.

2.2: “Self-compassionate people are naughty, selfish and egocentric”

The experiences of participants in this study confirm a significant assumption people have; taking a warm attitude toward oneself opens the door to spoilt, self-oriented and egoistic behaviours. Within this mind-set we see how for Barış, self-compassion and self-centeredness are equal:

“If someone is tolerant of his mistakes, he may do it without any rational reason... Just because of boldness, selfishness... The ego is more about being tolerant towards yourself... When understanding myself, I flatter my ego... If I have a stronger ego, I can tolerate myself easily. On the contrary, I cannot condone my mistakes unless my ego is high... However some people whose ego goes through the roof, feel completely innocent and do not put themselves in someone else’s shoes...”

Within this multi-layered account of Barış, he considers self-compassion equal to various states; being a slave to the ego, unquestioned acceptance of mistakes, overlooking others’ needs. The noteworthy point is, according to his view, using self-bullying for faults is the sign of a low ego. This assumption is echoed in Timur’s argument:

“I don’t know... When self-compassion enters your life, in my opinion, your arrogance will increase necessarily... Probably you will become more snooty and conceited... These personal traits may define your life... This may happen...”

Timur’s extract above illustrates how cultivating self-compassion fosters a superiority complex. Appreciating your admirable qualities and giving yourself a hug in a painful event paves the way for being preoccupied with yourself and seeing yourself as the center of the universe by scorning others. Both of these views may partly present some clues why participants stay clear from self-compassion and prefer to be assaulted by their inner critics.

3. The effects of a third person

This superordinate theme illuminates the momentous place that other people take in the participants’ perception of self-worth. It furthermore reveals how comments of a third person and a hypercritical environment push participants to become their harshest critic and marginalize self-compassion.

3.1: Parental effect: “I am a failure for my father”

This subtheme elucidates how critical and unsupportive parents become a turning point in participants’ perfectionist personality and introduce a relentless approach to their mistakes. In Ferah’s narratives the humiliation of her verbally abusive father is constantly recounted. The excerpt below illustrates the unbearable feeling of disappointing parents:

“My sister attended an academically superior school to mine. And my parents imposed their standards on me and always criticized me, coz my academic achievement was not enough for them. They lack the ability to appreciate... I think this propelled me to feel a sense of inadequacy...”

The comparison that was made by her parents and their rigid adherence to their perfectionist standard created pressure on Ferah and explain the roots of her intense self-criticism. Most tragically pronounced, her metaphor of a “barrier” highlight the devastating effects of the comments of her father:

“My father always warns me not to eat much and tells me how fat I am... He is like a barrier in front of me that keeps me from praising myself, love my body...”

It is significant to underline that sometimes, Ferah shifted from the subject of “I” to “she” while expressing her experience. When I asked the reason for this switch, she said that, “she” sentences actually belong to her father. However, Ferah internalizes the critical voice of her father and renders it as her own statements. Timur’s account also showed how parenting style considerable influences him:

“My parents are really risk-averse. They always try to anticipate three, five steps beyond. They raised me with an incredible sense of responsibility. Thus sometimes I feel anxious because I am ruminating twelve steps ahead...”

Throughout the interview, Timur offered a range of examples about his obsessive interest in predictions in order to minimize the possibility of mistakes. As the above extract shows, his overly cautious behaviours were instilled by his parents. Besides, Timur regards his father as a point of reference in terms of his personal growth and his attitudes towards self-compassion.

“Me and my father really look like each other... When I look at his developmental process towards self-compassion... He is not very self-compassionate... Therefore I won't be as well...”

These quotes encapsulate the key position of parents on the personality development of their children. This again emphasizes how external comments may jeopardize participants' life achievements, lifestyles and their view of life.

3.2: Destructive comments at the work place: “They never appreciate my accomplishments”

This subtheme draws upon the reports of participants that illuminate the importance of environmental influences at work. Two participants frequently described that demanding and critical managers put pressure on them and broke their spirit to progress willingly. Thus resentment and frustration emerged within the accounts of Ferah and Meriç.

Meriç:

“Do you know what's the problem? Throughout this whole year, our feedbacks highlighted our failures... Then we explained that to our managers... If they would mention our strengths as well, we would improve them ... There was no sentence like “You are great!”... Only “There is a deficiency or failure here, correct it!” May be that's one of the reasons of my self-criticism...”

Ferah:

“I made a mistake at work and my manager told me to call top executives and send an e-mail to everyone to apologize... This was really unpleasant... Cos when you accomplish something, they appreciate it but nobody knows about your success... But when a tiny error happens, everyone is informed and they reacted with „You made a big mistake, this is too bad!“ No doubt, this is really dispiriting... So you are trivialized more in the appreciation of people... Maybe having no value in the eyes of others boosted the pressure that I exert on myself....”

These two quotes clearly show that magnifying mistakes and accusatory habits coexist at work and both of these immediate causes discourage participants to engage with work. What is notable is that a problem-focused culture of managers also led them to question their self-worth. In the atmosphere of hostile comments, a downward spiral of negative emotion was triggered. This is closely related with the fear of losing the respect of others and seeing oneself as a person who has negative self-beliefs without any compassion.

4. The advantages of self-criticism

Two salient subthemes were found in the final superordinate theme, which identifies deceptive aspects of self-criticism. These aspects lure participants with the prospect of making fewer mistakes and having more success. All four accounts explicitly stated how their cruel self-judgment prevents similar future situations and berating themselves reinforces success.

4.1: Self-criticism as a shield: “It alerts and protects me from future mistakes”

This subtheme shows why participants prefer to be their own brutal critic rather than displaying a kind and compassionate attitude. In the extract below, Barış labels his critical voice as a protective force that prevents future errors:

“If I become understanding towards myself, I may do the things that I should not do, although I had already known their unfavourable consequences. Understanding yourself may not be good at any given moment... Don’t know... At some point, your inner critic protects you... It ensures you don’t repeat your previous mistakes... Your genuine anger, rooted in frustration is such a significant experience... They sometimes save us. One day if I take a hammering, this anger will warn me and will tell me that „You did this fault before, then you blow up...””

Bariş’s account hints at a unique viewpoint that regards self-criticism as an effective strategy. For him, the alarm of anger will ring in the case of emergency in order to remind him of his past mistakes and will guard against future ones. Holding his tongue will protect him from his painful past and thus his cold criticism will convert into internal power directing him towards the desired behaviour. Under these circumstances, his prejudice against self-compassion does not seem very surprising. In line with Barış’s account, Meriç also posits plausible reasons for her self-criticism:

“If I behave in a kind way towards myself, all of my action would have been... I mean I would act without considering the outcomes... That’s why I want to put it within the bounds of criticism... Ummm I think, you know I always tried to poke.... motivate myself in this way.”

These reports confirm that participants want to devote their critical energy to previous hurtful experiences with the aim learning from past mistakes. That’s why they prefer to shut their eyes to the damaging effects of self-criticism and to hold back from cultivating self-compassion.

4.2: Self-criticism as a key of success: “It curbs my laziness”

Another salient concept that appeared in the current study was the subjective impression of self-criticism as a stimulator to jump-start productivity and commitment. Participants held that brilliant performance depends on a simple yet powerful way; continual self-judgment. An example of this view is illustrated in the extract below that belongs to Meriç;

“In my mind, I desperately link failure and being kind to yourself. My role models are generally people who are not very understanding towards themselves... I believed that the best result could be attained by self-criticism. I believed that it would promote me. May be it did, may be it did not... Yet my laziness was curbed... However now I am exhausted because of this harsh voice... I am not even able to recognize my accomplishments... But if I would be a carefree person I probably wouldn’t pursue my postgraduate studies... And now I am happy being a master student...”

The quote above details how Meriç sees self-criticism, which ameliorates lazy inclinations and eliminates possible failures. She fuses failure and self-kindness and recognizes them as intertwined notions. Furthermore in her framework, role models are the ones who reach the peak of their career beating themselves up. Although she reports how falling into this trap of self-criticism puts her in a burdensome position, she is glad about her academic success that is reaped by belittling herself. This kind of dilemma can also be observed in the narratives of Timur;

“What happens if I become an understanding person towards myself... I cannot attain my goals...”

Basically Timur thinks that giving a pep-talk to yourself is a counterproductive solution for success and the only intelligent alternative is using his imperative internal language that he

mentioned several times. Both respondents don't let go of their resentment and liberate themselves from their oppressive attitudes with the intention of motivating themselves. That's why eradicating self-criticism and cultivating self-compassion is a problem in their eyes.

Discussion

Given the results of this study, for the very first time difficulties that are encountered while generating self-compassion were explored using IPA. Subjectively rich data that addresses the particular experiences of each participant about self-compassion and its relation to maladaptive perfectionism, the social atmosphere and supposed advantages of self-criticism was attained and can therefore enhance existing literature. Four salient superordinate themes namely, *Double-Edged Sword: Perfectionism*, *The flaws of self-compassion*, *The effects of a third person*, *The advantages of self-criticism*, were identified, described and supported by existing literature.

The first superordinate theme *Double-Edged Sword: Perfectionism*, indicated the most common facet of participants' experiences with perfectionism. The finding that preoccupation with pursuit of excellence, rejecting limits and fallible aspects of being human obstruct self-kindness is in line with previous findings. Existent studies articulated that higher levels of self-compassion relate to lower levels of maladaptive perfectionism (Heffernan et al., 2010; Neff, Kirkpatrick, Rude; 2007a; Pembroke, 2012; Preece, 2006). However, on a deeper level, the link between neurotic perfectionism and self-compassion is largely correlational rather than causal according to data from previous research. In this study perfectionism was shown to be an underlying reason for the lack of self-compassion rather than a mere negative correlation. Moreover, according to transcripts, participants' problems with soothing themselves when confronted with their inadequacies gives rise to anxiety and depression (Gilbert & Proctor, 2005). The interview reports revealed that this situation stems from over-identification with pain and attachment to negative emotions falls within the definition of the mindfulness component of self-compassion (Wada & Park, 2009). However burying deep pain and rejecting personal shortcomings as a part of common humanity also came from feeling overwhelming fear about the possibility of failure, which was a salient concept across participants' accounts (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejithirat, 2005). Besides an anticipated area was discovered within present research, which showed how perfectionism forms a comfort zone of success for participants. Moreover results of present study indicated that participants unconsciously commit themselves to their unrealistic standards owing to its favourable consequences that evoke the admiration of people.

Controversial results have been documented widely by pre-existing research, which attempted to explore the core of perfectionism. In their study Baker and McNulty (2011) have confirmed participants of present study and they asserted that self-criticism, which is diminished by self-compassion is the main source of perfectionism and the prime mover of achievement. Plenty of researchers disagreed and suggested that high personal standards associate with an adaptive form of perfectionism (Blatt, 1995; Rice & Stuart, 2010). Neff (2003b) pointed out that targeting high personal standards and having low levels of self-criticism conform with the concept of self-compassion. Despite of this academic debate, all respondents said the same thing and consider the notion of perfectionism as single concept without analysing its neurotic and adaptive members. Besides, in their mind, the desirable outcomes of perfectionism give way to external validation and this situation renders self-compassion as a conflicting concept that may destroy their cherished success.

The second superordinate theme, *The flaws of self-compassion*, is perhaps the most anticipated theme as mentioned in the introduction. The participant experiences indicated that non-judgmental understanding and displaying of self-warmth might yield to excessive self-centeredness and ego concerns, less sensitivity to pain of others and higher levels of

irresponsibility (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007a; Barnard & Curry, 2011). Contrary to these popular beliefs of participants, Davidson's (2007) scientific study showed that self-compassion curtails egoistic-self focus by increasing interpersonal perspective taking, without negating the sense of self. Furthermore improved feelings of autonomy, competence and social connectedness of self-compassionate individuals lead them to take greater responsibility (Leary et al., 2007). Additionally their increased capacity for self-care showed itself in the fact that self-compassionate individuals express more compassion to others as well (Reyes, 2011).

Destructive environmental effects and hostile comments of people emerged as the third superordinate theme, *The effects of a third person*, clearly outlines why self-criticism became the focus rather than self-acceptance for participants. In this context, childhood is fundamentally important because an individual's ability to experience empathy and recognition of internal feeling states improves during this period and is shaped by early caregivers (Stolorow, Brandchaft & Atwood, 1987). This means that low levels of self-compassion vividly reflect the attitudes of hypercritical, abusive and contemptuous parents (Brown, 1999). These findings offer support to participants' experience about how maternal criticism and dysfunctional families negatively influence self-behaviours of participants (Neff & McGeehee, 2010).

In addition to this the results of a number of studies underline the fundamental effects of the social environment. Dunkley and colleagues (2006) established that evaluative comments of others make perfectionism, self-criticism and various psychopathologies more likely. Furthermore Neff and Vonk (2009) highlighted that cognitive and emotional reactions of people with low levels of self-compassion are more defensive and negative unlike self-compassionate people. Therefore, they receive less recognition and appreciation than self-compassionate people who openheartedly acknowledge their flaws and inadequacies (Neff & Vonk, 2009). This data suggests a conceivable explanation for the latter part of third superordinate theme, which deals with the negative impacts of demoralizing criticism on participants.

Lastly, the fourth superordinate theme, *The advantages of self-criticism*, elaborated upon stubborn tendencies of participants to adopt a self-critical mode. Although, current results have revealed drawbacks of self-criticism namely lifelong risk of depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (Amir & Swisa, 2005), self-harm (Babiker & Arnold, 1997), social anxiety (Cox et al., 2000) and numerous psychological disorders (Longe et al., 2010), respondents of this study were inclined to focus their critical attention rather than cast compassionate attention on themselves (Falconer, King & Brewin, 2015; Norem, 2008; Yamaguchi, Kim & Akutsu, 2014). As mentioned in the results section, the interesting rationale behind this preference was, that in their opinion, self-critical people are able to cope with life's troubles with greater ease. The metaphor of a shield that was mentioned in the last theme, was critical with regards to truly understand why participants consider self-criticism as a protector that prevents future problems. For them, a critical internal language serves like activating a problem-solving switch in the case of any possible failure. To the best of our knowledge, this particular insight that highlights the tempting effect of self-criticism and introduces an uncharted domain on the realm of self-compassion. Also participants claimed that a critical outlook is a technique of motivation that curbs their laziness (Gilbert, McEwan, Catarino, Baião & Palmeira, 2014). Factually high self-compassion levels are associated with less fear of failure, more motivation to improve and being more watchful not to repeat past mistakes (Breines & Chen, 2012). However, participants close the door to self-compassion due to above convictions that were cited in all themes and one concise reason that is put in a nutshell by Meriç: "I should not make any mistake...But this is too compelling... Cos... I don't know how to live otherwise..."

Limitations

As elaborated above, this phenomenological study represented the first IPA attempt to explore the

difficulties that people experience cultivating self-compassion. Furthermore it is academically important because of the scarcity of qualitative research in this area. However a number of limitations and weaknesses need to be acknowledged due to the nature of the IPA methodology and the characteristics of the sample group.

The first challenge was the time limitation during the interviews. During the interviews, some participants reported that they have never thought about the reasons behind their self-criticism or the main cause of the problems they face while generating self-compassion. So they requested more time to think about some questions, yet in order to prevent waste of time, they then gave their answers based on their assumptions and predictions.

Another limitation was about the idiographic structure of IPA and the demographic factors. Although IPA lays the groundwork for rich and in-depth first- person accounts (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009. p.56), it is limited to a small number of participants. Therefore this research only focused on subjective experiences of four participants, which come from a similar educational and socio-economic background with ages ranging from 25 to 31. Despite the idiosyncratic focus of IPA it should be taken into account when interpreting the impact of the findings of this study.

Finally, the interviews were held in Turkish to provide freedom of expression for participants. Crucially the concept of “self-compassion” does not exist in Turkish. That’s why researcher paraphrased this concept in the information sheet as far as possible. Another important point is that the word “compassion” also has more than one meaning in Turkish, which differs from the meaning defined in the Buddhist tradition. That’s why throughout the interviews, the researcher paraphrased the word of self-compassion according to the definition in the introduction. Hence the linguistic disparity between Turkish and English was a considerable limitation.

Conclusion

The objective of this research was to illuminate the ideas and convictions that self-critical people hold when attempting to generate self-compassion. The qualitative strategy of this research filled a methodological gap. Although various parameters cause subtle but seismic changes in self-behaviour, four salient themes were deducted via phenomenological-based analysis. These results, which along with previous literature, found that maladaptive form of perfectionism, misconstructions about self-compassion, destructive social surroundings and supposed beliefs about self-criticism prevent self-kindness and compassionate manners. The key point is participants use self-bullying because they assume self-blame and self-criticism are central and indispensable parts of success and major precautions against possible mistakes.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. What does the term „self-compassion“ mean to you?
2. If you had to describe the role of self-compassion in your daily life, what would you say?
3. Could you tell me about a recent experience when you felt that something did not go as well as you hoped, for example you made a mistake or did something wrong?
Prompts:
 - a. -What happened?
 - b. -How did you feel?
 - c. -How did you cope?
4. Is there anyone or any event or any thought that create difficulty for you to cultivate self-compassion? Tell me about how this person, event or thought influenced you.
Prompts:
 - a. -In what ways?
 - b. -How did you feel?
5. Could you describe a typical situation that led up you to judgmental position rather than kind towards yourself?
Prompts:
 - a. -What happened?
 - b. -How did you feel?
 - c. -How did you cope?
6. Could you define me how do you behave yourself when you are in a painful situation?
Prompts:
 - a. -What happened?
 - b. -How did you feel?
 - c. -How did you cope?
7. Tell me about a time when you acted compassionately towards
 - a. someone else
 - b. yourselfPrompts:
 - a. What happened?
 - b. How did you feel?
8. How do you feel when you are imagining yourself as a self-compassionate person?
9. Where do you see your self-behaviours in two years?