

EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-COMPASSION, SELF-EFFICACY, FORGIVENESS AND PERCEIVED STRESS IN BUSINESS EDUCATION

Marek Vich

Abstract

The contemporary business environment is characterized by an increasing amount of fluctuations and uncertainty. New conditions create incentives for business universities to further enhance their curriculum to better prepare their students for the future role of managers and entrepreneurs, especially in the terms of the cultivation of their self-management skills. Capabilities to be more self-efficient, forgiving and to better cope with stress are highly demanded in complex and unpredictable business environments. A growing number of studies shows a beneficial effect of self-compassion on those qualities, yet its evidence in higher business education is limited. This study conducted of a sample of 125 university students of business and management examines the impact of self-compassion on self-efficacy, forgiveness and perceived stress. Results from a series of linear regressions showed significant support of all hypothesized relationships. This study suggests that the development of self-compassion can help business universities to better prepare their students for succeed in their managerial or entrepreneurial careers in the contemporary business environment.

Key words: self-compassion, self-efficacy, forgiveness, perceived stress, business education

JEL Code: M14, M53 Code, O35

Introduction

We live in a time of great changes and the nature of work has recognized significant development in recent years. Today's workers are required to be more resilient and adaptive, develop a broader variety of skills and cope with covid-related challenges such as social isolation, health uncertainty or home office. All those conditions bring new business opportunities, but also place significant psychological pressures on individuals.

Changing conditions in the global working environment also create new demands for business & management education. Business universities are advised to give more focus on the cultivation of cognitive and emotional capacities of students to equip them with better psychological tools for handling their future (or current) role in the business (Burton et al.,

2021). Future managers and leaders will be required to better handle stress, to be more self-efficient as well as be more forgiving of the shortcomings and failures of others. Cultivation of those skills has become an important part of healthcare and counselling education in past two decades. Previous studies in those fields also showed that one of the strongest antecedents of those skills the self-compassion (Stutts et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2019). Self-compassion is defined as “*being touched by, and open to, one’s own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to alleviate one’s suffering and to heal oneself with kindness*” (Neff 2003, p.67). Despite significant interest in self-compassion in healthcare and counselling, I did not find any study that would examine the relationship between self-compassion and self-efficacy, forgiveness and stress in business education.

Stress is one of the main psychological challenges in contemporary organisations as it is related to various health-related issues (e.g., a lower function of the immune system, accelerated mortality), decreased job satisfaction, limited decision-making skills or disrupted personal relationships (Neely et al., 2009). One of the most recognized methods for accessing the level of stress is the examination of the perceived stress that represents the degree to which one appraises his/her daily situations as stressful (Cohen et al., 1983). Self-compassion indicates one’s tendency to be patient and kind towards oneself in daily situations, especially while facing a failure or social discomfort (Neff, 2003) and helps university students to better cope with stressful situations (e.g. Neely et al., 2009). Beneficial effects of self-compassion on lower perceived stress in higher education have been confirmed by a previous studies that were conducted on medical or psychology students (e.g., Neely et al., 2009; Stutts et al., 2018). However, I have not found any study, that would examine this relationship on the sample of business students. Therefore, this study examines the impact of self-compassion on perceived stress in business education. Luo et al., 2019;

Hypothesis 1. Self-compassion is negatively related to perceived stress.

This study also examines the impact of self-compassion on forgiveness. Many organisations and business universities have been criticised for not being ethical, but some scholars also suggest that organisations have a capacity to be moral role models, especially through the development of their capacity to be more caring for their members as well as to respond to the crises and conflicts with forgiveness (Burton et al., 2021). Business universities can support the development of forgiveness in organisations by cultivating the individual capacity to be forgiving among the students. Self-compassion may be a practical way how to support such endeavour, because it helps individuals to be more tolerant towards mistakes and

errors of both themselves and others as well as to accept the particular situations with its pleasant and unpleasant aspects (Neff, 2003). A few pioneering studies already focused on university students and confirmed the positive significant impact of self-compassion on forgiveness (Neff & Pommier, 2013; Wu et al., 2019; Zhang & Chen, 2016). However, I have not found any evidence for the students of business universities.

Hypothesis 2. Self-compassion is positively related to forgiveness.

Finally, this study also focuses on self-efficacy. Self-efficacy which entails one's consistent belief in his/her ability to achieve across a wide range of tasks and challenges is related to several beneficial qualities, especially to increased performance and higher job satisfaction (Judge & Bono, 2001; Sitzmann & Yeo, 2013). According to Neff (2003), self-compassion represents an alternative to self-esteem and provides individuals with the more sustainable motivation that is less dependent on the actual environment and performance. Hence, it is likely, that self-compassion represents an important antecedent of self-efficacy. Relationships between self-compassion and self-efficacy have been examined by a few studies. However, their findings are mixed and similarly to previously hypothesized effects in this paper none of them focused on business university students (Chow et al., 2021; Manavipour & Saeedian, 2016). Therefore, I suggest that self-compassion is positively related to self-efficacy:

Hypothesis 3. Self-compassion is positively related to self-efficacy.

1 Methodology

1.1 Participants

The study was conducted on a sample of 125 students of business & management located in the Czech Republic. The google forms platform was used to gather the data and participants were recruited via e-mail. Initially, 131 participants filled the survey, but six of them were excluded from the sample because they exceed the age of 25 years. Participants (M age = 21.65, SD = 1.59) were 65 % female, 43 % reported having previous managerial or entrepreneurial experience and 32 % had previous experience with mindfulness or psychotherapy.

1.2 Measures

Self-compassion. Self-compassion was examined by the 26-item Self-compassion scale (SCS) developed by Neff (2003). The Czech version of the scale was validated by Benda & Reichová (2016). Participants indicated how they treat themselves in difficult situations by using the 1–5 Likert scale from 1 [almost never] to 5 [almost always]. SCS contains items like: „*I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain.*”

Perceived stress. The level of perceived stress was measured by the validated Czech version (Brabcová & Kohout, 2018) of the 10-item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) (Cohen et al., 1983). Participants evaluated their thoughts and feelings during the past month by choosing a statement on the 1–5 Likert scale from 1 [never] to 5 [very often]. The example of the scale's item is „*In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?*”

Forgiveness. The 16-item Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS; Thompson et al., 2005) was used as a measure of the level of forgiveness. The official Slovak translation developed by Chlebcová & Greškovičová (2019) was used for this study. Participants indicated how much they agree with the presented statements by choosing on the 1-7 Likert scale from 1 [almost always false of me] to 7 [almost always true of me]. HFS contains items like „*With time I am understanding of others for the mistakes they've made.*”

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy was examined by the 10-item General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). The official Czech version of the scale used in this study was developed by Křivohlavý et al. (1993). Participants indicated how much they agree with the presented statements by choosing on the 1-4 Likert scale from 1 [not at all true] to 4 [exactly true]. The item example of the GSE is: “*I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.*”

All measures proved to be reliable with Cronbach alphas ranging from .81 for the HFS to .90 for the SCS (see Table 1 for scale reliabilities and correlations).

2 Results

Data were analysed using RStudio (version 1.2.5033). Initial correlation analysis (see Table 1) indicated what there were significant relationships between all examined variables. Therefore, all variables were included in the main analysis.

Tab. 1: Means, Standard Deviation, Correlations and Scale Reliabilities (N = 125).

Scale	M	SD	1	2	3	4
SCS	2.85	.64	(.90)			
PSS	3.03	.80	-.60***	(.88)		
HFS	4.38	.77	.65***	-.49***	(.81)	
GSE	2.98	.51	.47***	-.49***	.41***	(.86)

Note. SCS = Self-Compassion Scale; PSS = Perceived Stress Scale; HFS = Heartland Forgiveness Scale; GSE = General Self-Efficacy Scale; * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$

In the final analysis, a series of linear regressions were used to examine the effect of self-compassion on perceived stress, forgiveness and self-efficacy. Results showed highly significant negative relationship between self-compassion and perceived stress ($\beta = -.48$, $p < .001$) and highly significant positive relationship between self-compassion and forgiveness ($\beta = .60$, $p < .001$) and self-efficacy ($\beta = .54$, $p < .001$). For more detailed data see Table 2.

Tab. 2: Standardized Regression Coefficients per relationship between Self-compassion, Perceived Stress, Forgiveness and Self-efficacy (N = 125)

	SCS	
	β	R^2
PSS	-.48***	.38***
HFS	.60***	.22***
GSE	.54***	.49***

Note. SCS = Self-Compassion Scale; PSS = Perceived Stress Scale; HFS = Heartland Forgiveness Scale; GSE = General Self-Efficacy Scale; * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$

3 Discussion

3.1 Interpretation of the results

It was expected that self-compassion is negatively related to perceived stress (Hypothesis 1) and positively related to forgiveness (Hypothesis 2) and self-efficacy (Hypothesis 3). Results showed highly significant support for all hypothesized relationships. According to my best knowledge, this study is the first one that found support for those relationships in the case of higher business education. This study also seems to be the first one that explored those relationships in the Czech Republic.

The significant negative relationship between self-compassion and perceived stress supports conclusions that cultivation of the ability to care for oneself is an efficient pathway to reduce individual stress (e.g. Nelly et al., 2009; Stutts et al. 2018). Individuals with higher self-compassion can give themselves appropriate emotional support during stressful situations

(Neff, 2003). Previous studies found the support for relationship between self-compassion and lower perceived stress in the case of medical and psychology students (Neely et al. 2009; Stutts et al. 2018), while this study offers pioneering evidence in business education. Medical, nursing and counselling employees are one of the primary working groups that suffer from chronic stress and burn-out syndrome (e.g., Neely et al. 2009; Stutts et al. 2018). However, stress is a universal human challenge and the dynamic nature of the contemporary business world has made all other working domains increasingly stressful (Neely et al., 2009). Cultivation of self-compassion represents one of the directions for increasing the practical impact of business education.

Results also showed a positive significant relationship between self-compassion and forgiveness. This finding supports the conclusions of previous studies that self-compassion is an important antecedent of forgiveness (Neff & Pommier, 2013; Wu et al., 2019; Zhang & Chen, 2016). My results confirmed this relationship in business education as well and suggest that the cultivation of pro-social qualities is possible if universities give more focus on the development of self-compassion. The significant relationship between self-compassion and forgiveness confirmed by the results of this can be explained through 2 mechanisms. Firstly, as a capacity to be more caring and less critical towards oneself (Neff, 2003), the self-compassion can also express an understanding resulting in forgiveness towards others. Secondly, self-compassion is also characterized by the ability to perceive one's experiences as part of the shared human experience (Neff & Pommier, 2013) and I assume that this supports one's capacity to be forgiving towards failures and other unpleasant aspects of other colleagues.

Finally, I found support for the positive significant relationships between self-compassion and self-efficacy. Those results represent important evidence in the field because findings of previous studies were mixed (e.g., Chow et al., 2021; Manavipour & Saeedian, 2016). These findings also support the suggestion that self-compassion represents an alternative form of self-esteem that is less dependent on external conditions (Neff, 2003). Self-efficacy is strongly related to performance (Judge & Bono, 2001) and some evidence shows that high self-efficacy is a result of high past performance (Sitzmann & Yeo, 2013). Self-compassion seems to represent a pathway toward self-efficacy that is less dependent on performance or it might give individuals greater emotional support for facing the odds and failures of everyday work in a more constructive way and thus help them be more self-efficient.

3.2 Limitations and recommendations for future studies

This study has three limitations. The first limitation is related to the versions of localized scales that were used in this study. The Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) were validated for Czech localisation by Benda & Reichová (2016) and Brabcová & Kohout (2018). However, the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) and General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) were not localized yet. This limitation is particularly addressed by the fact that both scales were translated by professional psychologists and both of them are provided on the official website of the scale's core authors (Chlebcová & Greškovičová, 2019; Křivohlavý et al., 1993). Nevertheless, I suggest future researchers validate the effects of self-compassion on fully validated localized versions of HFS and GSE (when those scales will be available).

The second limitation of this study is related to the fact that its data was obtained by self-report measures. Self-report measures are limited by possible self-report biases and hence the sole reliance on them is not recommended. I recommend future researchers consider using others methods such as qualitative analyses or peer-repost measures.

Thirdly, this study did not include the mediators in the analysis. The number of dependent variables was limited in this study and it is unlikely that any of them could serve as a mediator rather than a dependent variable. However, it might be particularly interesting to include mindfulness in future studies. Mindfulness and self-compassion are closely related qualities (Neff, 2003) and mindfulness itself could serve as a potential mediator especially between self-compassion and perceived stress. Caring for oneself during stressful situations seems to activate one's capacity to be more aware and accepting of his thoughts, feeling and bodily states (mindfulness) and this capacity might be the main factor in the regulation of the perceived stress.

3.3 Implications for business education

This study suggested that the cultivation of self-compassion in higher business education could be one of the answers for making their curriculums more up-to-date and more focused on the development of emotion-coping skills and pro-social qualities. The main advantage of the implementation of self-compassion in business curriculums of business universities is the fact that it can be systematically developed through compassion-based and mindfulness-based interventions (e.g., Zhang & Chen, 2014). Implementation of those interventions in business education can be realised in a few ways.

The first option entails the direct implementation of live interventions with qualified facilitators. This measure has more reliable outcomes and offers some portion of flexibility

regarding the adaptation of length of the modules etc. A disadvantage of this option is that it is financially more challenging and might be less sustainable especially for the smaller universities.

The second option is represented by training selected university teachers as qualified facilitators of mindfulness and self-compassion. Once gaining the qualification, the teachers would be able to deliver training in self-compassion by themselves. This measure can help universities to reach a cost-effective solution for the implementation of self-compassion training. Local teachers are also familiar with the environment and curriculum of the university and they are therefore more capable to implement compassion training in more skilfully. On the other hand, investing so many resources in particular individuals is always related to the risk that they will accept a better-paid job in other university or become a freelance facilitator of self-compassion and mindfulness.

Finally, the universities may consider the implementation of online forms of mindfulness and self-compassion training for the universities. This option is the cheapest solution and it is also most feasible in terms of organising and implementation in the current curriculum. The weakness of this measure is related to the fact that the online form of the training can be less engaging for some participants and reaching the full results of the training is more challenging.

Conclusion

This study was conducted on a sample of 125 students of business & management and examined the relationship between self-compassion and perceived stress, forgiveness and self-efficacy. The series of linear regressions confirmed the significant negative impact of self-compassion on perceived stress and the significant positive impact of self-compassion on forgiveness and self-efficacy. To my best knowledge, this study is the first one that explored those effects in business education and it is also the first such study that was conducted in the local context of Czech business university. Results of this study indicate that self-compassion represents one of the solutions for making the curriculums of business universities more up-to-date and more focused on the development of emotion-coping skills and pro-social qualities. The complexity and uncertainty of our society is escalating and we need more managers and leaders who are psychologically more stable and have the capacity of care for themselves as well as for others. Implementation of self-compassion training in business

universities can represent a small, but significant step towards for development of such individuals.

References

- Benda, J. and Reichová, A. (2016). Psychometrické charakteristiky české verze self-compassion scale (SCS-CZ). *Československá psychologie*, 60(2), 120–136.
- Brabcová, D. B. and Kohout, J. (2018). Psychometrické ověření české škály vnímaného stresu. *Epsychologie*, 12(1), 37–52.
- Burton, N., Culham, T., and Vu, M. (2021). Spiritual practice and management education pedagogy: Exploring the philosophical foundations of three spiritual traditions. *Journal of Management Education*, 45(2), 206–242.
- Chlebcová, V., Greškovičová, K. (2019). Heartland Forgiveness Scale: Slovak version. Retrieved online [2019-4-24] from <https://www.heartlandforgiveness.com/translations>
- Chow, T. and Hui, C. (2021). How does trait self-compassion benefit self-control in daily life? An experience sampling study. *Mindfulness*, 12(1), 162–169.
- Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., and Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 24(4), 385–396.
- Křivohlavý, J., Schwarzer, R., Jerusalem, M. (1993). Czech Adaptation of the General Self-Efficacy Scale. Retrieved online [2020-3-24] from <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~health/czec.htm>
- Manavipour, D. and Saeedian, Y. (2016). The role of self-compassion and control belief about learning in university students' self-efficacy. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, 5(2), 121–126.
- Neely, M., Schallert, D., Mohammed, S., Roberts, R., and Chen, Y.-J. (2009). Self-kindness when facing stress: The role of self-compassion, goal regulation, and support in college students' well-being. *Motivation and Emotion*, 33(1), 88–97.
- Neff, K. D. (2003). The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2, 223–250.
- Schwarzer, R. and Jerusalem, M. (1995). Measures in health psychology: A user's portfolio. Causal and control beliefs., chapter Generalized Self-Efficacy scale, pages 35–37. Windsor: Nfer-Nelson.
- Sitzmann, T. and Yeo, G. (2013). A meta-analytic investigation of the within- person self-efficacy domain: Is self-efficacy a product of past performance or a driver of future performance? *Personnel Psychology*, 66(3), 531.

Stutts, L., Leary, M., Zeveney, A., and Hufnagle, A. (2018). A longitudinal analysis of the relationship between self-compassion and the psychological effects of perceived stress. *Self and Identity*, 17(6), 609–626.

Thompson, L. Y., Snyder, C. R., Hoffman, L., ... , and Roberts, D. E. (2005). Dispositional forgiveness of self, others, and situations. *Journal of Personality*, 73(2), 313–360.

Wasylikiw et al., 2020

Wu, Q., Chi, P., Zeng, X., Lin, X., and Du, H. (2019). Roles of anger and rumination in the relationship between self-compassion and forgiveness. *Mindfulness*, 10(2):272–278.

Zhang, J. and Chen, S. (2016). Self-compassion promotes personal improvement from regret experiences via acceptance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 42(2), 244–258.

Contact

Marek Vich

Prague University of Economics and Business

Náměstí W. Churchilla 4, 130 67 Praha 3, Czech Republic.

marek.vich@vse.cz