



# Self-Compassion and Empathy: Differences and Relationships Across Gender

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## Introduction

*“One must be compassionate to one’s self before external compassion”* -Dalai Lama XIV

**Self-compassion**- tendency to respond to one’s own suffering with care and kindness, and approach inadequacies and failures with non-judgmental understanding (Neff, 2003)

**Empathy**- ability to understand the perspective of another and experience the resulting thoughts and feelings (Davis, 1996)

- Self-compassion and empathy are positively correlated (Welp & Brown, 2013)
  - Participants high in trait self-compassion are more likely to exhibit helping behaviors and empathy towards imaginary others than participants low in trait self-compassion
- Both constructs have a positive impact to individuals as well as society as a whole, but look different across gender
- Findings on gender differences in self-compassion and empathy are inconsistent (Yarnell et al., 2015, Birkett, 2013),
  - A meta-analytic review revealed males have slightly higher levels of self-compassion than females, however with a small ES (Yarnell et al., 2015).
  - Research has revealed biases favoring women exist in self-report measures of empathy, while the same is not evident in non-obtrusive, “objective” measures of empathy (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983)

### Study Goals

- Compare self-compassion intervention to control condition
- Investigate relationship between self-compassion and empathy
- Explore gender differences between the two constructs and specifically empathy when measured by two types of self-report measures

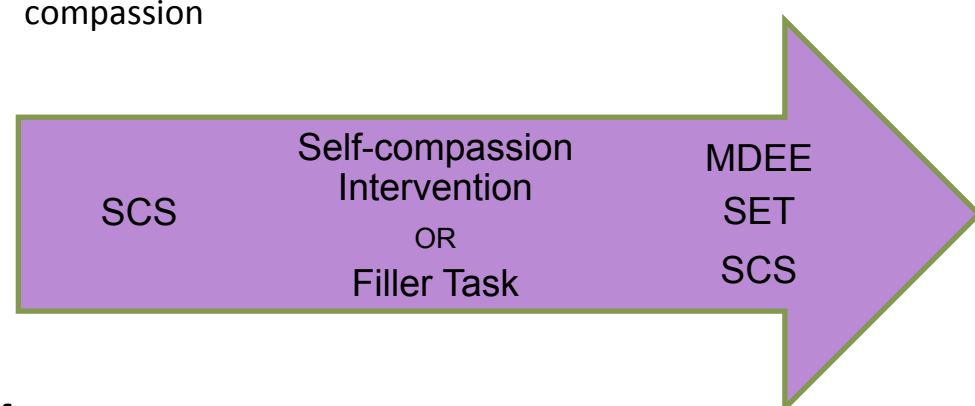
## Methods

### Participants

34 Davidson College Students (6 men, 28 women)  
 • Aged 18 years old or older;  $M = 19.3$   $SD = 1.2$

### Procedure

- Pilot study comparing self-compassion intervention to control
- Intervention: 3 part writing task (1) write about an inadequacy (2) compose a letter from the viewpoint of a loving friend on your perceived inadequacy (3) reread the letter to feel the compassion



### Measures

- Self-Compassion—Self-Compassion Scale (SCS); higher scores indicate greater self-compassion (Neff, 2003)
- Empathy— Objective Measure: Story-Based Empathy Task (SET); higher scores indicate greater emotional attribution (Dodich et al., 2015)
- Empathy—Self-report Measure: Multi-dimensional Emotional Empathy Scale (MDEE); higher scores indicate greater emotional empathy (Caruso, 1998)

## Self-Compassion and Empathy

Correlations of Self-Compassion and Empathy Scales Across Gender

Measure	1	2	3
1. SCS	(.92)	-.03	-.09
2. MDEE	-.81	(.69)	.33
3. SET	-.73	.47	(.70)

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Note: Correlations for women (N = 28) are above the diagonal; correlations for men (N = 6) are below the diagonal. In parenthesis are alpha reliabilities of measures.

## Gender and Empathy

### Multi-dimensional Emotional Empathy Scale

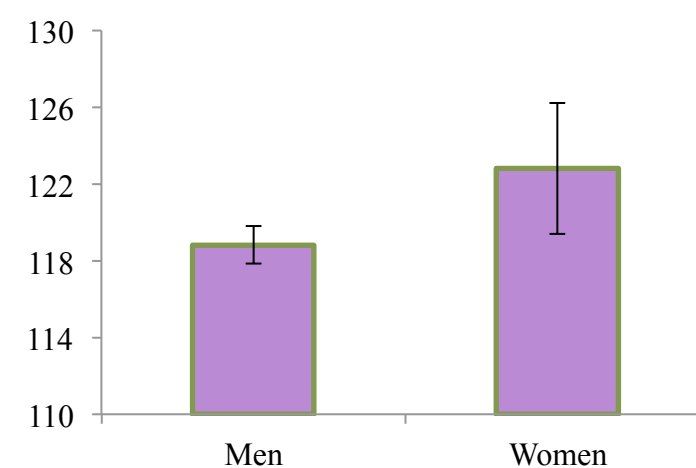


Figure 1

Women reported significantly greater empathy scores on MDEE compared to men

### Story-based Empathy Task

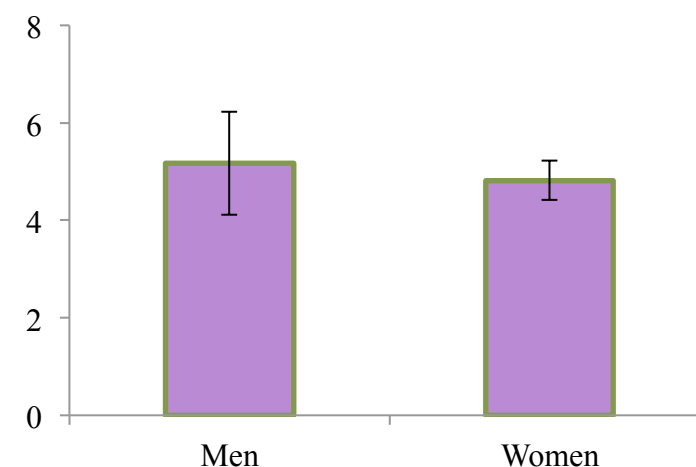


Figure 2

No significant gender differences on self reported SET scores for empathy

## Gender and Self-Compassion

### Self-Compassion Scale

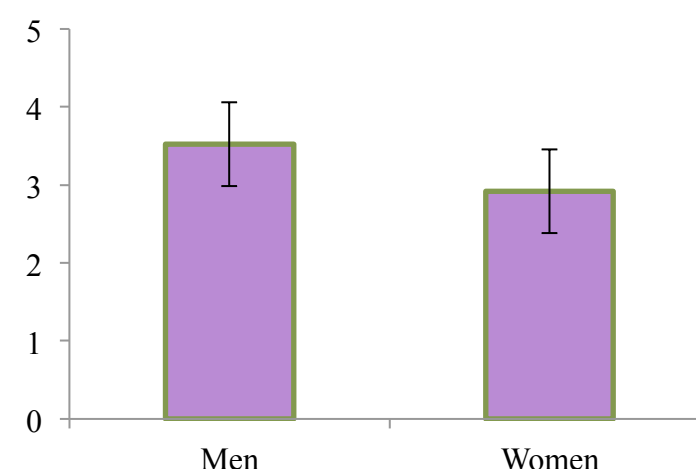


Figure 3

No significant gender differences on self reported SCS scores

## Results

- Average participant age was 19.32 years ( $SD = 1.25$ ) ranging 18–23 years
- As no differences between the intervention conditions were found, groups were combined for subsequent analyses
- Self-compassion scores on SCS did not significantly correlate with empathy scores on the MDEE or SET
- Scores for the empathy measures for the MDEE and SET were not correlated,  $r(32) = 0.28$ ,  $p = 0.12$
- Women reported significantly higher empathy levels on the MDEE compared to men,  $t(32) = 2.17$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ,  $d = 0.60$
- No significant gender differences in empathy on the SET,  $t(32) = .60$ ,  $p = 0.57$
- No significant gender differences in self-compassion on the SCS,  $t(32) = 1.80$ ,  $p = 0.12$ .

## Discussion

- No significant differences between experimental conditions. May indicate methodological flaws (i.e. increased time is needed to notice a difference in self-compassion) or the intervention was not effective in increasing self-compassion in this college sample
- Contrary to previous research, empathy did not correlate significantly with self-compassion
  - May be a function of experimental design flaws or indicative of a more complicated relationship.
  - Empathy is not as strongly correlated to self-compassion as previous research has suggested.
- Consistent with previous findings of a female advantage in emotional empathy in self-reports, women scored higher than men on empathy in the self-report measure, but no gender differences were found in the objective measure of empathy
- Two measures of empathy did not significantly correlate with each other. Which may indicate SET and MDEE do not measure empathy in the same way
  - More consideration is needed when determining how to measure empathy
- There were no significant differences between gender on self-compassion in this sample, while previous research has indicated women tend to report slightly lower levels on the SCS
- Small, heavily female, and all college student sample is not strong representative of the population.
- Future research might investigate the mechanisms and causes for these gender differences

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