


Basic Psychological Needs and its Relationship with Self-compassion among University Students

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Abstract

Basic psychological needs and self-compassion have gained significant attention in the field. Numerous studies have explored these concepts and their correlation with various personal variables due to their importance and their impact on positive personality aspects and mental health outcomes. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between basic psychological needs and self-compassion, as well as to examine potential differences in the level of basic psychological needs and self-compassion based on gender and college affiliation. The study included a sample of 528 undergraduate students from Hashemite University. Data were collected using the Basic Psychological Needs Scale and Self-Compassion Scale. The results indicated no gender-based differences in the level of basic psychological needs and two dimensions (competence and autonomy) due to gender, while males had higher level of relatedness compared females. Additionally, there were no significant differences in the level of basic psychological needs and two dimensions (competence and relatedness), between students' from scientific and humanities colleges. However, students from scientific colleges exhibited higher level of autonomy. The study also found that females had higher levels of self-compassion compared to males, with no differences based on college affiliation. Furthermore, positive correlations were observed between basic psychological needs and self-compassion, as well as and between psychological needs and self-compassion subscales (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness). Conversely, a negative correlation was identified between basic psychological needs and self-compassion subscales (self-judgment, isolation, and over-identified). Conclusion: The basic psychological needs are of paramount importance in human development, and they serve as fundamental requirements throughout an individual's growth. The study revealed a positive correlation between basic psychological needs and self-compassion. These findings have valuable implications for the development of training and guidance programs aimed at enhancing basic psychological needs and self-compassion, which can ultimately contribute positively to the learning process.

INTRODUCTION

Human evolution has advanced through the recognition and fulfilment of physiological, sociological and psychological needs. Despite the changes brought about by historical progress, the contemporary significance and value of these needs have remained integral in the foundational concepts of psychology. The exploration of human needs was initiated by

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McDougall in 1908, followed by contributions from Freud, Murray and Hull, among others. Notably, Maslow introduced the 'hierarchy of needs' model, which popularized the concept of needs in psychology during the 1970s and 1980s. However, this model has seen a decline in popularity due to recent research findings indicting variations in needs assessment and its failure to comprehensively explain all conditions (İlhan & Özbay, 2010; Türkdoğan, 2010).

Sheldon & Bettencourt (2002), made the point that research into positive psychology has focused novel, alternative methodologies on the needs model, including the theory of basic needs by Deci & Ryan (1985, 2000) as part of the self-determination theory, and generally known as satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Baard et al. (2004), Deci & Ryan (1985), and Gagné & Deci (2005) contended that the need for autonomy is the individual's essential need for self-determination, to act according to his/her personal outlook, decisions, and actions, where by the individual chooses a course of action and is responsible for both the choice and consequences of the action. The need for competence encompasses the determination and ability to manage change successfully in spite of a variety of difficulties, not only task oriented but also environmental (Baard et al., 2004; Deci & Ryan, 1985). The third need, relatedness, expresses the desire to feel connection and inclusion, to belong with the people and situation in which the individual lives and to build significant relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 2017; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kowal & Fortier, 1999; Reis et al., 2018).

According to Deci & Ryan (2008), the three needs of self-determination theory play a dual role, serving both as behavioural guides and as defences to safeguard mental stability. Studies by Sheldon & Bettencourt (2002) and Vansteenkiste (2008) have illustrated the significant influence of psychological needs on fulfilment and levels of happiness. Morsunbul (2012) and Ryan et al. (2010) have commented on the physical and psychological distress caused by unfulfilled needs, in contrast to the increased levels of happiness and self-esteem observed in individuals who exercise personal choice, accept responsibility, actively work towards achieving goals, and strengthen social connections, all of which contribute to their psychological health, overall well-being, and life-satisfaction.

The term 'self-compassion' refers to being kind and understanding towards one's own imperfections and failings, as well as those others, rather than being judgemental. It encompasses self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-kindness is achieved through understanding and accepting our human frailties, the imperfections of daily life, and the way we deal with its challenges without engaging in harsh self-recrimination. Common humanity involves understanding and accepting our shared human strengths and weaknesses, rather than retreating into self-imposed isolation and resentment of life's perceived unfairness on an individual level. Mindfulness represents the necessity of maintaining balance in our reactions to events, stemming from the realization and acceptance that problems and suffering are part of everyone's life experience. This perspective encourages a degree of mental distancing rather than reacting negatively (Neff, 2003).

Gilbert (2005) explains self-compassion as a buffer against natural reactions to perceived stress, including the threat and self-protection system. When facing physical or psychological stress, these reactions significantly impact our cognitive and behavioural responses, reducing the body's innate 'fight, flight, or freeze' reaction to physical threats. In psychological stress, these reactions can transform into self-judgment (fight), self-isolation (flight) or over identification (freeze). Gilbert (2005), Neff & McGehee (2010) and Neff et al. (2007) define self-compassion as remedial responses to stress. Self-kindness counters undue self-criticism, common humanity inhibits self-pity and feelings of isolation during times of distress, and mindfulness frees the individual from over-identifying with a distressing situation. The connection between self-compassion and self-protection, therefore, creates a bond between psychological and somatic features, calming both physical and psychological aspects of stress

(Neff, 2003). Several studies have confirmed positive results, with Shepherd & Cardon (2009) finding that self-compassion serves as a shield against reacting negatively to unfulfilled psychological needs, allowing individuals to learn from their disappointments and remain positive and motivated to keep trying (Ghorbani et al., 2012).

Rationale of the Study

Numerous studies examining the link between self-compassion trait levels and well-being have confirmed a close association (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011; Neff et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2008). Higher levels of self-compassion are consistently associated with components of life-satisfaction including optimism, happiness, confidence, body appreciation, and motivation. Conversely, some studies have found lower levels of negative reactions, depression, anxiety and stress, body embarrassment and fear of failure among individuals with higher levels of self-compassion (Daye et al., 2014; Finlay-Jones et al., 2015; Neff et al., 2007; Raes, 2010). Additionally, studies by Breines et al. (2014) and Friis et al. (2015) have shown a clear association between higher self-compassion score and improved physiological stress responses.

Purpose of the Study

The university stage is one of the most critical phases in a student's academic journey, significantly influencing their personality development. However, it can also be a challenging and stressful period due to increased responsibilities across various aspects of life. The success of university students is contingent upon their ability to navigate these challenges and interact effectively with events and people in their environment. While many studies have traditionally focused on variables impacting academic achievement among university students, recent research has increasingly turned its attention to factors affecting students' psychological well-being. Researchers in positive psychology are particularly interested in human strengths and positive outcomes, seeking to identify personal and social factors that enhance individual resilience, including basic psychological needs and self-compassion. This study aims to address the following research questions: (1) Are there gender and college-related differences in the levels of basic psychological needs? (2) Are there gender and college-related differences in the levels of self-compassion? And (3) Is there a relationship between basic psychological needs and self-compassion?

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach. The descriptive approach was utilized to assess differences in the levels of basic psychological needs and self-compassion based on gender and college affiliation. Additionally, the correlational approach was applied to explore the relationship between basic psychological needs and self-compassion.

Table 1. Distribution of the study sample according to demographic variables

Variables		Number	Percent
Gender	Male	276	52.2%
	Female	252	47.8%
	Total	528	100%
Academic specialization	Sciences college	220	41.7%
	Humane college	308	58.3%
	Total	528	100%
Academic years	First year	130	24.6%
	Second year	92	17.4%
	Third year	94	17.8%
	Fourth year	112	21.2%
	Total	528	100%

Population and the methods of sampling

The study included a sample of 528 undergraduate students at the Hashemite University in Jordan, with ages ranging from 18 to 22 years. Participants were selected purposively, and informed consent was obtained from all students' participants. Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Department of Educational Psychology in the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the Hashemite University. The demographic characteristics of the study sample are presented in Table 1.

Instruments

Needs Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (NSFS): The NSFS developed by Longo et al. (2014), consists of 18 items distributed across three dimensions: competence (6 items, $\alpha = .87$), relatedness (6 items, $\alpha = .76$), and autonomy (6 items, $\alpha = .82$). Responses to NSFS items are rated on a Five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

For this study, the NSFS was translated from English to Arabic, and its accuracy and integrity in the Arabic version were confirmed by an English language specialist. Reliability analysis using Cronbach alpha for the NSFS in this study yielded values of .73, and .71, .72, & .75 for competence, relatedness and autonomy, respectively.

Self-compassion Scale (SCS): The SCS developed by Neff (2003), consists of 26 items distributed across six dimensions: self-kindness (5 items, $\alpha = .88$), self-judgment (5 items, $\alpha = .88$), common humanity (4 items, $\alpha = .80$), isolation (4 items, $\alpha = .85$), mindfulness (4 items, $\alpha = .85$), and over-identified (4 items, $\alpha = .88$). The SCS utilizes a Five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) almost never to (5) almost always. The overall Cronbach alpha for the SCS was (.93).

Similarly, the SCS was translated from English to Arabic for this study, with accuracy and integrity validated by an English language specialist. Reliability analysis using Cronbach alpha for the SCS in this study yielded value of .71 and .70, .71, .83, .79, .73, & .70 for self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identified, respectively.

Data collection and analysis

The study scales were electronically distributed to the participants using the Microsoft Forms program, during the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (v. 20). Descriptive statistics and MANOVA analysis were employed to determine differences in the levels of basic psychological needs and self-compassion based on gender and college variables. Additionally, Pearson correlation coefficients were utilized to investigate the relationship between basic psychological needs and self-compassion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Are there gender and college-related differences in the levels of basic psychological needs? to address this question, descriptive statistics for basic psychological needs based on gender and college are presented in Table 2.

MANOVA analysis was conducted to explore whether significant differences exist in the levels of basic psychological needs, as shown in Table 3. The results of the MANOVA analysis indicated no significant differences in the level of basic psychological needs and its subscales, competence and autonomy based on gender. However, it was found that the level of relatedness among males was higher than that among females. The MANOVA results also revealed no differences in the level of basic psychological needs and its subscales, competence and relatedness, based on college affiliation. However, the level of autonomy among students in scientific colleges was higher than that among students in humanities colleges.

Are there gender and college-related differences in the levels of self-compassion? to answer this question, descriptive statistics for self-compassion based on gender and college are

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation for basic psychological needs based on gender and college

Variables	Gender				College			
	Male		Female		Scientific		Humane	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Competence	3.58	.59	3.61	.52	3.29	.30	3.61	.59
Relatedness	3.33	.58	3.17	.61	3.29	.59	3.24	.60
Autonomy	3.09	.39	3.09	.30	3.16	.36	3.04	.34
Basic psychological needs	3.34	.32	3.29	.30	3.34	.32	3.30	.31

Table 3. MANOVA analysis results

Source	Variables	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig
Gender (Wilks' Lambda= .980) P= .00)	Competence	.091	1	.091	.286	.59
	Relatedness	3.034	1	3.034	8.553	.00
	Autonomy	.082	1	.082	.667	.41
	Basic psychological needs	.148	1	.148	1.452	.22
College (Wilks' Lambda= .972) P= .00	Competence	.079	1	.079	.247	.61
	Relatedness	.036	1	.036	.102	.75
	Autonomy	1.835	1	1.835	14.913	.00
	Basic psychological needs	.177	1	.177	1.744	.18
Error	Competence	167.534	525	.319		
	Relatedness	186.247	525	.355		
	Autonomy	64.599	525	.123		
	Basic psychological needs	53.417	525	.102		
Corrected total	Competence	167.747	527			
	Relatedness	189.582	527			
	Autonomy	66.434	527			
	Basic psychological needs	53.824	527			

Table 4. Mean and standard deviation for self-compassion based on gender and college

Variables	Gender				College			
	Male		Female		Scientific		Humane	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Self-kindness	3.61	.64	3.81	.75	3.74	.68	3.67	.71
Self-judgment	3.02	.55	3.00	.46	3.07	.51	2.96	.50
Common humanity	3.57	.73	3.68	.79	3.66	.85	3.59	.69
Isolation	2.92	.53	2.83	.59	2.81	.61	2.93	.51
Mindfulness	3.61	.56	3.67	.66	3.66	.64	3.62	.60
Over-identified	3.30	.48	3.28	.47	3.30	.48	3.28	.47
Self-compassion	3.33	.26	3.38	.28	3.38	.27	3.34	.26

presented in Table 4. MANOVA analysis was conducted to investigate whether significant differences exist in the level of self-compassion, as shown in Table 5. The results of the MANOVA analysis revealed that the level of self-compassion among female students was higher than of male student. Specifically, self-kindness was higher among female students than among male students, while the level of isolation was higher among male students compared to female students. No significant differences in the level of self-judgment, common humanity, mindfulness and over-identified were observed on gender. Additionally, the MANOVA results showed no significant differences in the level of self-compassion and its subscales, self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness and over-identified, based on college affiliation. However, the level of self-judgment was higher among students in scientific colleges compared to students in humanities colleges, and the level of isolation was higher among students in humanities colleges compared to students in scientific colleges.

Table 5. MANOVA analysis results

Source	Variables	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig
Gender (Wilks' Lambda= .970, P= .01)	Self-kindness	6.262	1	6.262	12.910	.00
	Self-judgment	.003	1	.003	.011	.91
	Common humanity	2.146	1	2.146	3.663	.06
	Isolation	1.658	1	1.658	5.300	.02
	Mindfulness	.488	1	.488	1.278	.25
	Over-identified	.037	1	.037	.163	.68
	Self-compassion	.356	1	.356	4.826	.02
College (Wilks' Lambda= .968, P= .01)	Self-kindness	1.665	1	1.665	3.433	.06
	Self-judgment	1.521	1	1.521	5.818	.01
	Common humanity	1.057	1	1.057	1.804	.18
	Isolation	2.463	1	2.463	7.871	.00
	Mindfulness	.265	1	.265	.693	.40
	Over-identified	.043	1	.043	.186	.66
	Self-compassion	.263	1	.263	3.568	.06
Error	Self-kindness	254.657	525	.485		
	Self-judgment	137.243	525	.261		
	Common humanity	307.541	525	.586		
	Isolation	164.269	525	.313		
	Mindfulness	200.426	525	.382		
	Over-identified	120.483	525	.229		
	Self-compassion	38.718	525	.074		
Corrected total	Self-kindness	262.584	527			
	Self-judgment	138.767	527			
	Common humanity	310.744	527			
	Isolation	168.390	527			
	Mindfulness	201.179	527			
	Over-identified	120.563	527			
	Self-compassion	39.337	527			

Table 6. Pearson correlation between basic psychological needs and self-compassion

Variables	Competence	Relatedness	Autonomy	Basic psychological needs
Self-kindness	.24*	.21*	.07*	.29*
Self-judgment	-.07	-.15*	-.13*	-.09*
Common humanity	.12*	.07*	.13*	.16*
Isolation	-.13*	-.05	-.20*	-.16*
Mindfulness	.19*	.13*	-.02	.19*
Over-identified	-.23*	-.07*	-.03	-.20*
Self-compassion	.23*	.15*	.07*	.25*

Is there a relationship between basic psychological needs and self-compassion? to explore the relationship between basic psychological needs and self-compassion, Pearson correlations were conducted, as shown in Table 6.

The results of the Pearson correlation test indicated positive correlations between basic psychological needs and self-compassion ($r = .025$) and between psychological needs and self-compassion subscales (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness). However, negative correlations were observed between basic psychological needs and self-compassion subscales (self-judgment, isolation, and over-identified).

Discussion

In response to the first question, the results showed no significant differences in the level of basic psychological needs and two dimensions (competence and autonomy) based on gender.

This suggests that university students of different gender exhibit similar abilities to make decisions, take responsibility, control their lives, maintain confidence, and effectively cope with events while holding positive perceptions about their abilities. However, males exhibited a higher level of relatedness than females, indicating that males may be more adept at working with others, forming positive, collaborative, and sympathetic relationships. These results are consistent with the findings of [Ryan et al. \(2012\)](#), which suggest that male tend to exhibit higher levels of basic psychological needs than females. However, they differ from previous studies ([Al-Zghoul, 2019](#); [Al-Ziyadat, 2019](#)), which indicated that females tend to exhibit higher levels of basic psychological needs than males.

Regarding the impact of college affiliation, no significant differences were found in the level of basic psychological needs and two dimensions (competence and relatedness). However, students in scientific colleges reported higher levels of autonomy than students in humanities colleges. This finding could be attributed to students in scientific colleges perceiving themselves as more academically and socially competent, self-confident, and distinguished members of society. They may also view their academic disciplines as superior to those students in humanities colleges, contributing positively to their sense of autonomy. This finding contrasts with that of the study result conducted by [Al-Zghoul \(2019\)](#), which found that students in humanities colleges have greater levels of basic psychological needs than students in scientific colleges.

The results of question two indicated that the level of self-compassion for females were higher than for males. This may be due to the prevailing culture in Jordanian society and the nature of cultural and social formworks, which lead to differences between males and females in the level of self-compassion. The reason for this difference may be attributed to how female's deal with themselves when facing various situations of frustration and failure. They do not deal with themselves in the same way as males due to the social restrictions and controls imposed by society on them. Due to their psychological and social makeup, females frequently develop an internal sense of self-reliance that as barrier between them and the surrounding social milieu. This result is consistent with a study by [Adam \(2018\)](#), which also indicated gender differences in self-compassion, in favouring females. It differs from the results of previous studies ([Neff & McGehee, 2010](#); [Neff, Rude, et al., 2007](#)), which found no significant gender differences in the level of self-compassion. And differ of the resulting study of [Neff & McGehee \(2010\)](#), which suggested that males have higher levels of self-compassion than females.

Researchers hold varying opinions on the issue of gender differences in self-compassion. Some studies ([Beery, 2017](#); [Bishop et al., 2004](#)) suggest that females tend to exhibit more self-compassion compared to males, attributed to their internal sense of self-reliance and greater empathy. However, a study by [Neff et al. \(2007\)](#) indicated that females can be more self-critical and less self-compassionate than males.

Furthermore, the result of question two also showed no significant differences in the level of self-compassion based on college. This suggest that students in scientific colleges and humanities colleges exhibit similar positive attitudes towards themselves in challenging situations and when facing experiences of failure. They do not engage in severe self-criticism. Students from both types of colleges also seem to handle painful feelings resulting from failure and frustration with awareness and an open mind. This similarity in behaviour may be attributed to the shared university environment, despite differences in curricula, encouraging students to view themselves positively and objectively when confronted with situations of failure and frustration. These results align with the findings of the study by [Adam \(2018\)](#) , which also found no significant differences in self-compassion based on college.

The results of question three revealed a positive relationship between basic psychological needs and self-compassion. This relationship can be explained by the fact that engagement in autonomous tasks satisfices basic psychological needs and leads to improved behaviours and

greater consistency in actions. Consequently, the combination of meeting these basic psychological needs and integration of self-knowledge can enhance levels of self-compassion. Likewise, greater self-knowledge can further improve an individual's self-compassion, increasing their confidence in decision-making and their ability to cope with various circumstances that may arise.

Finally, integrative self-knowledge allows an individual to analyze and accept past, present and future experiences, and such analysis demands that the brain engage at higher, more complex levels. As shown by previous studies, there is a positive relationship between basic psychological needs and self-compassion (Babenko & Oswald, 2019; Busch, 2014; Gerber & Anaki, 2021; Shamsi & Sufi, 2017). Gerber & Anaki (2021) view self-compassion as a coping mechanism that enables individuals to accept their destiny and face the consequences of their actions with equanimity. It also empowers them to take responsibility for their actions without relying on the distortion or denial of defence mechanisms (Allen & Leary, 2010). Instead, it helps them make informed decisions and provide well-reasoned responses. self-compassion thus serves as a bridge between the individual and their behaviour, establishing a direct empathic link that legitimizes and validates the individual's actions with deliberate intent. In construct, Deci & Ryan (2014) note that autonomy refers to the individual feeling that they are in control and that their actions are voluntary. This sense of autonomy allows individuals to take responsibility for their actions without hostility or alienation (Ryan et al., 2012). The concept of autonomy aligns with and is supported by the empirical principle of self-compassion (Legault & Inzlicht, 2013). Consequently, as Hodgins et al. (2010) suggest, performance is enhanced by greater autonomy along with the acceptance of negativity and open acceptance of hostile self-relevant information in the face of challenges and restrictive limitations.

Landgraf (2013) believes that self-compassion specifically enhances cognitive compatibility and the emotional and behavioural processes of individuals. It also assists individual facing difficulties and problems, reducing anxiety levels, and increasing self-tolerance. Moreover, it leads to increased determination and perseverance in tasks after repeated failure. Potter (2014) have suggested that self-compassion plays a critical role in protecting individuals from psychological disorders. Breines & Chen (2012) have also proposed that self-compassion represents a mind-set charged with positive emotions that counteract negative feelings about oneself. It helps individuals realize that these feelings do not define their lives, which positively impacts the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs.

Implications

This study has uncovered a positive relationship between basic psychological needs and self-compassion. These findings have a beneficial impact on university students. Meeting basic psychological needs plays a pivotal role in preventing and reducing the pressures that students face during their university studies. Self-compassion is a fundamental dimension within an individual's psychological structure, and individuals with high levels of self-compassion possess a better understanding of themselves and their emotions. They also exhibit a greater ability to positively confront stressful life events. The results of this study can be valuable in designing training and guidance programs that contribute to the development basic psychological needs and self-compassion, both of which play a positive role in enhancing the learning process.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, to measure basic psychological needs and self-compassion, the self-report method was used. Secondly, the sample that participated in this study was exclusively from the Hashemite University, a public university in Jordan. Future studies could be conducted with a sample of private university students in Jordan.

Additionally, future research could investigate the relationship between basic psychological needs and self-compassion with other cognitive or personality variables.

CONCLUSION

The concept of psychological needs has received significant attention from psychologists, as these needs are fundamental requirement at all stages of individual growth. Self-compassion is one of the important and positive variables in an individual personality. It represents a basic dimension in the psychological structure of the individual and serves as a protective factor against the negative effects of stressful life events. This study primarily aimed to examine the correlation between basic psychological needs and self-compassion and determine whether there were differences in the level of basic psychological needs and self-compassion based on the variables of gender and college. The results showed a positive correlation between basic psychological needs and self-compassion. There were no differences in the level of psychological needs based on gender and college, but differences were observed in the level of self-compassion due to gender.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

AG and FA wrote the literature review and the discussion of the study. AM conducted the statistical analysis and wrote the results. All authors participated in reviewing the study in its final form.

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