

Self-Compassion and Well-being: A Study of Undergraduates at an HBCU

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Introduction

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between self-compassion and well-being factors—life satisfaction, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and academic achievement—among Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) students. Preliminary analyses compared students with high and low self-compassion, revealing significant associations between high self-compassion and increased life satisfaction and reduced loneliness and anxiety. No significant association was found between self-compassion and academic achievement (GPA). These findings suggest that interventions aimed at increasing self-compassion may support the mental well-being for HBCU students.

Aims of the Research

The aim of this research was to **explore the relationship between self-compassion and various aspects of well-being, including life satisfaction, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and academic achievement**, among students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Given the unique cultural and social experiences of students at HBCUs, this study sought to understand whether **self-compassion might serve as a protective factor** in supporting mental health and academic outcomes in this population. Preliminary analysis focused on comparing students with high and low levels of self-compassion to identify potential differences in their well-being and academic performance. Specifically, the study aimed **to determine if higher self-compassion correlated with greater life satisfaction, reduced loneliness and anxiety, and potentially better academic achievement**. This early analysis provided valuable insights into the role of self-compassion in the lives of HBCU students, offering a foundation for future research and interventions tailored to this population’s unique needs.

Research Questions

1. How do high and low levels of self-compassion relate to life satisfaction among students at HBCUs?
2. What is the relationship between levels of self-compassion, depression, and anxiety in HBCU students?
3. Is there a significant difference in loneliness levels between students with high and low self-compassion at HBCUs?
4. What is the association between self-compassion and academic achievement in students at HBCUs?

Method

Research Design

Using a cross-sectional research design, a self-report questionnaire was administered to undergraduate students enrolled in courses in the department of health, physical education, and recreation at a public-HBCU located in the U.S. Southeast. Students were recruited to complete the survey via Qualtrics during the fall semester of 2024. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

The Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) consisted of 26 items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 = Almost Always to 1 = Almost Never. An overall self-compassion score between 1-5 was possible, along with five subscale scores. Life satisfaction was measured using the **Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)**, which included 5 items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree = 1 to Strongly Agree = 7. The Four-Item **Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ– 4)** for Anxiety and Depression was used to measure mental-wellbeing. The PHQ-4 used a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Not At All to 4 = Nearly Everyday, with a possible score range of 0 to 9. Loneliness was measured using the **UCLA 3-Item Loneliness Scale**, resulting in a range of scores from 3 to 9.

Cronbach’s alpha indicated the **SCS** ($\alpha = .913$), **SWLS** ($\alpha = .864$), and **PHQ-4** ($\alpha = .788$) were **reliable measures**. The Cronbach’s alpha indicated the UCLA 3-Item Loneliness Scale ($\alpha = .679$) was a questionable measure, which may reflect the fact that this scale hasn’t been validated with African-American students.

Participants

Demographics revealed the sample to be 88.7% African-American/Black, 56.6% women, 49.1% transfer students, and 66% were in their third year or higher.

Data Collection

Using SPSS 29.0 to analyze the data, descriptive statistics were used to measure the frequency of responses. Independent t-test was used to compare the differences in level of self-compassion, life satisfaction, and academic achievement. Chi-square was used to measure the association between levels of self-compassion, depression, anxiety, and loneliness. High and low levels of self-compassion and loneliness were determined using a median split.

Results

Data Analysis

Table 1. Comparison of self-compassion levels, loneliness, depression, and anxiety symptoms.

	Low Self-Compassion (n = 29)	High Self-Compassion (n = 24)		
Variable	%	%	Test value	P Value
Depression Symptoms				
Low	13.8	58.3	11.616	0.001**
High	86.2	41.7		
Anxiety Symptoms				
Low	34.5	75.0	8.651	.003**
High	65.5	25.0		
Loneliness				
Low	13.8	58.3	11.616	.001*
High	86.2	41.7		
Note: p < .01*, p < .001**				

Table 2. Comparison of self-compassion, satisfaction with life scale, and GPA items.

	Overall Mean(SD)	Low Self-Compassion (SD)	High Self-Compassion (SD)	F	p-Value
Satisfaction with Life Scale	4.74(1.583)	4.03(1.569)	5.58(1.139)	8.068	.001**
In most ways, my life is close to my ideal.	4.70(1.462)	4.07(1.462)	5.46(1.062)	3.565	.001**
The conditions of my life are excellent.	4.79(1.472)	4.17(1.513)	5.54(1.021)	4.783	.001**
I am satisfied with my life.	4.89(1.552)	4.10(1.448)	5.83(1.090)	2.163	.001**
I have gotten the important things I want in life.	4.66(1.617)	4.03(1.500)	5.42(1.442)	.091	.001**
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	4.02(1.896)	3.41(1.500)	4.75(2.090)	4.720	.009**
GPA	3.28(.425)	3.18(.452)	3.40(.364)	.615	.064
Note: p < .01*, p < .001**					

Discussion

These findings suggest that higher self-compassion is associated with greater life satisfaction and lower levels of loneliness and anxiety, although it does not appear to have a direct impact on GPA. The relationship between depression and academic performance highlights the potential importance of addressing mental health needs to support academic success among HBCU students.



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