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**LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE MAJOR REASEARCH PROJECT**

<b>Title</b>	A Critique of Theory Related to Self-Compassion in the Parent-Child Relationship
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## **A Critique of Theory Related to Self-Compassion in the Parent-Child Relationship**

### **Background**

This review will consider the emerging concept of self-compassion and its theoretical association with the parent-child relationship, particularly in the context of parental depression. The parent-child relationship is considered in terms of parental sensitivity and attributions of child behaviour; both aspects are considered to be negatively influenced by parental depression. The clinical implications of an association between self-compassion and the parent-child relationship are considered and areas for further research are discussed.

Self-compassion is considered to be a relatively new concept in psychology, although it is becoming an area of significant interest (Raes, 2011). Self-compassion supports the cultivation of a healthy attitude and caring relationship towards the self (Birnie, Speca & Carlson, 2010; Neff, 2003a). It is integral to compassion for others; Goldstein has described it as the “heartfelt experience of sharing the pain of another and the wish for alleviation of their suffering” (cited in Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011, p. 223). It is thought that self-compassion enhances compassion for others through understanding that pain, suffering and failure are a common human experience (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion encourages an open awareness to others' failures and misguided actions whilst responding with nonjudgemental understanding of “shared human fallibility” (Neff, 2003a, p. 87). It has been considered that a nonjudgemental stance towards oneself permits the same attitude towards others, recognising that people are interconnected (Neff, 2003a).

Self-compassion has been defined as encompassing three main components; self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness (Neff, 2003b). Self-kindness is considered to be kindness towards oneself instead of harsh criticism and judgement. Common humanity is the understanding of shared human experience, the recognition that suffering is not unique to the self but is inherently related to others. Mindfulness is an approach of balance when

experiencing painful thoughts and feelings; instead of over-identifying with them, one is able to hold them in awareness (Neff, 2003b). Mindfulness has been linked to nonjudgemental acceptance of mental states and feelings. It provides a state of awareness that is not influenced by personal opinion or views, instead fostering a flexible thought process (Neff, 2003a). Neff (2003b) developed a self-report measure based on this concept, known as the Self Compassion Scale (SCS). This provides an overall self-compassion score and subscales for self-kindness, self-judgement, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness and over-identification.

Self-compassion has shown an association with lower levels of depression; a recent meta-analysis concluded this association had large effect sizes (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Self-compassion has been found to be a predictor of depression severity and quality of life, accounting for more unique variance than a single factor of mindfulness (Woodruff et al. 2013; Van Dam, Sheppard, Forsyth & Earleywine, 2011). Kuyken et al. (2010) also reported that self-compassion mediated changes in depressive symptoms at a 15 month follow up following the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy intervention (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002).

**The Parent-Child Relationship.** The parent-child interaction forms the “basis for the child’s psychological growth and development” (Shin, Park, Ryu & Seomun, 2008, p.304). Maternal sensitivity is a fundamental indication of the quality of the parent-child interaction and one of the most important aspects of a secure attachment relationship (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall; cited in Shin et al., 2008). Sensitivity is a dyadic process between mother and child but it is the responsibility of the parent to create “mutual attunement” (Shin et al., 2008, p.307). Sensitivity involves the awareness and accurate interpretation of a child's signals whilst being able to respond appropriately. Essentially, the parent is able to make accurate inferences about their child's state from their behavioural cues (Fonagy, Steele, Steele,

Higgitt & Target, 1994). Thompson (1997) reported that a change in sensitivity might be expected over the developmental period and the “requirements of sensitive responding impose changing demands on the parent” depending on the age of the child (p. 596).

Parental attributions of child causation also have a significant impact on the quality of the parent-child relationship (Esdaile and Greenwood, 2003). Dix, Ruble, Grusec and Nixon (1986) explained that parents must "determine why particular child behaviours are occurring; infer the needs, motives and limitations in their children that may underlie those behaviours; and select parenting responses" (p. 879). Dix et al. (1986) explained that if a parent perceives a situation caused by internal factors (i.e. the child has adequate knowledge, ability and lacks external influences), they will infer the child intentionality and that the child's personality dispositions caused the behaviour. Conversely, if the parent views that the behaviour was controlled by external factors, then the behaviour is perceived as unintended. Therefore, the cause of the behaviour is attributed to "developmental or situational constraints on children's control over behaviour but not personality dispositions" (p. 880). Additionally, Dix et al. (1986) reported that child age is related to changes in causal attributions; parents assumed personality dispositions were the cause of the behaviour with increasing child development.

It is thought that parental attributions enable inferences about child behaviour on a daily basis, particularly immediate assessment of causal factors. Dadds, Mullin, McAllister, and Atkinson (2003) explained that attributions are particularly likely to occur when the behaviour is perceived as ambiguous. If situational cues do not provide enough information to explain the child's behaviour, a parent may refer back to pre-existing cognition about the child. It is thought habitual patterns of interpreting and responding to behaviour occur following an established attribution.

**Parental Depression.** Depression research has raised particular mental health concerns for parents and children. Depression has been shown to have a high rate of

reoccurrence, often within the first few months of recovery, whilst the severity of depressive symptoms increase during each episode (Maj, Veltro, Pirozzi, Lobracc & Magliano, 1992; Kessing, 2008). It has been found to be more common in women and during child rearing years (Cox, Murray & Chapman, 1993; Hasin, Goodwin, Stinson & Grant, 2005). Depressive symptoms have been associated with child internalising disorders (symptoms of depression and anxiety) and are also at an increased risk of developing externalising problems (Langrock, Compas, Keller, Merchant & Copeland, 2010; Thompson et al., 2010; Bagner, Pettit, Lewinsohn & Seeley, 2010; Frye & Garber, 2005). The association with child developmental outcomes and parenting has been shown to vary with the duration and number of episodes of depression (Foster et al., 2008).

Parent depression is thought to increase the risk of parental insensitivity and disrupt the parent-child relationship (Knoche, Givens & Sheridan, 2007; Shin et al., 2008). The interactions of parents with depression and their children are often less sensitive; behaviours include intrusiveness, disengagement and hostility. Driscoll and Easterbrooks (2007) found parents with depression showed unpredictable structuring and disengagement during parent-child interactions. Dix, Gershoff, Meunier and Miller (2004) reported that parents with depressive symptoms tended to show fewer child orientated concerns and less positive emotions towards their children but an increase in parent orientated concerns.

Parental attribution style has important implications on the parent-child interaction and child outcomes (Dadds et al., 2003). There is growing literature concerning attributions of parents with depression. Research has shown an association between parental depressive symptoms and internal attributions of negative child behaviour as well as parent self-blaming attributions (Bolton et al., 2003; White and Barrowclough, 1998; Leung and Slep, 2006; Laskey and Cartwright-Hatton, 2009). This attribution style has negative implications for the parental response; it has been associated with hostility, ineffective discipline, over-reactive

response and low parenting satisfaction in parents with depression (Bolton et al. 2003, Leung & Slep, 2006; Snarr, Slep & Grande, 2009).

In summary, self-compassion has been described as integral to compassion for others, supporting an understanding of shared human experience and a sense of interconnection. Research has shown self-compassion is associated with lower levels of depression and has mediated changes in depressive symptoms. In regard to the parent-child relationship, the current evidence base suggests parent depressive symptoms are negatively associated with this relationship. It has been associated with a lack of parental sensitivity and negative attributions of child behaviour. An association between self-compassion and positive parent-child relationships has clinical implications, particularly for parents with depression. This is particularly important when considering that self-compassion has been associated with reducing depressive symptoms. If there is an association between self-compassion and parenting, it is possible that interventions based on self-compassion could intervene with depressive symptoms as well as the parent-child relationship. However, research considering self-compassion and parenting is at the beginning stages, therefore the following review considers the theoretical research concerning self-compassion in aspects of the parent-child relationship, specifically attributions and sensitivity.

### **Review questions**

This literature review considered whether self-compassion is associated with parent sensitivity and attributions of child behaviour. Self-compassion concerning the parent-child relationship is a relatively new concept in psychology. Therefore, the aim of this literature review was to provide a theoretical review of self-compassion in relation to parental sensitivity and parent attributions of child behaviour. The literature review question was 'Does self-compassion influence parenting sensitivity and attributions of child behaviour?'. Furthermore, the review was interested in literature on this topic specifically relating to

parents with depression.

## **Method**

A search was conducted using PsychINFO and Google Scholar at two time points (July 2011 and August 2013). The database search was of key words relevant to the literature review, this was restricted to articles from 1891 to 2013. An asterisk was used at the end of keywords in order to ensure relevant articles were sourced. The search key words included: self compassion and attribution\*; self compassion and sensitiv\*. The search also included a broader term to include any additional articles relating to parenting and self-compassion; these key words were self compassion and parent\*. In addition, as manuscripts were accessed and reviewed, key articles were sourced through Google Scholar.

Papers retrieved in the search were screened against several inclusion/exclusion criteria. Articles that referred to self-compassion in the context of either parental sensitivity or attributions of child behaviour within the title and/or abstract were included. Articles that did not focus on self-compassion in either context were excluded. Additionally, articles which related to the perinatal or infancy stages of development were excluded. Parenting in the earlier developmental stages such as pregnancy, birth or breast feeding relate to different relational processes compared to childhood. The studies were reviewed qualitatively and critically evaluated to provide a theoretical background in the emerging area of self-compassion in relation to parent sensitivity and attributions of child behaviour.

## **Results**

The approach outlined above yielded three articles for self compassion and attribution\*, five articles for self compassion and sensitiv\* and 15 articles for self compassion and parent\*. The returned searches were screened using the predefined criteria, some articles required further assessment of the main text to determine their suitability. One article met the criteria and an additional two key articles were sourced, these focused primarily on

mindfulness and/or self-compassion but included relevant theory concerning self-compassion and parenting in the main text.

The results of the relevant articles were summarised in Table 1. Two of these articles provide theoretical background on mindful parenting which included a specific focus on self-compassion in parenting (Bögels, Lehtonen & Restifo, 2010; Duncan, Coatsworth & Greenberg, 2009). Neff (2003a) focused on defining and examining the construct of self-compassion and included theoretical background on self-compassionate parents and the relationship with their child.

**Self-Compassion and Parent Sensitivity: Psychological Theory and Models.** Neff (2003a) described a concept of self-compassion entailing three facets: self-kindness and self-judgement, common humanity and isolation, mindfulness and over-identification. These have been considered to be conceptually distinct but interact to facilitate and develop each aspect (Neff, 2003a). This theory was based on empirical research examining the aspects of self-compassion which provided an evidence base for the three facets of self-compassion (Neff, 2003b). Additionally this research provided an evidence base that self-compassion is conceptually different to self esteem (Neff, 2003b). Although further research is required to develop a model exploring the influence of each facet in relation to parent-child interactions, the theory has provided an insight into potential mechanisms which may influence the parent-child relationship.

Neff (2003a) theorised that self-compassion will positively influence parenting behaviours; a parent with higher levels of self-compassion will react with nonjudgemental actions whilst showing concern and kindness for their child's wellbeing. A sense of social connectedness with others is thought to develop alongside self-compassionate mindfulness

Table 1

*Research article characteristics*

<b>Author; country</b>	<b>Focus of the research</b>	<b>Key theoretical concepts</b>
Bögels, Lehtonen & Restifo (2010); The Netherlands	Theorised mechanisms of change in the parent – child relationship through mindful parenting	Mechanisms hypothesized to be mediated by mindful parenting included: reducing parental stress and reactivity; reducing parental preoccupation, improving executive functioning, breaking the transmission of dysfunctional parenting schemas and habits, increasing self-nourishing attention and improving co-parenting.
Duncan, Coatsworth & Greenberg, (2009); USA	An operational definition of mindful parenting and implications for the parent-child relationship.	Development of a mindful parenting model. Comprised of five elements; listening with full attention, nonjudgmental acceptance of self and child, emotional awareness of self and child, self-regulation in the parenting relationship and compassion for self and child.  Development of the Mindfulness-Enhanced Strengthening Families Program based on integrating the mindful parenting concepts.
Neff (2003a); USA	Definition and examination of the construct of self-compassion	The construct of self-compassion has three main components: self-kindness and self-judgment, common humanity and isolation and mindfulness and over-identification. It is a healthy attitude toward the self which could protect against negative mental health symptoms such as depression and support positive parenting-child interactions.

and common humanity (Neff, 2003 a). Furthermore, a sense of common humanity has been thought to increase a compassionate response to others; a realisation that others are also suffering and deserving of kindness. However, the definition of parental kindness is open to interpretation and requires further definition to be assessed within parenting research. This theory could inform hypotheses concerning sensitive parenting, which has been extensively defined in parenting research (Shin et al., 2008). It could be hypothesised that self-compassion is positively associated with parental sensitivity, particularly self-judgment and common humanity.

Neff (2003a) considered self-compassion would be particularly useful in interactions which trigger negative emotions. Self-compassion has been related to the ability to be mindful of distressing emotions. Instead of avoiding the distressing experience, a compassionate approach encourages self-kindness and non-reactivity, facilitating a more considered response. Therefore, parental sensitivity could be associated with self-compassion through the ability to reduce reactivity, particularly in moments of distressing emotion.

Duncan, Coatsworth and Greenberg (2009) provided a mindful parenting model based on key mindfulness concepts (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer & Toney, 2006; Brown & Ryan, 2003), evidence based mindfulness interventions (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Kabat-Zinn, 2003) and theoretical and empirical research concerning parenting (Teti & Gelfand, 1991; Dix, 1991). The model has been based on five dimensions of parenting; of interest is the domain of compassion for the self and child (see Table 1 for the remaining dimensions). The model has provided a theoretical approach to self-compassion relating to parenting.

Duncan et al. (2009) suggested that self-compassion whilst caring for a child is a prerequisite for good parenting. Duncan et al. (2009) theorised self-compassion would positively influence a parent-child relationship; suggesting parents with self-compassion may be more able to perceive their child's distress and respond appropriately. They referred to the

concept of self-compassion outlined by Neff (2003b), suggesting common humanity may particularly benefit parenting practices by reducing self-judgement. They suggested this could shift the focus from self-blame in parenting activities, facilitating reengagement and attention on present parenting tasks. This is relevant to parental sensitivity, considering the importance of maternal attunement to the child and that parents with depression tend to ruminate (Raes, 2010).

Duncan et al. (2009) referred to the concept of self-compassion proposed by Neff (2003b). However, they considered some aspects (e.g. non-judgement) in relation to mindfulness as opposed to facets of self-compassion. Although the definition of mindfulness in relation to self-compassion requires further study, both articles consider that mindfulness will support a positive parent-child interaction. Duncan et al. (2009) explained a mindful parent may more accurately attend to a child's internal representations and needs. This theoretical application of mindfulness in the parent-child interaction has implications for hypotheses concerning parental sensitivity; interpreting a child's needs is essential for responding sensitively (Shin et al., 2008). A mindful parent may have awareness of accurate information enabling them to sensitively respond.

Bögels et al. (2010) hypothesised that mindfulness-based parenting interventions may positively influence the parent-child relationship and parenting skills. They suggested this operates in six domains, specifically of interest is self-compassion, which is considered essential for a healthy parent-child interaction (see Table 1 for the remaining domains). Bögels et al. (2010) also referred to self-compassion as described by Neff (2003b). They suggested by devoting compassion and acceptance towards the self, a parent is able to extend the approach towards their child, particularly in negatively emotive situations. They suggested this may be particularly useful for parents with mental disorders who may have less self-nourishing attention. Additionally, they hypothesised mindfulness may support the

parent in reducing negative ruminations, enabling awareness of their child's cues whilst facilitating attunement. Although these hypotheses are based on evidence concerning depression and mindfulness (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 1997), they require empirical research to assess their validity.

In summary, research concerning self-compassion and parenting, particularly parental sensitivity, has focused on the definition provided by Neff (2003b). This empirical research has provided distinct facets of self-compassion which can guide further research. Research has also indicated that self-compassion may influence parental sensitivity in depressed populations. There is a need to empirically research the hypotheses proposed by theoretical research. Indeed, the importance of research development in this area is apparent when considering the clinical implications for compassion based interventions, particularly for parents with depression (Foster et al., 2008).

#### **Self-Compassion and Parental Attributions: Psychological Theory and Models.**

Neff (2003a) based theory of self-compassion concerning its association with awareness of thoughts on key empirical and theoretical research examining the concept of self-compassion and mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Neff, 2003b). This research has implications when considering hypotheses regarding self-compassion and parent attributions. Neff (2003a) considered the mindfulness facet of self-compassion to facilitate a more flexible and spacious thought process, allowing for awareness of the current experience instead of holding a rigid viewpoint. Additionally, reducing a negative self-judgement attitude supports the individual to view maladaptive thoughts with more awareness. Furthermore, Neff (2003a) explained common humanity is the ability for an individual to perceive that others experience similar feelings of suffering, reducing a sense of separateness. This is important when considering research on attributions, which shows that negative parental reactions towards their children are often based on rigid and preformed attribution styles (Dadds et al., 2003). When applied

to parenting, this could guide hypotheses in further research. For example, a self-compassionate parent may be able to hold attributions in awareness and generate alternative explanations of the behaviour, as opposed to reacting to automatic thoughts.

The mindful parenting model proposed by Duncan et al. (2009) presented theory which has implications for hypotheses concerning attributions of child behaviour. The theory was based on the central aspects of mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), parenting (Jacobs & Eccles, 1992; Dix, 1991) and automatic perceptions of behaviour (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). They suggested nonjudgmental acceptance of child behaviour may facilitate attention to the present moment; increasing awareness and interpretation of the behaviour. Additionally, a reduction in over-identification encourages a conscious awareness of their own and their child's emotions; facilitating a nonreactive response. This conforms with the definition of the over-identification and mindfulness facet in self-compassion provided by Neff (2003a). This suggested that the two aspects are related to each other; mindfulness encourages a balanced awareness of an internal experience.

Duncan et al. (2009) suggested the ability to hold emotions in awareness is particularly important in emotionally distressing parent-child interactions. They emphasised that these situations in particular can initiate automatic evaluative thoughts which can be enacted in the relationship. Furthermore, they stated mindful parenting facilitates a parent to make more conscious decisions about responding to child behaviour. This is particularly important to consider in relation to parents with depression; research has shown a tendency towards negative attributions which influence parent reactions (Bolton et al., 2003).

Bögels et al. (2010) stated the importance of considering mindfulness in relation to parent negative attributions. They referred to the robust finding that parents with depression have a tendency towards negative attentional biases and negative parent-child interactions (Goodman & Gotlib, 2002). The concept of mindfulness is developed throughout this article

by reference to key authors and empirical research (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 1997; Bishop, 2002; Dumas, 2005). Similarly to Duncan et al. (2009), they suggested mindfulness may bring open and nonjudgemental attention to the parent child interaction, allowing the parent to view the situation more accurately, as opposed to a negatively biased interpretation of behaviour. Although this research does not provide empirical evidence for this association, it has provided a theoretical approach and guides hypotheses to consider aspects such as nonjudgement and mindfulness in relation to parental attributions.

Furthermore, Bögels et al. (2010) suggested that a parent able to bring compassionate attention towards their child may be able to connect to positive feelings and view themselves positively. They described a self-compassion meditation that may “counteract negative biases by having participants deliberately attend to compassionate feelings towards themselves” (p. 7). Furthermore, this has highlighted the clinical implications of developing research in the area of self-compassion; the development of parent self-compassionate interventions could positively impact on the parent-child relationship.

In summary, the articles have provided a theoretical basis to guide hypotheses in parental attributions research. The research particularly highlights the importance for developing research in this area for parents with depression. It is possible that a parent with self-compassion may over-identify with emotions less and have a more mindful state, enabling them to become aware of predefined attributions. It is also possible a parent with self-compassion, particularly common humanity, will be able to appreciate external or situational causes of behaviour common to all human experience. Additionally, an individual with self-compassion may be able to tolerate negative emotions, enabling them to consider alternative factors causing child behaviour.

### **Self-Compassion and Parenting: Measures and Design in Future Research.**

Duncan et al. (2009) and Bögels et al. (2010) both provided a theoretical approach to self-

compassion and parenting. They considered that self-compassion would positively influence the parent-child relationship. They also both referred to the concept of self-compassion described by Neff (2003a), additionally referring to the facets they hypothesised would influence parenting. This guides further research and presents hypotheses concerning specific areas of self-compassion. Furthermore, the Self Compassion Scale (SCS) has been found to be a good psychometric and theoretically valid measure of self-compassion (Neff, 2003b). The measure enables further research to develop in the area of self-compassion; it provides scores for each facet of self compassion enabling research to explore these areas. However, this research does not provide an indication of appropriate measures to assess parent sensitivity or attributions. It would be important for future research to consider the validity of parent self-report measures in relation to parent-child interactions given that parents with depression tend to provide negative attributions and self blame in relation to parenting (Bolton et al., 2003). To reliably assess sensitivity and attributions, independently coded observations and interviews could increase reliability of an accurate assessment (Aspland & Gardner, 2003).

Duncan et al. (2009) and Bögels et al. (2010) suggested that further research needed to be considered in terms of theory, research and application into interventions. The lack of consensus in the reviewed research has highlighted the need to develop the concepts and distinction between mindfulness and self-compassion. However, for self-compassion research to develop, a focus should be maintained on the overall concept of self-compassion as well as the individual facets empirically researched by Neff (2003b). The reviewed research indicates the area of self-compassion and parenting is in the early stages of development, although it has provided a theoretical basis on which to develop empirical studies.

## **Conclusion**

Based on this theoretical background it is possible that parents with self-compassion may show more parental sensitivity and positive attributions of child behaviour, even in negative situations. The concept of self-compassion proposed by Neff (2003a) informed models and hypotheses by Bögels et al. (2010) and Duncan et al. (2009). As previously stated, the SCS measure provides an ideal assessment of each facet within self-compassion, including self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. It would provide an insight into the association of each self-compassion facet with attributions and sensitivity. However, self compassion research needs to consider valid and reliable measures of parenting in order to develop empirical research in this area.

In summary, the above articles have provided a novel appreciation of self-compassion in the parent-child interaction. They draw from theoretical and empirical literature in self-compassion, mindfulness and parenting to provide a theoretical basis to this area of research. They have provided theory on the areas of self-compassion which may facilitate a more positive parent child interaction. However, research in this area is in the early stages of development and further empirical research is now required to develop the evidence base for the theoretical association of self-compassion and positive parenting. Specifically, there is a need for research to consider whether an increase in self-compassion is associated with parental sensitivity and positive attributions of child behaviour.

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