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## Understanding Self-Compassion within Narrative Identity: The Struggles of Japanese Students with Measuring Up

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## Understanding Self-Compassion within Narrative Identity: The Struggles of Japanese Students with Measuring Up

### Abstract

The psychology of self-compassion is growing in importance for understanding well-being and helping people in therapeutic and educational settings. However, present research may be limited by a narrow focus on nomothetic self-reports like the Self-Compassion Scale. This article supplements that qualitatively, looking at self-compassion in life stories. It is guided by the questions, “How do students experience the struggle between self-compassion and its deficit? And how is this experience manifest in their narrative identity?” This study examined three Japanese university students who submitted their narrative self-reflections, including stories of the high point, low point, turning point, and recurring pattern in their lives, without any direct prompting about “self-compassion.” However, their life stories spontaneously pointed to self-compassion and its deficit. These stories were analyzed using the methods of narrative analysis presented by Murray and Josselson, beginning with descriptive/inductive approaches then proceeding to a more interpretative phase using McAdams’ psychology of narrative identity. As expected, their stories included their struggles with self-criticism and self-isolation in what they do and how they think and feel about it. But beyond that, the paper points to entire personas in their stories and their self-conception revealing this struggle with low self-compassion. This shows that self-compassion can be seen on the level of narrative identity via life stories.

### Keywords

mindful self-compassion, narrative identity, life story interview, Japanese education

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# Understanding Self-Compassion within Narrative Identity: The Struggles of Japanese Students with Measuring Up

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The psychology of self-compassion is growing in importance for understanding well-being and helping people in therapeutic and educational settings. However, present research may be limited by a narrow focus on nomothetic self-reports like the Self-Compassion Scale. This article supplements that qualitatively, looking at self-compassion in life stories. It is guided by the questions, “How do students experience the struggle between self-compassion and its deficit? And how is this experience manifest in their narrative identity?” This study examined three Japanese university students who submitted their narrative self-reflections, including stories of the high point, low point, turning point, and recurring pattern in their lives, without any direct prompting about “self-compassion.” However, their life stories spontaneously pointed to self-compassion and its deficit. These stories were analyzed using the methods of narrative analysis presented by Murray and Josselson, beginning with descriptive/inductive approaches then proceeding to a more interpretative phase using McAdams’ psychology of narrative identity. As expected, their stories included their struggles with self-criticism and self-isolation in what they do and how they think and feel about it. But beyond that, the paper points to entire personas in their stories and their self-conception revealing this struggle with low self-compassion. This shows that self-compassion can be seen on the level of narrative identity via life stories.

*Keywords:* mindful self-compassion, narrative identity, life story interview, Japanese education

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## Introduction

This paper examines the life stories of Japanese students, and in the process uncovers the struggle between wanting to measure up and wanting to be kind to oneself—comparative self-esteem versus self-compassion—embedded within their narrative identities. In their stories of the best and worst times of their lives, as well as the turning points and the repeating patterns, we will see the importance of self-compassion not just on the level of behavior or cognition but in entire personas that emerge in their narratives. The findings suggest to researchers of self-compassion a new way to understand the phenomenon idiographically, on the level of narrative self-identity, instead of via the usual nomothetic self-reports. And to therapists, workshop leaders, and educators who use self-compassion, it suggests novel ways of engaging and responding to the need for self-compassion in clients/students.

What drives students to learn? Motivations for learning often include the desire to succeed, to fulfill the expectations of parents and teachers, and to have a sense of prestige as an achiever. This desire connects to “self-esteem” (in the comparative sense of being esteemed “in comparison to...”) which Kristin Neff (2011, p. 138) defines as “an evaluation of our worthiness, a *judgment* that we are good, valuable people” (emphasis added), a comparative

measurement distinct from direct, non-comparative self-acceptance or self-respect that some may associate with the same term, “self-esteem.”

Neff suggests that an overdominance of this comparative approach to self-worth can have its dangers: narcissism, putting others down, excessive self-criticism, and contingent self-worth (that plummets when one experiences failure). The culture of self-esteem has had a major effect on American education (Twenge, 2014). However, Arimitsu (2014) and Arimitsu et al. (2018) suggested that in Japan, comparative self-esteem combines with the Confucian attitude toward social expectations, resulting in among the lowest scores for self-compassion compared to other measured countries. Thus, it is likely that Japanese education is equally or even more under the influence of comparative self-esteem.

Against this focus on self-esteem, Neff (2011) advocates for self-compassion:

Self-compassion does not try to capture and define the worth or essence of who we are. . . Rather than managing our self-image so that it is always palatable, self-compassion honors the fact that all beings have both strengths and weaknesses. Rather than getting lost in thoughts of being good or bad, we become mindful of our present moment experience. (p. 152)

Self-compassion can be understood as a combination of three elements: mindfully noticing one’s pain instead of ignoring it or exaggerating it, a sense of camaraderie with others (common humanity) as human beings going through suffering instead of isolating oneself and comparing oneself and being kind and supportive to oneself instead of being unconstructively critical, harsh, or punitive toward oneself (Germer & Neff, 2019; Neff & Germer, 2018).

As teachers in all levels begin to focus on students as multi-faceted human beings (instead of abstracting them as mere learners; e.g., see Mizokami, 2019), and as we become aware of the dangers of an education that is overly competitive, comparative, and focused on “self-esteem” in an unhealthy way, being able to understand students’ difficulties with being self-compassionate becomes very important. The discourse of self-compassion is slowly making its way into education (Block-Lerner & Cardaciotto, 2016). And self-compassion may be particularly helpful for teachers themselves, who tend to be compassionate to others but not themselves—hence Neff’s recent workshops on “Self-Compassion for Educators” via Mindful Schools ([www.mindfulschools.org](http://www.mindfulschools.org)).

But how can we observe if students and teachers are self-compassionate? How can we assess the extent of their self-compassion and the balance of various elements in self-compassion? How can we understand how people experience or struggle with various elements of self-compassion? At present, the approach to these questions is usually nomothetic and via self-report questionnaires like the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS). It focuses on self-reported behaviors (“When I see aspects of myself I don’t like, I get down on myself”), feelings (“When I fail at something that’s important to me I tend to feel alone in my failures”), and thoughts (“When I’m feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that’s wrong”; Neff, 2003, p. 231). These may be useful if students and teachers are willing to take a written test, but also suffer from the usual issues of quantitative self-reports, such as individual variation in scoring, the sense of being “measured” and its distortion on reports, and so on. They also tend to focus on the ordinal side of self-compassion but not on the process of its experience.

However, perhaps self-compassion goes deeper than behaviors, thoughts, and feelings on the surface. To what extent is self-esteem entrenched within the conception of oneself, in one’s identity? Is self-criticism felt as something external or something that one has completely identified with? As suggested in McHugh and Stewart (2012), without understanding how self-compassion relates with “self,” the theory and practice is at risk of remaining superficial.

One way to get deeper into how participants see themselves is to see expressions of subjectivity via qualitative research. For example, Eke et al. (2019) examined narratives of female athletes for themes of self-compassion, via thematic analysis of stories. However, this kind of research can be deepened even further by looking specifically at “identity.”

Identity points to how we integrate various facets of ourselves—our inclinations, aptitudes, social roles, where we come from, and where we might be headed (Erikson, 1963). It is not just momentary behavior or experience, but a relatively consistent pattern that people see via self-interpretation, giving life a sense of continuity as “self” despite the rich complexity of experience. But how might we understand such a self-interpretation, especially if it is tacit?

This is the primary aim of personality and development psychologist Dan P. McAdams. He writes:

The story is the answer to the questions, “Who am I?” and “How do I fit into an adult world?” Identity is a life story. The identity configuration . . . is a configuration of plot, character, setting scene, and theme. (McAdams, 1988, p. 18)

Citing Bruner, he suggests that the self is interpreted not through logical statements about the self, which are made in the “paradigmatic mode” and characterized by “tightly reasoned analyses, logical proof, and empirical observation,” (McAdams, 1993, p. 29) but instead through the “narrative mode” and its stories.

McAdams’ (1988, pp. 60-62) overall plan for researching narrative identity was first modeled as follows: “A person’s identity (life story) is divided into four major components; nuclear episodes, imagoes, ideological setting, and generativity script.” To understand narrative identity, McAdams begins by asking for nuclear episodes, the key stories that shaped the participant’s life (the high points, low points, turning points, and so on). These alone already show the researcher much of how this person conceptualizes themselves. Then looking at these stories, one can see deeper into this narrative identity. First, stories are populated by characters, and the self is represented via various personas or voices. McAdams calls these imagoes. Furthermore, stories have an ideological setting, various rules and personal values that constrain what should or should not be done. And third, stories contain a generativity script, how the person sees themselves contributing to others. Seen together, McAdams argues that these four elements are the pieces by which people “construct” a sense of self and express it in stories.

In a book that is well-known even with non-academic audiences, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of Self*, McAdams (1993) suggested that such an exploration might be helpful for the participants themselves, expanding its application to students and their self-exploration (McAdams & Guo, 2014). Inspired by this, I designed a narrative class to help students and teachers understand the narrative identity of students. And it was in this that I stumbled upon traces of self-compassion and its deficits in the very heart of students’ identities.

My research is guided by the question, “How do students experience and make sense of themselves in their life stories?” This paper in particular narrows that research questions to, “How do students experience the struggle between self-compassion and its deficit? And how is this experience manifest in their narrative identity?” In this paper, I employ Michael Murray’s and Ruthellen Josselson’s approaches to narrative psychology, which begin with an inductive examination of life stories and proceeds to more deductive, theory driven interpretations. For interpretation, I primarily use McAdams’ (1988, 1997) model of narrative analysis as a theoretical framework to “arrange” inductive observations of life stories.

A note on reflexivity: I am a Filipino-Japanese university professor directly teaching the participants, my students. This position may influence the kind of life stories my students write, making them hesitate to disclose information they do not want “authority figures” to know. However, I endeavored to reduce this influence by making assurances to privacy and by sharing my own stories.

My primary interest is in having a deeper understanding of these students as unique persons rather than as mere students to be socialized, trained, and evaluated. This is what led to my research in life stories, and I make this interest openly known to my students and participants. I suspect this also makes them more likely to self-disclose. As many of my students suffer from mental health problems (Japan has a considerable youth suicide rate), mental health is both a personal and research concern for me, leading to a certain highlighting of mental health-related themes in their life stories. Mindful Self-Compassion is one way in which I have been helping my students; it thus forms a theoretical background to my concern. However, I did not directly teach this to my students, nor did I design this study to verify any preexisting concerns. This study is exploratory and inductive, and not hypothetico-deductive (Willig, 2008).

## **Method**

The cases were taken from the researcher’s university orientation class held in a national university in Japan. The university requires all first-year students to attend a “Core Education Seminar” where students think about what they want to learn in university and why (eight weeks, one session per week, 90 minutes each session). In a narrative version of the class I designed, every week, students did autobiographical exercises for around 15 minutes each session, writing the table of contents of their lives, the high point, low point, turning point, and continuity point, and reflections on this process. These exercises were submitted as homework and form the bulk of the stories for analysis. Despite having mostly Japanese students, the class was taught primarily in English, and students wrote in English. (For the details of the design process of this class as well as overall descriptions of its pedagogic process, see Sevilla-Liu, 2021a, 2021b; Other than the author’s academic position in this university and participation in the design of these classes, the author has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.)

This narrative class is part of an ongoing, wider research project on understanding students’ life stories, which was examined and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Kyushu University. Students were informed of the basics of this research project at the start of the semester and were given the option of making their stories available for a narrative research project by giving their consent at the end of the semester. There was no monetary or grade incentive for participating, and the voluntary nature of participation was emphasized. In the second year of data collection, 12 students (of 40 total) volunteered to submit their stories for narrative research. On re-reading these 12 sets of stories, I found that the stories of three students particularly highlighted themes connected to self-compassion. This paper focuses only on these three students, whose names and identifying information have been anonymized to protect their privacy.

The methodology of the overall project is drawn from McAdams’ (1988, 1997) narrative analysis. He and his team have developed various interviews and questionnaires to seek out key scenes (nuclear episodes) in this life story. Most academic articles of his team examine the life story nomothetically, using various codes for motivational themes, narrative complexity, plot sequences, et cetera, which are then statistically correlated with other measures like the Thematic Apperception Test or the big five personality test (McAdams et al.,

1996, 2004). McAdams also has more idiographic approaches where he focuses on presenting and elaborating on individual life stories rather than coding them and using them in a hypothetico-deductive manner. We see this primarily in his full-length books, such as *The Redemptive Self* (2005) and *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump* (2020). However, while he provides instructions and coding guides on how to carry out his nomothetic method, he does not do so for the idiographic use of his work.

The class assignment questions used in this class were adapted from McAdams' (1997, 2008) "Life Story Interview," which explores key stories that shape the participant either in an oral or written interview. The core of these interviews is found in "nuclear episodes," selected stories that seem to form the "highlights" of their lives and have shaped them in some ways. There are various types of nuclear episodes, and I chose to request written accounts of the high point, low point, turning point, and continuity point of the lives of participants. These were asked as follows:

**High Point.** Please describe a scene, episode, or moment in your life that stands out as an especially positive experience. This might be the high point scene of your entire life or else an especially happy, joyous, exciting, or wonderful moment in the story. Please describe this high point scene in detail. What happened, when and where, and who was involved (four to six sentences)? If you haven't written it yet, what were you thinking and feeling then (two to four sentences)? Why do you think this moment was so good? What does the scene say about who you are as a person (one to three sentences)?

**Low Point.** The second scene is the opposite of the first. Thinking back over your entire life, please identify a scene that stands out as a low point, if not the low point in your life story. This can be a bit difficult to write about, so you don't have to choose the worst time of your life. Pick an event that's bad but you can still write about. What happened in the event, where and when, and who was involved (four to six sentences)? If you haven't written it yet, what were you thinking and feeling then (two to four sentences)? Why do you think this moment was so bad? What does the scene say about who you are as a person (one to three sentences)?

**Turning Point.** In looking back over your life, it may be possible to identify certain key moments that stand out as turning points – episodes that marked an important change in you or your life story. It can be a positive or negative story. Please identify a particular episode in your life story that you now see as a turning point in your life. Or describe some event in your life wherein you went through an important change of some kind (choose a story different from the ones in the high point and low point.) Again, for this event please describe what happened, where and when, and who was involved (four to six sentences). If you haven't written it yet, what were you thinking and feeling then (two to four sentences)? Why do you think this moment was such a big change? What does the scene say about who you are as a person (one to three sentences)?

**Continuity.** Now we would like you to focus on an opposite kind of experience from last week. Rather than focus on an experience of change, we want you to consider a moment in your life story in which in some way you demonstrated a sameness or continuity in your life. Think back on your life in the recent past (e.g., the last two years or so) and choose a single event or experience that you

believe illustrates something within you that is stable and unchanging. This event should reveal a pattern in your life that occurs again and again. Again, for this event please describe what happened, where and when, and who was involved (four to six sentences). If you haven't written it yet, what were you thinking and feeling then (two to four sentences)? Why do you think this moment was such a constant thing in your life? What does the scene say about who you are as a person (one to three sentences)?

One limitation of this study is that the written exercises only had a paragraph or two written per story, whereas McAdams' (2008) interviews usually use structured interviews with around 15 minutes per story. Thus, I acknowledge that my method results in data that lacks richness. However, at the same time, my method has the advantage of being easily used as a class exercise for reflection by all students.

McAdams' research is at the forefront of the psychology of narrative identity. However, most of his instructions for research are designed for nomothetic research, where qualitative data is coded according to pre-given themes and treated quantitatively. In the words of Willig (2008, p. 9), it is "small 'q'" qualitative. As such, it also uses much larger data sets (often above 100). To adapt McAdams to a smaller data set and a more idiographic approach (big "Q" Qualitative), I went through a process of trial-and-error, using and discarding various ways of doing narrative analysis. For this paper, I settled on two step-by-step introductions to narrative analysis: Murray's (2015) "Narrative Psychology" in Smith's *Qualitative Psychology*, and Josselson's (2011) "Narrative Research" in Wertz et al.'s (2011) *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*. Both authors provide simple, flexible approaches with clear instructions and examples. And both are compatible with McAdams's theory, extensively citing and using his work on identity.

For an overview of the process of analysis, I combine Murray and Josselson as follows:

1. I put the written stories of students into a two-column table with the text on the left and a space for comments on the right. I read and re-read stories, noting my impressions, and getting an overall sense of the narratives. This includes noting the overall narrative tone, as suggested by Murray (2015).
2. I began my research with an inductive phase as Josselson does and as Murray (2015) directly instructs, by first noting the basic plot of the stories and writing them on the comment column. I am grateful to the suggestions of Hiles et al. (2017) for how to examine this plot/fabula.
3. Then, I observed for themes and patterns that emerge in the content and the structure of the stories. I labeled some patterns in the comments and then returned to them considering the whole.
4. Moving to the more interpretative and theoretically informed phase (Murray, 2015), I used McAdams' framework of narrative identity, examining the nuclear episodes for the ideological setting and noting its constituent rules and values in the comments.
5. Then, I read for imagoes. "I paid particular attention to statements about self-experience ("I statements") ..." where students directly indicate parts of themselves to "identify different 'voices' of the self and to create a view of how these selves are in dialogue with one another" (Josselson, 2011, pp. 232, 228). I explain this further below.
6. Finally, I examined the stories and the reflections for their overall attitude toward these different imagoes and the values and motivations that connect to them, to see their "generativity script" and the kind of values that they *choose* to stand for (what Michael White, 2007, calls "preferred stories").



A sample of the table for analysis is presented below:

**Table 1**

*Sample Table*

Text	Comments
<p>I applied for an exchange program when I was in the third grade of high school. After some exams and writing an essay, I was able to get scholarship for studying abroad. But even if I was selected as a scholarship student, I still had choice not to take the opportunity to go study abroad. There was one part of me who was encouraging me to do new things, but on the other hand, another part of me was afraid to do new things especially because I might fail. I talked with some of my sempais [senior classmates] who have studied abroad and got some advice, but I could not make decision until the day before I was supposed to answer whether I was going or not. In the end, I decided to go, but I often have this kind of wavering mind. I have to [sic] will to try new things, but because I'm afraid to fail, I decide not to do new things.</p>	<p>Setting: Applying for exchange program            Emphasizes getting scholarship            Complication: Had a choice, inner conflict            Self that likes to do new things vs. self-afraid to fail              Support from superiors              Result: Decides to go            Self: Wavering mind, afraid to fail.</p>
<p>I know trying new things is important and the type of person who I want to be is someone who doesn't hesitate to do new things. So, I wanted to do it, but one part of me was telling me not to do it because in that way I don't have to experience an unexpected failure. Being stuck between those two parts of me, I was kind of disappointed at me, who cannot take the final step toward doing new things.</p>	<p>Ideology: Trying new things            Generativity: Become someone active              Self: Avoid failure, stuck between two parts            Self-criticism (disappointment)</p>

Steps 1-3 are purely inductive and attempt to bracket theoretical assumptions (to whatever extent possible) and focus on what the text presents. Steps 4-6 are “theoretically informed,” but do not use pre-existing codes or classification schemes. Imagoes, ideological setting, and generativity script function as heuristic guides as to how to cluster inductive observations. Furthermore, these heuristics are arguably present in the very definition of narratives, which necessarily include characters/actors who act from various rules and motivations (Bruner, 1990) and are making moral claims via their narratives (Sarbin, in Scheibe & Barrett, 2017). I do not employ any predefined types of imagoes or ideology or generativity (for example, by classifying imagoes into agentic or communal types, or ideology into levels of moral development, or evaluations as to level of generativity).

The steps above slowly unpack the four elements of narrative identity (nuclear episodes, imagoes, ideological setting, and generativity script) explained in the introduction. The stories themselves and the analysis of their plots and themes allow for an understanding of the nuclear episodes. The ideological setting and the generativity script are seen through the rules and values in the stories. However, imagoes are a difficult concept and central to my analysis, requiring further explanation.

Imagoes are synonymous to “voices,” or “subjective positions.” McAdams (1988, p. 178) defines it as follows: “Imagoes are idealized and personified images of self which function as characters in the life stories which are our identities.” While some may see this as more theoretical and deductive, even strictly inductive approaches by Josselson point this out:

The narrative is conceived as a multiplicity of “I” positions (Hermans & Kempen, 1993) where each “I” is an author with its own story to tell in relation

to the other “I’s.” Some of these selves may be strongly developed, whereas others may be suppressed or even dissociated. (Josselson, 2011, p. 227)

For those interested in the details of analyzing imagoes, in addition to McAdams and Josselson, one may examine Hiles et al.’s (2017) Narrative-Oriented Inquiry, Langdrige’s (2007) Critical Narrative Analysis (identity positions) and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (subject positions; Willig, 2008). They all provide analogous concepts to imagoes, making this a rather ubiquitous element in narrative analysis. I also benefited from suggestions for the close reading necessary to see imagoes from Ueda Kayoko (Sakugawa et al., 2013; Ueda & Sakugawa, 2009; Ueda et al., 2009).

When reading through a story, the reader notices different personas when the self emerges as a character in a story. The writer may even directly refer to these parts of the self, as in the example in the table: “One part of me was telling me not to do it because in that way I don’t have to experience an unexpected failure.” Certain personas seem to organize related features, traits, motivations, values, and so on (McAdams, 1988), and in my example I saw repeated references to a timid self that is afraid of failure. When this occurred, I then connected these “imagoes” as they are defined in various stories, seeing related motivations, values, and so on. I also looked at how each imago relates to the other imagoes, in line with Josselson’s (2011, p. 228) suggestion to “do multiple readings to identify different ‘voices’ of the self and to create a view of how these selves are in dialogue with each other.”

After analyzing the data, I sent my draft analyses to the participants, taking care to present my findings tentatively and asking for their confirmation. Two of the three responded. Both mostly agreed with the findings, clarifying their present attitudes toward the imagoes.

In the next section, I present the life stories of three students, Ms. A, Ms. B, and Mr. C. I begin with a summary of their nuclear episodes, re-arranged in chronological order. I then analyze it descriptively, showing key inductive themes. I then proceed to interpretative analysis of ideological setting, generativity script, and imagoes.

## Story A

### *Summary and Descriptive Analysis*

Ms. A is a female Japanese student, 19-years-old. Reading her assignments, I was struck by how clear her focus was on examining her identity from the very first assignment (the table of contents), where she already examined themes of being a “good girl” vs. “don’t wanna be a good girl anymore.” “Self” seems to be a striking facet of her stories, and she seems to make essentializing statements about herself (“I am the kind of person...”) with more frequency than other students. Seen chronologically, her story begins with a high point then descends to progressively grimmer stories, and which gave me the impression of having a more tragic narrative tone.

Let us examine her nuclear episodes in chronological order. The very first chapter of her life is entitled, “A ‘Good Girl’.” She opens with her high point: When she was in the last years of elementary school, she was chosen to be part of the student council. She enjoyed all the activities and initiatives she carried out with the rest of the student leaders, and certain special experiences only council members could have. She particularly enjoyed her sense of superiority and how teachers had such high expectations for her.

Shortly after, she entered the turning point in her life. She applied to a prestigious junior high school that her brother attended, but after a series of competitive examinations, she lost the lottery (by pure chance) and was rejected. She felt crushed having to go to an ordinary middle school. “But thinking back now, I was lucky that I could go to the local school because

I was able to communicate with people who had completely different character from me and I realized that being a good students [sic] is not everything.”

However, her challenges continued with her low point. When she was in middle school, she went abroad to study. But because of her difficulty with English, she felt isolated and incompetent, completely inferior, even with other second language learners. She related this story of a time when a classmate gave everyone but her snacks, and she blamed it on her poor communication abilities.

Her most recent story is her continuity point. Back in Japan for high school, she was applying for an exchange program. But despite being accepted, she was torn between taking risks and trying new things versus avoiding the risk of failure by staying in her comfort zone. She eventually went, but she remained critical of how she tends to have a “wavering mind” in these situations.

When I examined Ms. A’s stories inductively, the following issues struck me: motivation for superiority, questioning of superiority, and self-definition. First, all her stories stress some form of superiority. This is particularly clear in her high point. All the additional details to her student council story had to do with special privileges of council members. She then commentates, “I thought what I believed was always right and I could have my own way in everything.” In her low point, we get the mirror image of this, where she emphasizes how her inability to speak English made her “inferior” not only to classmates but even to the English as a Second Language section. Reflecting on this, she puts it bluntly: “I think I’m a kind of person who always want [sic] to feel superior to others in some ways.” We also see this in her turning point as a desire for superiority in belonging to a prestigious school, and in her continuity point as an admission that she still wants to be “perfect.”

But at the same time, she questions this desire to be superior. Her turning point was primarily about realizing that life could be good even if she wasn’t one of the “good students.” That questioning continues in her low point where she writes, “I don’t like myself always hoping to be superior to others, but I just cannot avoid thinking that way. Is there any way that I can overcome this [complex, *kattō*]?”

A final inductive observation: Her story has a surprising amount of self-definition, where rather than simply describing herself, she emphasizes the self-definition by making it an essence of herself. In one of her first reflections, she writes, “I am always too afraid to fail that I haven’t taken any action” (emphases added for all sentences). In her high point, she writes, “I am a kind of person who can work hard when I feel that many people have high hopes for me and trust me.” In her low point, she writes, “I think I’m a kind of person who always want to feel superior to others in some ways.” “I just cannot avoid thinking that way.” In her turning point, she writes, “I’m a kind of person who can easily get affected by others.” “Being stuck between those two parts of me, I was kind of disappointed at me, who cannot take the final step toward doing new things.” It gives the reader the impression that the inertia of her identity weighs on her, and she is very conscious of it.

### ***Interpretative Analysis***

Narrative identity is how one sees their whole life through stories. While there are many approaches to getting a glimpse of this identity in a structured way, McAdams (1988) suggests a model where we identify nuclear episodes and explore the imagoes, ideological setting, and generativity script present therein. We have seen four stories that Ms. A thinks have shaped her life—her experience of superiority in the student council, her failing to enter a prestigious middle school, her linguistic inferiority as a foreign student, and her confusion about studying abroad. What might the content of these stories tell us about how Ms. A interprets who she is? Note that this paper does not intend to essentialize who participants “really” are. Instead, I

focus on how they, at that moment, interpreted themselves, given the context of our class and me reading their self-interpretation. I take a constructionist, not realist, approach to identity.

In addition to the inductive notes above, I interpretatively focus on three additional aspects: ideology, imagoes, and generativity script. While these three aspects are guided by McAdams' theory, they are not derived from a pre-existing code but simply guide my readings inductively, akin to Josselson's (2011, pp. 228, 232) focus on examining "voices" and "statements about self-experience."

In the background of Ms. A's stories is an "ideological setting"—rules and beliefs she has about what is right vs. what is wrong. However, while her motives and feelings are very clear in her stories, her "ideological setting" is not. She does not often speak in terms of how people should be, but instead merely talks about her own feelings without necessarily globalizing them. However, in her turning point, she does state a (newfound) belief that "being a good student is not everything." And in her continuity point, she says, "trying new things is important." Therefore, her ideology appears to be rather consistent, pointing at the value for trying new things, untrammelled by the box of being a "good student."

However, while her values seem consistent, there is a part of her that dominates her stories but clearly goes against those declared values. As I noticed in the inductive observations, clued in by the very first line of her assignment: "A good girl," there is a part of her that seeks prestige and superiority over others and tries to secure this position.

McAdams calls these parts imagoes, and I sifted for these in a manner like Josselson (2011, p. 228) who instructs:

We do multiple readings to identify different "voices" of the self and to create a view of how these selves are in dialogue with one another. // These iterative readings continue until we develop a "good Gestalt" that encompasses contradictions.

Similarly, I read Ms. A's story, noticing when she directly refers to parts/facets of herself, especially when she distinguishes them from other parts, and seeing which situations, motivations, and actions tend to constellate around the imago.

Her "Good Girl" imago comes up most clearly in her high point, and in a frustrated way in her turning point and continuity point, and as a background (of what she should have been) in her low point, trying to gain superiority and status in comparison to others. This part of her seems to revel in having privileged experiences and suffers dearly in positions of incompetence in comparison to others. While these motivations seem to stress individual agency, they also seem to connect to relational motivations: a sense of being held in high regard by superiors ("I think this moment was so good because I felt that many people had high hopes for me and that they trusted me.") and a sense of belonging which is lost when she is "inferior" (as in her foreign student experience). This seem to suggest a certain inner belief: In her low point, she writes, "I think this moment was so bad because I did not have confidence in myself at all and I felt that I was a person with no value" (emphasis added). This suggests a belief that value comes not from being "good" but from being better than others.

This seems to connect the "Good Girl" to another repeated experience: fear of failure. In her continuity story, talking about her confusion about studying abroad, she writes:

I know trying new things is important and the type of person who I want to be is someone who doesn't hesitate to do new things. So, I wanted to do it, but one part of me was telling me not to do it because in that way I don't have to experience an unexpected failure. Being stuck between those two parts of me,

I was kind of disappointed at me, who cannot take the final step toward doing new things.

This “Good Girl” feels pressure to be superior, “perfect,” held in high regard at the center of things, but at the same time keeps her on a safe path, avoiding risk of failure. It is this imago that casts a shadow over all her stories. And I suspect that this is a story that is culturally dominant, not just in Japan but in all competitive educational systems (Dore, 1976). English-speakers might know this as an “achiever” or “straight-A student” story.

However, the mere fact that her directly stated values all contradict this persona she shows in her stories demonstrates that this “Good Girl” is not all there is to her. She has another side, and she herself splits these two parts in the block quote above. This is of course the part that, as I noticed in the inductive analysis, is critical of claims to superiority. It seems to first come to play in her turning point when she fails to enter the prestigious middle school. While the “Good Girl” part of her is devastated, she writes, “But thinking back now, I was lucky that I could go to the local school because I was able to communicate with people who had completely different character from me, and I realized that being a good students [sic] is not everything.” We also see from the previous block quote that this part develops in her continuity story, where she wants to be someone who doesn’t hesitate to try new things. She articulates this much more clearly in the ending reflections, writing:

I want to become a kind of person who doesn't compare myself with others and who always has confidence but does not look down on others. I always compare myself with others and thus lose confidence, so it is going to take a long time to achieve. // ...The high point is unhelpful when I try to become what I want to become. I had confidence at that time and that is why I chose as my high point, but that confidence came from what others thought about me and not from my inner part. I would like to be a kind of person who can have confidence based on what I think of me and not what others think of me, so this story is not helpful.

Here, she shows a realization that the “Good Girl” is dependent on comparison and harms her self-confidence, but it is possible to have a kind of confidence of a different sort, that comes from her own authentic attitude to herself. She was one of the only students to suggest that recalling her “high point” story was harmful for her! However, this “Confident Challenger” is not entirely developed, as it comes out only in her turning point, and otherwise emerges as a negative evaluation of her “Good Girl” self.

Ms. A has a very clear generativity script, which we see in the previous block quote. She is clearly taking a personal stance toward her various values and beliefs, despite what society may promote or expect. And her stance is to choose a more authentic, self-driven self that does not compare itself to others.

Allow me to add a personal speculative remark—not one based directly on the text, but more of an abductive intuition. I wonder if she is struggling on this path. Two block quotes above, we see her write, “Being stuck between those two parts of me, I was kind of disappointed at me, who cannot take the final step toward doing new things.” When I read this, I wondered, who is the “I” that is disappointed in these two selves? If she can stand back and see the tension between these two personas, where is the judgment coming from? The judgment does not strike me as a non-comparative “Confident Challenger” but the tug of a “Good Girl” who needs to get it all perfectly, even in cases of existential crisis.

I have shown in this interpretative analysis an overview of Ms. A’s narrative identity, as seen via McAdams’ model, and I hope it shows how I tried to understand this student better.

We saw four stories that shaped her life as she struggled with success and failure, superiority, and inferiority. We see her value for a different kind of openness to challenges and confidence without comparison, and how she champions this in her generativity script. But we also saw how she has different facets of herself, and that the imago that supports these values is dominated by a persona still very much within the gravitational pull of needing to be superior as a “good girl.”

Reading this story, I was struck how, even without exposure to concepts of “self-compassion” vs. “self-esteem,” Ms. A was already showing a clear struggle with comparative self-esteem, not merely on the level of thoughts but on the level of imagoes and how she defines herself. We also see a clear attempt to resist this focus on comparison via a rudimentary value-system and persona centered on self-acceptance. I will explore these further in the discussion.

## **Story B**

### *Summary and Descriptive Analysis*

Ms. B is a 19-year-old female Japanese student. My first impression of her writing was that it had a strongly emotional quality, talking of being “broken” by certain experiences, of a time when “life began to fall down” or moving from “hating” to being “so relieved.” Her writing is engaging, and its overall tone struck me as quite dramatic, progressing from a very positive story to a very negative one, yet recovering again to a positive story. She shared the following four stories.

Chronologically, the first story she shares is her continuity point, which is an overarching narrative of her growing interest in foreign cultures. She began to like western music because of her father’s influence, and by middle school, she was already thinking about working internationally. She continued to do various things to get exposed to foreigners. And now, as a university student, while she has some fears about leaving Japan, she is mostly filled with excitement and curiosity.

Part of this arc is her foreign student experience in her high point. In high school, a homestay experience in a western country offered her a glimpse into a different way of being. She was talking with her host mother about her big ambitions about serving society, when her host mother quite unexpectedly replied, “You don’t have to give others too much, a little will be big.” Somehow this woke her up from her attachment to this “good girl” image and showed her that she could be honest with herself.

However, her next story shows her struggle with this issue. Her low point occurred toward the end of her high school days. She felt very pressured by her family to pursue a prestigious profession. She resisted this pressure vehemently, “I did not want to live someone [else]’s life and I hated the way of thinking [of certain members of my family].” She chose her degree against her family’s wishes, and yet she did not know what she herself wanted. As a result, she ended up confused and unmotivated.

However, a turning point for her came as she was preparing for the university entrance exams. She learned much through the course of her preparation for the exams. But what unexpectedly transformed her was rehearsing for the interview. “At first, I was not good at talking about myself because I had no exact ideas about future, but my teacher listened to me and helped me put my feelings into words. I continued to write down my ideas on the notebook and cleared my head.” Slowly, it became clear for her what she wanted to do and what motivated her.

Looking at Ms. B’s stories inductively, without any theoretical lens, I found three major themes: future career, expectations, and encountering foreign cultures. First, all her stories point to some setting where there is something at stake in her future career, suggesting that this

might be a major issue for her. Her high point was a discussion about what goals and values she should have in her career. Her low point had to do with immense pressure from her family to major in a particular prestigious field. Her turning point was exam preparation. And her continuity story is an overarching narrative of why she wants to work internationally. While this is not surprising given how most of my students are thinking about their careers, her almost single-minded focus on it is remarkable.

Second, we have the weight of expectations. In her high point, we see a pressure to do something big for society: “I want to work for people in poor countries in the future.” The high point is about being freed from this pressure by her host mother’s statements. Her low point had to do with pressure from a family member to enter a prestigious field, a pressure that metaphorically weighed on her to the point that “life began to fall down.” And her response to this was misguided rebellion (rather than freedom). And in her turning point, while she does not directly name it, she implies a pressure to pass exams, which she responds to by working fiercely hard.

And third, smaller theme is encountering other cultures. Her entire continuity point is framed around this. And her high point has to do with encountering a completely different way of thinking about career in her homestay in a western country.

### *Interpretative Analysis*

Four nuclear episodes have been identified above—the growth of her interest in foreign cultures, her enlightening homestay experience, suffering pressure from her family, and discovering herself through exam preparation. What kind of values and personas do we find in the content of these stories that shaped her life?

Examining her stories, we see a mix of values. On one hand, she has very strong twin values of self-understanding and being true to herself. In her high point, her host mother’s statement, “You don’t have to give others too much, a little will be big,” awakens in her two realizations: “I realized that what I had needed was to focus on myself, not to pretend to be a good person.” This focusing on herself is elaborated as coming to understand one’s own dream and path. This value is repeated in her low point when she rebels against family pressures, saying “I did not want to live someone [else]’s life.” When she prepares for her exams, we see part of this value—self-understanding—repeated as well. There is another value that may or may not be related to these twin values—being curious, as she is toward foreign cultures.

However, these twin values, while dominant, do not exist unopposed. For example, in her homestay, her initial statement (to which the host mother responded) shows a motivation (although not phrased as a rule) to serve society in a big way. Also, her admission that “I was suffering from pressure from my [family]” suggests (but never in an articulated way) that this “pressure” does weigh down on her. If we were to articulate it, both having a prestigious profession and serving society in a big way function as social expectations for what a “good girl” is, and there is a value for that which she both possesses but resists. I speculate that this may connect to the Japanese discourse of “responsibility” (*sekinin o motsu*), which is collectivistic and that reinforces heeding social expectations. However, hers is not so typical among my students, and seems representative of a family with an elite pedigree, somewhat like Ms. A.

These conflicting values can be arranged through her imagoes. The most dominant character is a self that is heedful of her own inner voice, understanding herself, and true to herself, able to resist various pressures and expectations around her. We see this in her high point, inspired by her host mother, and we see it negatively in her low point, with her unhappiness with the pressure as well as her rebellion. “I was supposed to enter [a department other than what I was pressured to]. I thought it was my own way. However, still, I did not

know that to be [this other profession] is exactly what I really wanted to do.” We see it again in her turning point, inspired by her teacher, learning to understand herself and her dreams. I call this part of her “Understanding My Dreams.” And while it has agentic motivations like being self-directed, it also seems to emerge under the support of caring authority figures like her host mother and teacher.

She deliberately distinguishes this part of her from another imago (what McAdams calls an “anti-imago”) which she herself calls the “Good Girl” (the same label suggested in Ms. A’s story). In her reflections, she writes, “She tried to be a good girl, but it was not herself and she didn’t know that.” This indicates that she herself sees this as a separate part of her character, one that she struggles with. This is the part of her that tries to help society in a big way, feels pressured toward prestigious professions, and sometimes, simply feels lost about herself (turning point). The motivations of this part of her include both agentic desire for status, but also a desire to measure up to the expectations of family. However, this imago is never articulated directly, and only stands in the background of the first imago.

As I read her stories, there seemed to be a third imago that may be distinct from both—a kind of rebel. It appears this rebel can sometimes help her break out of the “Good Girl” mode. She writes in her reflection, “The most helpful story for me is the lowest point because I learned how to face to myself and how to protect myself.” But at the same time, it may not be completely identical to the first imago, because she writes, “However, still, I did not know that to be [this other profession] is exactly what I really wanted to do. I started to feel I did not want to do anything anymore. I hurt people around me and myself.” Instead of this rebel being agentic and self-accepting, it seems to be lost and hurtful. However, as she does not personally delineate this imago, my observations remain speculative.

Ms. B’s generativity script is not as clear as Ms. A’s. In her reflection, she points to her “Rebel” in the low point as being the most aligned with the direction she wants in life. But elsewhere she writes, “Deep understanding is the most important thing to realize one’s dream and live one’s own life,” suggesting that self-understanding and authenticity are more important. While she is clear she is not happy with just being a “Good Girl,” she appears to be during trying to figure out where she wants to take that.

In this overview of Ms. B’s narrative identity, I hope the reader is better able to imagine who this young lady is, as she struggles in various situations with where to take her life and career, as she wrestles between caving into expectations, rebelling against them, or genuinely getting to know herself and being authentic. We also see her trying to find her own generative contribution to the world as she tries to resolve the very question of how to deal with expectations. We also have traces of self-compassion in her stories—a desire to understand herself and live by her own dreams. But at the same time, we see the effects of the absence of self-compassion—feeling isolated in one’s problems and the weight of conditional self-acceptance.

## Story C

### *Summary and Descriptive Analysis*

Mr. C is a 19-year-old male Japanese student. Compared to his classmates, I found his writing a little less articulate and emotional, but with much clearer attempts to logically connect stories. He also showed a very strong interest in understanding his identity, what he repeatedly calls the “foundation of myself.” And seen temporally, his stories have a very positive narrative tone, starting with a rough beginning, but progressively overcoming those difficulties in subsequent stories. We examine his nuclear episodes chronologically.



He begins his life story with a story from his elementary schoolboy days. He had difficulty with social relationships and was poor at expressing himself. He would try to do things to gain popularity, doing various antics in hopes of getting attention—but these got him into trouble instead. Things picked up when he became best friends with someone, but even this friend betrayed him. This formed the low point of his life, where his worldview was such that, “. . . I can believe nobody. And to be accepted, it is necessary to be excellent.”

But his life story turns to a brighter scene—his high point in life—as a junior high school student. He had a fight with a close friend. But his friend told him that the reason they can quarrel this way is precisely because they are such good friends. He deeply stresses the value of this experience:

I realized that this unbreakable relationship is . . . real friendship. // I felt that . . . I have . . . a place where I can come back any time and find the value of myself. This might be the foundation of my identity.

This identity is further solidified in his third and fourth stories, which happened in high school. His major turning point was a dilemma he had between focusing on the club activities of his sport or joining a new club for debate. Despite feeling pressure to choose the former and get results in competitions, he chose the latter. In his new group, he was able to put in a lot of effort, making it a choice he sees as a “really good decision.”

This turning point follows through in his “continuity point”—a story that shows something enduring in him. Here, he shared that when he loses a sports match, it does not bother him, because it was not a goal, he set for himself. But he is very concerned about practice for debate because this was a goal of his own making. The significance and biographical connections of this event show when he writes, “I think this characteristic was formed because I have gained the strong foundation of mine through meeting my best friends. I do not care about what other people think about me anymore.”

Examining Mr. C’s stories inductively, we find several key themes: extracurricular life, conflict with peers, and status vs. acceptance. First, the settings of his stories are usually part of extracurricular school life. His high point had to do with martial arts training with his friend. His low point appears to point to school yard relationships. And his turning point and continuity point are about his sports club and debate club experiences. This was striking for me as a reader, because in my country, extra curriculums do not play as major a role as they seem to in Japan. But even compared to other Japanese students, extracurriculars seemed to play a particularly large role for Mr. C’s identity formation.

Second, most of his concerns have to do with interpersonal conflict with his peers. While other students often spoke of teachers, parents, and other family members, Mr. C almost exclusively talks about his friends and his peer group. His high point is about his best friend, his low point about his peers and (ex) best friend, and his turning and continuity points about his fellow members in two clubs.

Amidst these peer relationships, he appears to respond either with an attempt to measure up—be popular, meet expectations, acquire status via success (“it is necessary to be excellent”)—or alternatively and in contrast, he responds by trying to accept himself and be true to himself. We will explore this theme much more thoroughly below.

### ***Interpretative Analysis***

We have seen four stories that are “highlights” of Mr. C’s life—his failed bids at popularity, his landmark fight with his friend, choosing to join the debate club, and his learning

to act toward his own goals. Next, I examined the content of his stories for elements of McAdams' "narrative identity"—ideological setting, imagoes, and generativity script.

Mr. C appears to value steadfast friendship. As he writes in his high point, "...this unbreakable relationship is the real friendship." And he also values affirming himself—being proud of himself (high point) and pursuing what he believes is important (turning point, continuity). He connects these two values, writing "The important point for me is just whether I was able to fulfill the goal I set. // I think this characteristic was formed because I have gained the strong foundation of mine through meeting my best friends."

However, these rules and beliefs are not necessarily consistent—they also show tension and contradiction. For example, in his low point, he writes, "I felt that I can believe nobody. And in order to be accepted, it is necessary to be excellent." We see echoes of this in his turning point too, where he believes "I should do my best to report a great result for the sport team members." Unlike Ms. A and Ms. B, Mr. C actually words these as rules rather than personal preferences or feelings. I speculate that this may connect to Japan's cultural narrative, where there is a dominant story of being concerned with the group (responsibility, as in Ms. B) and trying to live up to the group's expectations (being a full-fledged adult, *ichinin mae ni naru*), but this point needs further confirmation.

How do we make sense of these conflicting rules and beliefs? Looking over these rules and motivations, I noticed that there seem to be at least two different imagoes or voices that are opposed to each other. On one hand, there is the part of him that tries to be popular, be accepted, to fulfill the wishes of his fellow club members, and to be admired. On one hand, this shows motivations to strengthen one's agency through status. But at the same time, it has communal motivations for a sense of belonging in the group. He explains this part by saying, "In this part of my life, I could not understand something that give value to me [sic] and required others to give me value by admiring me." I tentatively named this persona "Recognition Seeker."

On the other hand, there is the part of him that wants to value himself as himself, do what he himself finds interesting, and focus on striving toward what he personally values. He writes, "The important point for me is just whether I was able to fulfill the goal I set." This seems very agentic but is connected to communal motivations, as this side of him seems to emerge strongly in times when he feels unconditionally accepted by close friends. "I think this characteristic was formed because I have gained the strong foundation of mine through meeting my best friends. I do not care about what other people think about me anymore [sic]." I tentatively named this imago "Playing by My Rules," from his own description of life as if playing a videogame.

We get support for separating these two imagoes from his own statements:

I think this character is completely opposite from the one I used to have during elementary school time. I used to care about what other people think of me and caused a lot of troubles. Now, I noticed that I do not have to care such things, but it is better to think about what is good for myself.

In these sentences, he is deliberately contrasting two different "characters" within himself.

Finally, we have his generativity script, what he wants to bring into the world and how he wants to reconcile tensions between various values. However, in his reflection, he writes:

My continuity, which is the character that I do not care about other people and just pursue what I set as my goal will help me the most. And maybe, my continuity was formed because of my high point, the existence of best friends.  
// What is unhelpful in my path is a strong desire for recognition, which I think

is the cause of my low point. I feel unhappy and do hurt others when I become obsessed with a desire for recognition like I used to in elementary school.

While it is unclear to what extent this connects to other core criteria for generativity such as contribution to the next generation, and so forth (McAdams, 1988, p. 62), we do see here personal values arrived at by choosing between social values like being a full-fledged adult vs. authenticity.

What we see above is an overview of Mr. C's narrative identity, as seen via McAdams' model. We see key stories that shaped his life, various narratives of interpersonal conflict where he wrestled between expectations and his own subjectivity. We see various values, both of success and group belonging and authenticity and friendship. We see these various motives and ideologies organized into two conflicting imagoes, one trying to be popular and another trying to affirm oneself. Finally, we see beginnings of what value he personally wants to bring into the world, choosing to live life by his own rules, and supported by his most trusted friends.

Furthermore, the narrative identity of Mr. C already shows the tension between being kind and supportive to oneself vs. harshly pushing oneself in competition with others. We also see this on the level of rules and values, motivations, personas of the self, and even in his view of generativity.

## **Discussion**

As mentioned at the start of this article, self-compassion, "treating yourself the way you would treat a friend who is having a hard time" (Neff & Germer, 2018, p. 9) has three elements: noticing one's own suffering (mindfulness), having a sense of shared human suffering (common humanity), and being kind to oneself (self-kindness). Its opposite is ignoring or over-inflating one's suffering, isolating oneself in one's suffering (especially by comparing oneself to others), and being unsupportive and punitively critical of oneself.

I read my students' stories with the primary intention of getting to know their narrative identities. I did not particularly have self-compassion in mind, nor had I taught it to them. In discussions with them, I also confirmed that they had not heard of self-compassion previously. There was no "hypothesis-testing" taking place. Despite this, I noticed that in three students, themes related to self-compassion and its absence were plain to see.

What was clearest were stories about the lack of self-compassion. We could see this on different levels: there were reports of behavior like comparing oneself to others or criticizing oneself. There were values and beliefs like needing to be superior to be of value, showing both self-criticism and self-isolation. But most strikingly, there were entire imagoes, entire personas that embody low self-compassion— "Recognition Seeker," "Good Girl" (in both Ms. A and Ms. B)—entire constellations of identity that are oriented to comparing the self to others, achieving status, and criticizing oneself when one falls short. For example, Ms. A writes, "I think I am a kind of person who always wants to be perfect, so I am afraid of failure." Similarly, Ms. B writes, "I have been very negative, and very strict to myself (My teachers in high school always told me so)." And Mr. C writes, "...in order to be accepted, it is necessary to be excellent."

Without being cued for experiences of self-compassion or self-criticism, simply when being asked about the key stories that shaped their lives, these three students revealed entire parts of their identity that embody self-isolation and self-criticism. This is a key discovery for researchers of self-compassion because this shows low self-compassion not merely on the level of reported behavior or automatic thoughts but embedded into one's self-concept and narrative identity.

For therapists and educators who employ self-compassion, this is relevant, first because it shows us how we can see struggles of self-compassion in natural speech, without the use of nomothetic self-report scales. And second, it warns us of the difficulty of building self-compassion in these cases, because some have argued that changing self-concept cannot be done by cognitive-behavioral means that operate on conscious cognitions but would require the transformation of schemas and core beliefs through long-term experiential interventions (Tirch et al., 2014; Young & Klosko, 2003).

However, one important thing to note is that all three of these students, without any exposure to mindful self-compassion, were already mindful that these imagoes (recognition seeker, good girl) were a source of suffering. While this part of them had high self-criticism and self-isolation, it did not show experiential avoidance toward the pain of isolation and criticism.

On one hand, this suggests “on the ground” what quantitative research (Neff, 2011) has demonstrated in a positivist way—that indeed low self-compassion connects with depression and dissatisfaction with life. But on the other hand, this suggests that *even without* self-compassion training (and despite Confucian norms that support self-criticism and self-isolation), students spontaneously lean toward a form of self-compassion.

For example, Ms. A strikingly pointed out to her entire high point story as “unhelpful” in a bid to overcome this low self-compassion imago. Furthermore, we see elements of self-compassion in their stories through what they do (Mr. C learning to be proud of himself no matter what) and their values and beliefs (Ms. B, “I realized that what I had needed was to focus on myself, not to pretend to be a good person”). But also, we saw it in imagoes that were connected to their main generative contribution and preferred stories— “Confident Challenger,” “Understanding My Dreams,” and “Playing by My Rules.” While these images are unique to each student, a shared feature of these imagoes is knowing what one really values and deciding one’s path from there.

These imagoes connect to all three elements of self-compassion. Interestingly, all three imagoes focus on the values side of self-compassion—not just being kind to oneself in suffering but helping oneself thrive along the path to one’s own values. Neff (2021) did not originally stress this values-driven “yang” side of self-compassion as much as the “yin” side of caring for suffering, but my inductive inquiry is showing spontaneous movements that are already in line with the newest innovations in mindful self-compassion. And not only do they affirm the developments in self-compassion research, but they also suggest that perhaps it does not need to be taught “top-down;” people already have existing resources that can be drawn from inductively.

Finally, the stories of the students also suggest that self-compassion is not merely something that is to be addressed in an individualistic, psychologically reductionistic way, but has a social, relational component. Because narratives constantly connect between the socio-cultural and the individual, between the norms of society and the deviations of the individual (Bruner, 1990), stories show us not only what is going on inside the heads of students but in the social context they are emplaced. (This would benefit from further study through Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, which directly connects the text to broader social discourses.) In all three students, low self-compassion thrived in situations of competition, pressure, and expectations in school, with parents and teachers, and with one’s peers. And in the case of Ms. A and Mr. C (who had the clearest ways forward beyond self-criticism and self-isolation), self-compassion was discovered relationally—through the unconditional love of a best friend or the accepting and non-judgmental affection of a host mother. Can we really address this struggle with low self-compassion merely through individual attendance in workshops, without addressing the “dominant story” (White, 2007) that promotes its opposite?

This present study is exploratory. It has shown that comparative self-esteem vs. self-compassion can manifest in life story narratives, particularly in narrative elements like personas/imagos. But it does not seek to argue at this point that this can be generalized—that those with low self-compassion will statistically exhibit such in life story narratives. This is left for future research.

This research has several limitations. First, as the researcher is the teacher in class, this may have reduced student self-disclosure. It could be supplemented with studies by researchers who are not in a hierarchical relationship with the participants. Second, as interviews were written they were shorter, and could be supplemented with oral interviews. Instead of follow-up emails, it would be helpful to have follow-up interviews to explore further various elements that emerged, especially highly interpretative aspects like imagos, and see how students feel about the interpretation. Third, as suggested above, this research could greatly benefit from research on the social discourses behind self-criticism in Japan. And fourth, if one wishes for a more hypothetico-deductive or mixed methods approach, future research could address lack of generalizability through a larger sample size and with triangulation with Self-Compassion Scale scores.

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**Compliance with Ethical Standards:** The author above certifies that he has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria, educational grants, participation in speakers' bureaus, membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest, and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

This research proposal has been examined and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Science, Kyushu University. Participation in this research was voluntary. The researcher explained the research to participants beforehand and acquired their written consent (and that of their parent/guardian, for participants below 20 years of age). Furthermore, the names and identifying information of participants have been changed to protect their privacy.

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