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Flourishing After Sexual Assault: An Examination of Self-Compassion in Women

Jessica E. Schindler

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FLOURISHING AFTER SEXUAL ASSAULT: AN EXAMINATION OF SELF-
COMPASSION IN WOMEN

by

JESSICA E. SCHINDLER

(Under the Direction of Jeff Klibert)

ABSTRACT

Sexual assault is a serious and increasing public health concern, which has spurred recent development of the #metoo movement (Miller, 2017; Sigurdsson, 2018). Much of the current literature and treatment emphasis focuses on how to bring survivors of sexual assault back to baseline functioning. This exclusive focus on stability models often neglects pathways by which survivors thrive and flourish following experiences with sexual violence. It is important to consider how sexual assault experiences relate to flourishing efforts. Self-compassion, or the ability to be open and non-judgmental about one's own suffering and treat oneself with kindness in the face of pain, inadequacies, and failures, is linked with reductions in stress and increases in flourishing efforts after individuals encounter traumatic events (Neff, 2003a; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). However, it is unknown whether self-compassion explains variation within the sexual assault-flourishing relationship in a community sample of women. The current study sought to answer the following questions: (a) do significant relationships exist between self-reported sexual assault experiences, self-compassion, and flourishing? (b) does self-compassion buffer the effects of sexual assault on flourishing? (c) are potential buffering effects delineated by specific aspects of self-compassion (self-kindness vs. common humanity vs. mindfulness)? The study utilized a cross-sectional, correlational design in which participants answered questions related to their experiences with sexual assault, self-compassion, and

flourishing in an online survey format. Data were collected from a community sample of 511 women. Main and interaction effects of socioeconomic status and rurality were examined on the study's main variables, with women from higher socioeconomic backgrounds reporting higher levels of self-compassion and flourishing compared to women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Importantly, more experiences with sexual assault were related to lower levels of reported self-compassion and flourishing scores. In terms of my moderated model, self-compassion did not moderate the relationship between sexual assault experiences and flourishing. These findings highlight the negative effects of sexual assault, especially regarding lower accrual of self-compassion and flourishing resources. However, it is important that future research efforts identify other factors that may better explain the conditional effects of sexual assault on flourishing.

INDEX WORDS: Sexual assault, Flourishing, Self-compassion, Women

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Sexual assault is a serious and increasing public health concern (Miller, 2017). Particularly, sexual assault against women is at the forefront of societal concern and awareness, especially via the #metoo movement (Sigurdsson, 2018). Although the definition of sexual assault varies, the general concept is associated with experiences of unwanted sexual attention or contact. Sexual assault usually includes both penetrative and non-penetrative sexual acts perpetuated by force, threats of force, or incapacitation (Muehlenhard, Peterson, Humphreys, & Jozkowski, 2017). Penetrative sexual acts include vaginal, oral, and anal penetration, whereas non-penetrative sexual acts include kissing, groping, and sexual touching (Muehlenhard et al., 2017).

The pervasiveness of sexual assault is noted in several types of settings (e.g., workplace, public spaces, at home) and communities (e.g., military, Hollywood) within the United States (U.S.). In fact, every 98 seconds an American is sexually assaulted (Department of Justice, 2015). Although sexual assault occurs in all communities, women are disproportionately affected, with 91% of survivors of rape and sexual assault identifying as female (Rennison, 2002). Moreover, recent studies suggest one in five women have experienced an attempted or completed rape (Black et al., 2011) and one in three women will experience some form of contact sexual violence in their lifetime (Smith et al., 2017).

Much of the research surrounding sexual assault focuses on its physical and mental health consequences. For example, 81% of women with a history of sexual assault report significant short or long-term impacts, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Black et al., 2011). In addition, 70% of rape and sexual assault survivors experience moderate to severe distress following the assault, a larger percentage than any other violent crime (Department of

Justice, 2014). Following a rape, 33% of women contemplate suicide, likely due to the overwhelming mental health effects of sexual trauma (Kilpatrick, Edumuds, & Seymour, 1992). Furthermore, 38% of survivors of sexual assault experience work or school problems, such as significant difficulties with a boss, coworker, or peer (Department of Justice, 2014). Along with work and academic concerns, 37% of survivors experience relational problems with friends and family, including getting into more frequent arguments and feeling as if their friends and family are untrustworthy and distant (Department of Justice, 2014). Taken as a whole, these figures represent the frequent and severe consequences of sexual trauma on women.

Although evaluating the consequences of sexual assault sheds light on treatment options, much of the treatment emphasis is associated with bringing survivors back to their baseline level of functioning following assault. A neglected focus in the literature is how survivors can thrive and flourish following experiences with sexual violence. Flourishing is defined as a measure of subjective well-being that encompasses both emotional well-being (e.g., presence of positive affect, absence of negative affect, perceived satisfaction with life) along with positive functioning (e.g., self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy; Keyes, 2002). This concept is a continuation of positive psychology theory, a model that highlights the importance of building positive qualities in life rather than repairing deficits (Seligman, 2002). Due to the significant consequences of sexual assault on mental health and functioning, sexual assault detracts from flourishing efforts in women (Krug, 2002). However, the processes by which women can flourish in the face of sexual assault are understudied and unclear, necessitating greater empirical attention.

One process by which women may be able to flourish following sexual violence is through the use of self-compassion. Self-compassion, or the ability to non-judgmentally

understand and be open to one's suffering and avoid evaluations of self-worth, is related to flourishing (Satici, Uysal, & Akin, 2013). The concept of self-compassion is comprised of three elements: self-kindness vs. self-judgment, common humanity vs. isolation, and mindfulness vs. overidentification (Neff, 2003a). Self-kindness vs. self-judgment refers to the practice of being kind and understanding toward oneself rather than being judgmental and self-critical (Neff, 2003a). Common humanity vs. isolation denotes the ability to view one's experiences in relation to the larger human experience rather than viewing them as separating or isolating (Neff, 2003a). Mindfulness vs. overidentification refers to seeing one's thoughts in a state of balanced awareness rather than overidentifying with them (Neff, 2003a). Currently, investigating the role of self-compassion within the context of sexual assault-flourishing relationships is a sorely neglected area of study. Specifically, is flourishing after a sexual assault experience dependent upon a woman's ability to generate self-compassion? Given the recent attention to the pervasiveness of sexual assault in women, it is important to identify and understand ways by which women can find meaning in their experiences and flourish following sexual assault.

Purpose

Given these gaps within the literature, the current study sought to answer the following questions: (a) do significant relationships exist between self-reported sexual assault experiences, self-compassion, and flourishing?; (b) does self-compassion buffer the effects of sexual assault on flourishing?; and (c) are potential buffering effects delineated by specific aspects of self-compassion (self-kindness vs. common humanity vs. mindfulness)?

Significance

Establishing models of flourishing for survivors of sexual assault is important from a theoretical and clinical perspective. Sexual assault is significant social concern. Not only are

women subject to extreme negative cognitive and emotional side effects of this traumatic experience, they are deemed responsible for the event happening to them. These conjoined effects can significantly impact how women view themselves, others, and the world. Women should not be blamed for their experiences with sexual support. Nor should survivors of sexual assault be made to feel inferior, less than, or incapable because of their sexual assault experience. Therefore, it is important to identify avenues of empowerment so that survivors can recognize and take advantages of their strengths. Exploring ways by which women can flourish following sexual assault may provide a solid foundation for researchers to conceptualize preventative and strength-building elements into sexual assault theory. For instance, current research is overly focused on processes that connect the experience of sexual assault to negative psychological outcomes. This over-emphasis may inadvertently cast a stigmatizing sense of victimhood and vulnerability on women. Instead, preventative and strength-based models of sexual assault may highlight aspects of womanhood that promote strength, resilience, and meaning-making used to overcome adversity. In this way, my research has the potential to empower theory development in a way that will reduce stigma and advocate for stronger strength-based facets of models of sexual assault for women.

Clinically, finding pathways by which women can thrive following sexual assault may provide a useful target for interventions. Specifically, it is imperative for clinicians to find non-stigmatizing ways for women to access their strengths following experiences with sexual assault, especially given the amount of societal stigma surrounding this issue. Exploring methods of flourishing in women who have experienced sexual assault may also allow for women to grow and become stronger from their experiences, which in turn may protect them against the effects of mood- and anxiety-specific pathology.

Definition of Terms

Sexual assault. Sexual assault is defined by a range of unwanted and threatening sexual experiences. These experiences include: leering, sexual comments by others, being forced to view sexually explicit material or pornography, being watched by another person while undressing or nude, being shown another individual's private areas of their body, being masturbated in front of, experiencing another individual making sexual motions towards them, fondling, kissing, rubbing or sexual touch, oral penetration, vaginal penetration, and anal penetration. In the current study, a history of sexual assault experiences was assessed by the Sexual Experiences Survey – Long Form Victimization (SES-LFV; Koss et al., 2007) and served as the predictor variable.

Flourishing. Flourishing is defined as being filled with positive emotions and functioning well psychologically and socially (Keyes, 2002). Individuals who are flourishing in life possess elevated levels of emotional well-being and positive functioning (Keyes, 2002). In the current study, level of flourishing was defined by participants' scores on the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010). In the current study, flourishing served as the outcome variable.

Self-compassion. Self-compassion is defined as a type of relating with oneself when faced with personal suffering. The concept of self-compassion can be broken down into three distinct constructs: self-kindness vs. self-judgment, common humanity vs. isolation, and mindfulness vs. overidentification. Self-kindness refers to being gentle and supportive of oneself rather than harshly judging oneself for personal shortcomings (Neff, 2003a). Common humanity denotes recognition that all humans fail and make mistakes, rather than feeling isolated and taking an egocentric view of imperfection (Neff, 2003a). Lastly, mindfulness involves awareness of one's present experience of suffering with balance rather than overidentifying with negative

aspects of oneself or one's life (Neff, 2003a). For the purposes of this study, self-compassion was measured via the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS), which consists of six subscale scores (self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and overidentification; Neff, 2003b). The three domains of self-compassion (i.e., self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness) served as the moderating variables in the current study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Flourishing

Flourishing refers to a state of mental health in which individuals are free from any diagnosable mental illness (e.g., major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, etc.) and exhibit elevated levels of emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Keyes, 2007). There are two core concepts associated with flourishing: subjective emotional well-being (i.e., hedonia) and subjective psychological and social well-being (i.e., positive functioning; Keyes, 2007). In simpler terms, the World Health Organization defines flourishing, otherwise known as complete mental health, as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (World Health Organization, 2001. p.1).

Flourishing is not simply about promoting human happiness – it includes promoting human potential that results in positive life functioning when nurtured (Keyes, Myers, & Kendler, 2010). Positive functioning, a major component of flourishing, includes both psychological and social well-being (Keyes, 2005). Flourishing in the context of psychological well-being includes facets of functioning such as affirmation, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others (Keyes, 2007). Individuals who exhibit high levels of flourishing hold positive attitudes about themselves, seek challenges and feel a sense of continued development, feel as if they have a direction and meaning in life, are able to manage and mold their environment to suit their needs and passions, and are able to form warm, trusting personal relationships with others. Flourishing also features abilities such as social acceptance, social actualization, social contribution, social coherence, and social integration (Keyes, 2007). Individuals with high levels of flourishing hold positive attitudes

toward and accept human differences, believe that people and society have the potential to grow positively, view their daily activities as useful and valuable to society, find society and social interactions meaningful and interesting, and feel a sense of belonging, comfort, and support from their community. Those in a state of flourishing generally exhibit elevated levels of at least one measure of hedonic well-being and six measures of positive functioning (Keyes, 2007).

Research indicates functioning at sub-flourishing levels confers increased risk to impairment and disability (Keyes, 2002). Individuals high in flourishing report the fewest workdays missed, less cutbacks to work, lowest levels of health limitations in activities of daily living, fewest chronic physical conditions, and lowest levels of health care utilization (Keyes, 2007). In addition, individuals who are flourishing exhibit high levels of psychosocial functioning, low levels of perceived helplessness, high levels of functional goals (e.g., knowing what they would like out of life), high levels of self-reported resilience, and high levels of intimacy (Keyes, 2007). Given the range of positive outcomes associated with flourishing, it is important to research and identify ways to promote emotional well-being and positive functioning at an individual and community level.

Sexual Assault and Flourishing

Experiences with sexual assault are a significant barrier to flourishing (Krug, 2002). This is likely due to the detrimental effects that sexual assault confers on mental functioning and physical health. Specifically, sexual assault inhibits flourishing efforts in the domains of emotional well-being and positive functioning. On an emotional level, sexual assault is related to negative, distressing feelings of worry, anger, violation, vulnerability, distrust, and depression (Department of Justice, 2014). These effects are typically persistent in that symptom levels of survivors of sexual assault remain elevated for two years compared to women who have not been

sexually assaulted (Koss & Figueredo, 2004). Shame and guilt are two particularly prevalent emotions that occur in the aftermath of sexual assault. Feelings of shame generally produce a lack of motivation to seek care, isolation, and produce secondary feelings of anger and aggression. These consequences all inhibit efforts to increase positive emotions and life satisfaction (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Furthermore, shame is associated with a number of psychological diagnoses, including depression, anxiety, substance use, and eating disorders (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Although negative emotions are inevitable and at times beneficial to human survival, accumulations of extreme, prolonged negative emotions, like those seen in individuals who have experienced sexual assault, can be detrimental to individuals' livelihood and well-being (Fredrickson, 2000). Negative emotions have several adverse consequences, including impairment of positive psychological resource development and restriction of creativity and purview (Fredrickson, 2000). According to the broaden-and-build model, the cultivation of positive emotions can undo the consequences of negative emotions (Fredrickson, 2000). In addition, the cultivation of positive emotions not only negates the influence of negative emotions, but also broadens and builds an individual's personal resources, including physical, intellectual, and social resources, which are a necessary component of flourishing (Fredrickson, 2000). However, women with a history of sexual assault report fewer positive emotions to help undo the effects of overwhelming negative emotions that occur following sexual assault (Chivers-Wilson, 2006).

Sexual assault also confers a detrimental effect on psychological and social well-being, or positive functioning. Individuals who experience sexual assault often have negative beliefs about the goodness of humanity and the safety and fairness of the world even after one year following

their assault (Frazier, Conlon, & Glaser, 2002). In general, experience with a traumatic event, specifically sexual assault, can fundamentally alter one's basic assumptions about the world from positive to negative. In addition, survivors of sexual assault have higher rates of chronic health problems, unintended pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections (Jozkowski & Sanders, 2012). Moreover, the damaging effects of sexual assault on psychological and social well-being are counterintuitive to the resources needed to flourish such as self-acceptance, positive relations with others, and social integration (Keyes, 2007). Experiences with sexual assault strip individuals' ability to build these positive resources and instead replaces them with negative psychological and social functioning. In summary, experiences with sexual assault produce a number of emotional, psychological, and social detriments that interfere with the ability to flourish and achieve complete well-being.

Conditional Effects

Although sexual assault has detrimental effects on flourishing, several studies provide evidence that women who experience sexual assault still have the ability to flourish. Posttraumatic growth theory associated with sexual assault suggests that it is possible for women to achieve well-being, positive functioning, and flourish following experiences with sexual assault. Posttraumatic growth, or positive psychological change as a result of a struggle with highly challenging life circumstances, helps sexual assault survivors redefine harmful or self-deprecating beliefs and rebuild positive outlooks about themselves, others, and the world (Calhoun & Tedeshi, 2006). A number of positive outcomes are associated with posttraumatic growth interventions employed among samples of sexual assault survivors, including greater self-trust and self-worth, increased positive relationships with others, increased spirituality or changes in life philosophy, heightened awareness of new possibilities, and a greater appreciation

for life (Grubaugh & Resick, 2007). Each of these qualities represents an increase in psychological functioning and runs parallel to the resources needed to flourish. However, posttraumatic growth encompasses several resilience-based concepts and constructs. It is currently unknown if one type of posttraumatic growth feature is helpful in explaining the connection between sexual assault and flourishing. Given this line of study, it is important to specifically investigate the effects of unique features of posttraumatic growth on the relationship between sexual assault and flourishing. One construct that demonstrates potential in further clarifying the relationship between sexual assault and flourishing is self-compassion.

Self-Compassion as a Moderator

Definition and characteristics. Self-compassion is defined as the ability to be open and non-judgmental about one's own suffering and treating oneself with kindness in the face of pain, inadequacies, and failures (Neff, 2003a). The concept of self-compassion is comprised of three distinct components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness (Neff, 2003a). Self-kindness refers to extending kindness and understanding toward oneself, in contrast to judgment and self-criticism. Individuals who practice self-kindness treat their flaws gently and embrace their imperfections rather than being harsh and critical toward themselves. These individuals offer themselves warmth and unconditional acceptance in the face of personal shortcomings or failures. In addition, individuals who practice self-kindness rather than self-judgment often turn inward in the face of difficult life circumstances to offer themselves soothing and comfort (Neff, 2011).

Common humanity indicates the ability to view one's experience in the context of part of larger human experience, rather than viewing pain, failures, and inadequacies as separating and isolating. Individuals with a sense of common humanity connect their own suffering to the

realization that all humans have imperfections and make mistakes (Neff, 2011). Isolation, the opposite construct of a sense of common humanity, happens when individuals believe they are the only ones undergoing hardship or believe that it is abnormal to suffer (Neff, 2011).

Lastly, mindfulness is the ability to not overidentify with negative thoughts and feelings, but rather view them from a more balanced, aware perspective. Individuals who are mindful neither ignore nor ruminate on suffering, but rather recognize their suffering with objectivity and perspective (Neff, 2011).

Associations with flourishing. Self-compassion is linked to several positive outcomes, including flourishing. Particularly, self-compassion and emotional well-being are strongly related. Higher levels of self-compassion are associated with greater feelings of social connectedness, life satisfaction, adaptive coping strategies, self-determination, and self-concept accuracy, all important components of flourishing (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). In addition, self-compassion is related to several other positive psychological strengths commonly associated with flourishing such as greater happiness, optimism, positive affect, wisdom, curiosity, emotional resilience, and personal initiative (Neff et al., 2007). Not only is self-compassion strongly related to positive outcomes, but it is also negatively correlated to a number of constructs that detract from flourishing efforts, including self-criticism, depression, anxiety, fear of failure, thought suppression, and perfectionism (Neff, 2011).

Associations with sexual assault. Studies show self-blame and self-judgment are negatively associated with self-kindness (Neff, 2003a). Survivors of sexual assault often exhibit elevated levels of self-judgment and self-blame following their experiences (Bensimon, 2017). These individuals may attribute the cause of their assault to themselves and blame themselves for engaging or not engaging in certain behaviors. In addition, survivors of sexual assault may

believe they could have avoided assault or they deserved the assault due to their actions or character. Self-blame in sexual assault survivors is correlated to increased post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, depressive symptoms, and higher general distress levels (Bensimon, 2017). High levels of self-blame, which are common following sexual assault, therefore directly detract from self-compassion efforts.

Moreover, research shows a negative correlation between self-compassion and loneliness (Akin, 2010). Feelings of isolation and alienation impede the recovery of individuals who have been sexually assaulted (Ehlers et al., 1998). By feeling alone in their recovery from sexual assault, individuals have difficulty finding a sense of common humanity in their suffering, leading to a decreased ability for self-compassion.

Lastly, being mindful of one's experience and emotions is a prerequisite for a sense of self-compassion (Neff, 2003b). If an individual has difficulty being compassionate toward themselves in the face of hardship, they will often ignore their suffering or become over-identified with it (Neff, 2003b). Over-identification with one's suffering may come in the form of intense and persistent negative emotions such as shame, anger, or fear (Neff, 2003a). Studies show survivors of sexual assault often experience these intense negative emotions, particularly in the form of shame and guilt (Rizvi, Kaysen, Gutner, Griffin, & Resick, 2008). This over-identification leads to rumination and exaggerated negative beliefs about themselves and others, which can detract from feelings of self-compassion (Neff, 2003a). On the other hand, survivors of sexual assault may cope with their trauma via avoidance, which also runs contrary to the mindfulness features of self-compassion.

Self-compassion as a moderator. The qualities of self-compassion (i.e., self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness) protect individuals against the negative effects of stress,

conflict, and interpersonal strife and these qualities may extend to sexual assault as well. First, a meta-analysis examining the strength of the relationship between self-compassion and psychopathology such as anxiety and depression indicates higher amounts of self-compassion are associated with lower amounts of psychopathological symptoms (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). This is important as meta-analytic research is an essential component for conferring a stable inverse relationship between a protective factor and a specific outcome (Vagi et al., 2013). Second, highly self-compassionate individuals are less affected by and more resilient to social difficulties (Terry, Leary, & Mehta, 2013). In fact, numerous studies report self-compassion assists in building resilience after stressful situations (Leary et al., 2007; Terry et al., 2013). Finally, higher levels of self-compassion predict lower severity of post-traumatic stress disorder, panic, depression, and suicidality and higher levels of well-being among individuals who experienced a traumatic event (Zeller et al., 2015).

Overall, the literature strongly highlights the protective effects of self-compassion in mitigating the negative effects of stress, conflict, and trauma on different indices of well-being and flourishing. However, research has yet to examine self-compassion in the context of sexual assault. Considering sexual assault is an extreme form of stress or trauma, it is likely self-compassion is an integral factor in terms of increasing flourishing after sexual assault experiences.

Differentiation among subscales. Although research highlights the potential for self-compassion to moderate the relationship between sexual assault and flourishing, there is little literature to determine whether any potential moderating effects vary by self-compassion subscale (e.g., self-kindness vs. self-judgment, common humanity vs. isolation, mindfulness vs. overidentification). It is important to examine the potential moderating effects of self-

compassion as not only a singular concept, but also through independent components to provide meaningful theoretical and clinical implications, given the results hold. By breaking self-compassion down into its three components, I analyzed the results from a narrower perspective, supporting more fine-tuned clinical findings. The three self-compassion components orient themselves to different clinical interventions, so by examining each component, I was able to pinpoint more effective interventions to help minimize the effects of sexual assault on flourishing. Therefore, the exploratory nature of the study included examining each specific subscale as a moderator to help inform more meaningful clinical work in assisting sexual assault survivors with flourishing.

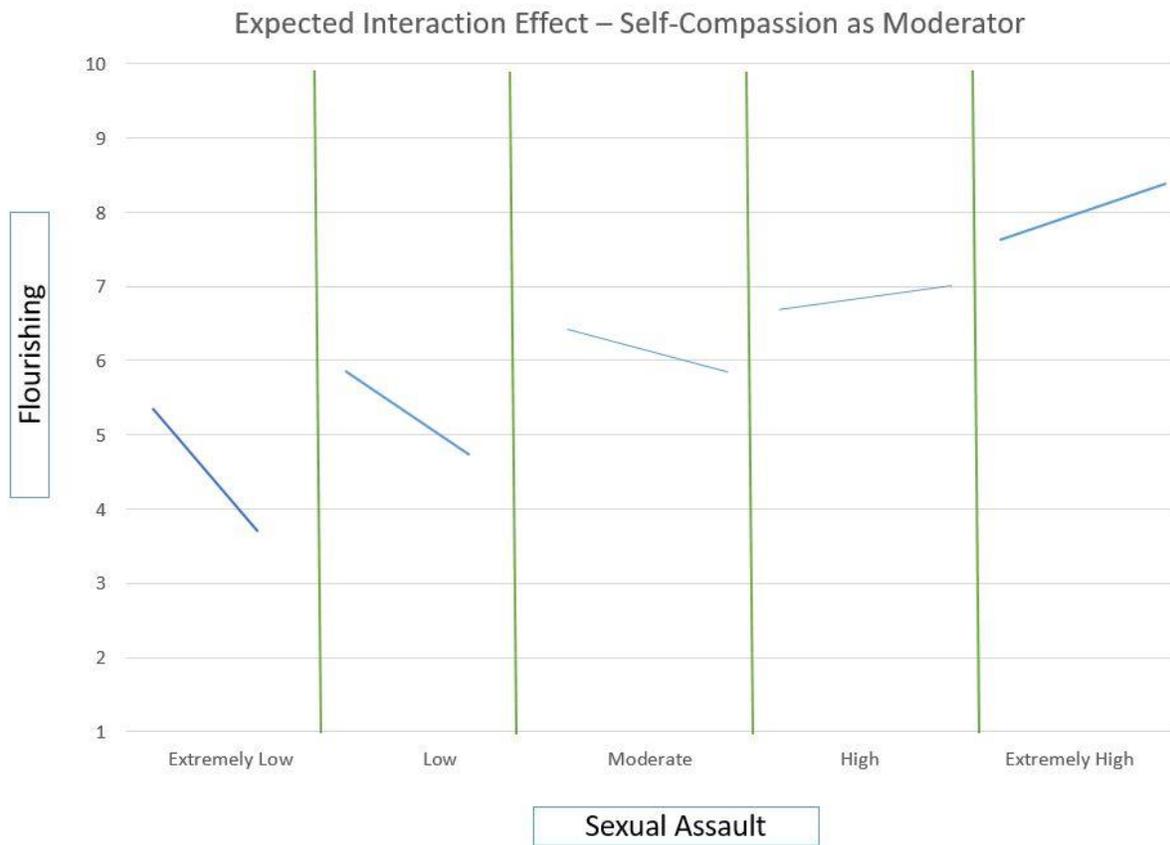
Current Study

The overarching purpose of the current study was to identify unique mechanisms contributing to a more complete understanding of the relationship between sexual assault and flourishing in women. The construct of self-compassion may provide a means to buffer the effects of sexual assault on flourishing. It is important to identify pathways by which women can flourish following sexual assault to promote strength, resiliency, and negate the sense of victimhood and vulnerability currently permeating the literature surrounding outcomes of sexual assault. Specifically, if the results held to expectation, the current study could provide useful targets for interventions to increase women's ability to flourish following sexual assault.

Hypotheses. It was expected results would reveal an inverse relationship between sexual assault experiences and flourishing. In addition, it was expected self-compassion would moderate the relationship between sexual assault and flourishing, such that higher levels of self-compassion would result in a weaker association between sexual assault and flourishing (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Expected Interaction Effect – Self-Compassion as a Moderator



CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

A community sample of women was recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a data collection system operated through Amazon. MTurk was utilized to obtain a wider variety of women from more diverse age groups, socioeconomic statuses, rural vs. urban residencies, and histories of sexual assault than would be available in an undergraduate student sample. To ensure data quality, 162 respondents were removed from analyses because they did not answer survey validity check questions correctly, completed the survey in less than 5 minutes, or did not complete 75% of the survey items. A total of 511 participants were retained in the final sample. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 83 ($M = 40.93$, $SD = 12.71$). In terms of ethnicity, participants primarily identified as White/Caucasian ($n = 412$, 80.6%), though other ethnicities were represented, including Black/African-American ($n = 42$, 8.2%), Asian/Asian-American ($n = 23$, 4.5%), Mexican-American/Latino/a ($n = 16$, 3.1%), American Indian/Native American ($n = 4$, 0.8%), Multiracial ($n = 13$, 2.5%), and Other ($n = 1$, 0.2%). Regarding marital status, the majority of the sample reported they were single ($n = 141$, 27.6%) or married/partnered/common law ($n = 301$, 58.9%), though other marital statuses were represented, including separated ($n = 12$, 2.3%), divorced ($n = 50$, 9.8%), and widowed ($n = 6$, 1.2%). As for socioeconomic status, a majority of the sample reported some financial resources ($n = 343$, 67.1%) or substantial financial resources ($n = 102$, 20.0%), with few identifying themselves as poor/impoverished ($n = 66$, 12.9%). The sample consisted of similar rates of individuals who came from rural hometowns ($n = 219$, 42.9%) and urban hometowns ($n = 289$, 56.6%). All participants indicated they currently reside in the United States (US) as a citizen.

Measures

Demographics Form. Participants completed a demographic form designed to assess for basic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, and marital status. Demographic information based on geographic location of the participant was also assessed. Rurality was measured using two demographic questions: (1) “Of these terms, [urban, rural] which best describes the area that you currently live?” and (2) “Of these terms, [urban, rural] which best describes the area in which you grew up?”

Sexual Experiences Survey – Long Form Victimization (SES-LFV). The SES-LFV (Koss et al., 2007) is a self-report assessment used to identify and classify experiences of sexual assault. Respondents report the frequency of distinct types of sexual victimization and aggression experienced in the past 12 months. The inventory covers a broad range of sexual victimization, from instances of leering to forcible rape. The inventory is scored to reflect an objective severity continuum, with more severe experiences of sexual assault (e.g., rape) adding more points to respondents’ scores than less severe experiences (e.g., leering, catcalling). The SES-LFV is widely used and accepted as the best available measure of sexual assault. In terms of validity, SES-LFV demonstrates modestly associated effects with subjective trauma (i.e., rape, attempted rape, coercion, and contact; Koss et al., 2007). The measure demonstrates solid internal consistency ($\alpha = .74$ for women; Koss & Gidycz, 1985). The SES-LFV demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$) in the current study.

Self-Compassion Scale (SCS). The SCS (Neff, 2003b) is a self-report questionnaire designed to quantitatively measure an individual’s level of self-compassion. Respondents indicate how often they engage in behavior on 26 items, each measured on a scale from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The scale measures for six dimensions of self-compassion: self-

kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification. The scale demonstrates excellent convergent validity with established measures of self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-determination, and basic psychological needs (Neff, 2003b). The measure demonstrates great internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$) and solid factor structure across multiple populations (Neff, 2003b). In the current study, the SCS demonstrated poor internal consistency among subscales (self-kindness $\alpha = .61$; common humanity $\alpha = .58$; mindfulness $\alpha = .54$). However, the SCS demonstrated good internal consistency as a total score ($\alpha = .81$) in the current study.

Flourishing Scale (FS). The FS (Diener et al., 2010) is an 8-item self-report measure of psychological well-being. Participants indicate their perceived success in different life domains (relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism) on a 7-point rating scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree). Higher scores on the measure indicate greater psychological resources and strengths. The measure demonstrates strong convergent validity with assessments related to optimism and satisfaction with life (Diener et al., 2010). The measure demonstrates good internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$) and scores appear to be stable across time (Diener et al., 2010). The FS demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$) in the current study.

Procedures

The current study focused on a community sample of women from a diverse background of ages, socioeconomic statuses, rural vs. urban residencies, and experiences with sexual assault. Participants were recruited through Amazon MTurk, a data collection system owned by Amazon that allows for compensation for completing tasks requiring human knowledge. Upon visiting the Amazon MTurk website, participants were directed to a Qualtrics survey link. Women read an electronic informed consent and those who wished to continue with the survey demonstrated

consent by clicking “I give my consent to participate.” Individuals who chose not to participate clicked on “I do not give my consent to participate” and were directed away from the survey. Women who provided consent to participate were asked demographic questions (e.g., age, socioeconomic status) followed by a randomized list of self-report measures (i.e., sexual experiences, self-compassion, flourishing). Following completion of the surveys, participants were debriefed about the nature and purpose of the study and were provided with information regarding free or low-cost mental health services. Finally, participants were compensated \$1.00 following completion of the study.

Data Storage. Initially, all data were stored on Qualtrics. Following data collection, the researcher retrieved the data from the online site and transferred the data to SPSS. After the transfer, the researcher deleted the data from Qualtrics. Data transferred to SPSS are stored on a secure, password-protected hard drive.

Statistical Analysis

Preliminary analyses investigated the main effects and interaction effect of rural status and socioeconomic status on the study’s main variables (sexual assault experiences, self-compassion, flourishing) using a 2 Residency (Rural, Non-Rural) x 3 SES Resources (Low, Some, Substantial) factorial MANOVA. Primary analyses examined the strength and significance of the bivariate relationships among sexual assault experiences, self-compassion, and flourishing. In addition, a moderated regression model was analyzed through the SPSS macro PROCESS (Model 1; Darlington & Hayes, 2016). The model examined the main effects of sexual assault and self-compassion along with the interaction effect between the two on flourishing. Significant conditional effects were probed for significance using the interactive

utility tool (McCabe, Kim, & King, 2018) and the Johnson-Neyman technique for two-way interactions (Carden, Holtzman, & Strube, 2017).

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Frequency of Severe Sexual Assault

To estimate the frequency of more severe instances of sexual assault in the sample, responses to items regarding rape on the SES-LFV were analyzed. Participants reported varied experiences with sexual assault in the past year, with a number of participants reporting more severe instances of sexual assault. These included nonconsensual oral sex ($n = 34$, 6.4%), nonconsensual vaginal sex ($n = 44$, 8.3%), and nonconsensual anal sex ($n = 33$, 6.2%).

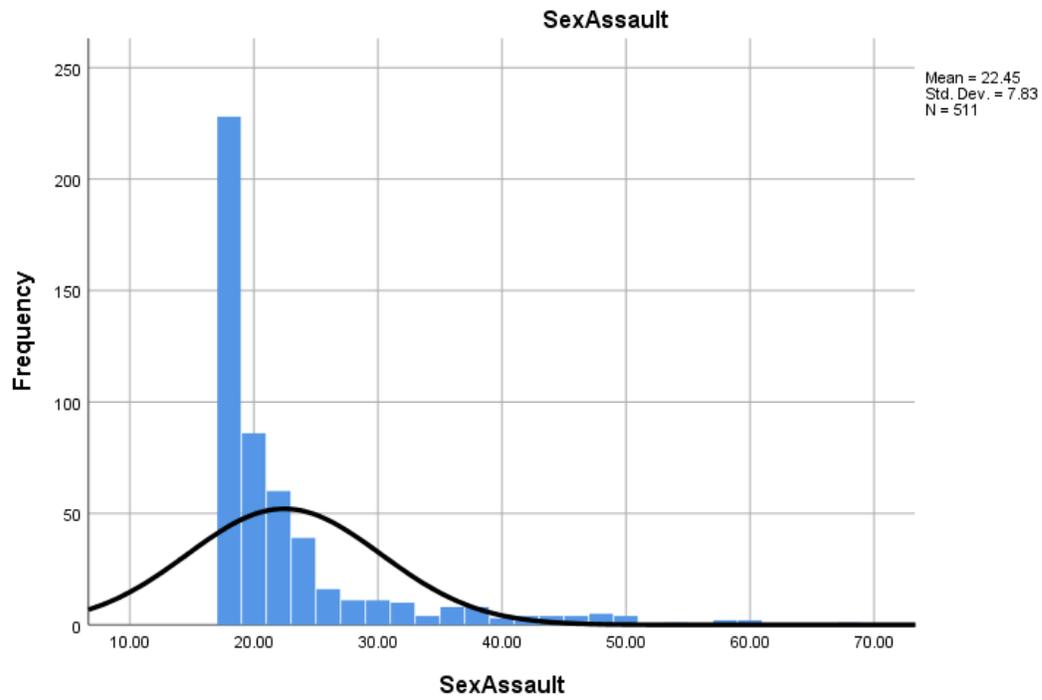
Additionally, 5.4% of the sample ($n = 29$) reported that in the last year, they had woken up with a sore vagina or anus and had little/no memory of what happened.

Assessment of Normalcy

The data were examined to determine whether the factors were normally distributed. For sexual assault scores ($M = 22.45$, $SE = .35$), the skewness of the data was 2.60 with a standard error of .11 and the kurtosis was 7.20 with a standard error of .22. To evaluate whether these effects demonstrated a violation of the normal distribution, the Kolomogorov-Smirnov test was performed. Results were significant, $D(511) = .29$, $p < .01$, indicating that sexual assault scores were non-normally distributed. An examination of the histogram for sexual assault (Figure 2) shows the data were positively skewed.

Figure 2

Distribution of sexual assault scores from a sample of community women



Regarding self-compassion scores ($M = 94.42$, $SE = .72$), the skewness of the data was $-.43$ with a standard error of $.72$ and the kurtosis was 7.20 with a standard error of $.22$. To evaluate whether these effects demonstrated a violation of the normal distribution, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was performed. Results were significant, $D(511) = .05$, $p < .05$, indicating that self-compassion scores were non-normally distributed. An examination of the histogram for self-compassion (Figure 3) shows the data were negatively skewed.

Figure 3

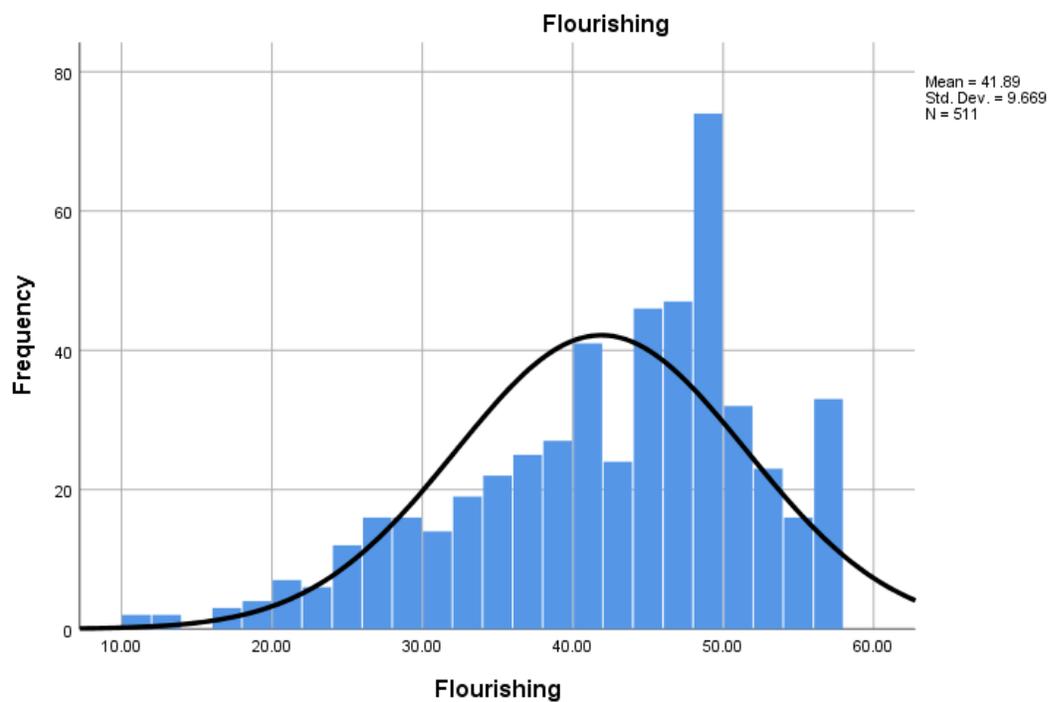
Distribution of self-compassion scores from a sample of community women



For flourishing ($M = 41.89$, $SE = .43$), the skewness of the data was $-.73$ with a standard error of $.11$ and the kurtosis was $.02$ with a standard error of $.22$. To evaluate whether these effects demonstrated a violation of the normal distribution, the Kolomogorov-Smirnov test was performed. Results were significant, $D(511) = 0.12$, $p < .05$, indicating that flourishing scores were non-normally distributed. An examination of the histogram for flourishing (Figure 4) shows the data were negatively skewed.

Figure 4

Distribution of flourishing scores from a sample of community women



Rural and SES Differences

A 2 Residency (rural, non-rural) x 3 Resources (low, some, substantial) factorial MANOVA was analyzed to determine the main and interaction effects of rural and socioeconomic status on self-reported measures of sexual assault, self-compassion, and flourishing. Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations for each rurality status and socioeconomic status group on the three variables. Results demonstrated an overall significant multivariate main effect for socioeconomic status, $F(6,1000) = 11.74, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = 0.07$. However, the data revealed a non-significant main effect for rural status, $F(3,500) = .45, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = 0.003$, and a non-significant interaction between socioeconomic status and rurality, $F(6,1000) = .58, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = 0.003$.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations by Rural Status and SES on Sexual Assault, Self-Compassion, and Flourishing

Resource (SES) Status	Rural Women (<i>n</i> = 219)			Non-Rural Women (<i>n</i> = 289)		
	Low (<i>n</i> = 34)	Some (<i>n</i> = 150)	Substantial (<i>n</i> = 35)	Low (<i>n</i> = 31)	Some (<i>n</i> = 191)	Substantial (<i>n</i> = 67)
Sexual Assault						
<i>M</i>	22.15	22.11	22.60	25.19	22.19	22.48
<i>SD</i>	7.10	7.92	8.11	9.51	7.21	8.43
Self-Compassion						
<i>M</i>	83.59	95.36	98.83	85.10	95.69	96.00
<i>SD</i>	19.68	15.27	15.10	14.46	16.47	14.21
Flourishing						
<i>M</i>	34.74	42.41	46.31	34.52	41.69	45.96
<i>SD</i>	11.12	9.11	7.42	11.12	9.31	7.24

Significant results were revealed when examining the main and interaction effects for some but not all dependent variables. The univariate test for sexual assault revealed a non-significant main effect for rural status, $F(1,256) = .96, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = .002$, a non-significant main effect for socioeconomic status, $F(2,255) = .97, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = .004$, and a non-significant interaction effect between rural status and SES, $F(2,255) = .48, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = 0.004$. Overall, these results suggest women residing in rural and non-rural locations and women reporting various levels of SES status report a comparable amount of experience with sexual assault.

The univariate test for self-compassion revealed a nonsignificant main effect for rural status, $F(1,526) = 0.03, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = .001$, and a nonsignificant interaction effect between rural status and SES, $F(2,525) = 0.45, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = .002$. However, there was a significant main effect for socioeconomic status, $F(2,525) = 15.52, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .058$. Post hoc analysis using LSD indicated that individuals with low financial resources ($M = 84.31, SD = 17.27$) reported less self-compassion when compared to individuals with some ($M = 95.54, SD = 15.93$) and substantial ($M = 96.97, SD = 14.51$) financial resources. There were no significant differences between individuals with some and substantial financial resources.

The univariate test for flourishing revealed a nonsignificant main effect for rural status, $F(1,526) = .17, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = .000$, and a nonsignificant interaction effect between rural status and SES, $F(2,525) = .03, p > .05, \eta_p^2 = .000$. However, there was a significant main effect for socioeconomic status, $F(2,525) = 30.41, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .11$. Post hoc analysis using LSD indicated that individuals with low financial resources ($M = 34.63, SD = 11.03$) reported less flourishing when compared to individuals with some ($M = 42.00, SD = 9.22$) and substantial ($M = 46.08, SD = 7.27$) financial resources. Moreover, individuals with some ($M = 42.00, SD = 9.22$) financial

resources reported less flourishing when compared to individuals with substantial ($M = 46.08$, $SD = 7.27$) financial resources.

Bivariate Correlations

Zero-order correlations were examined to determine whether significant relationships existed among the study variables. Table 2 depicts the correlation coefficients among the study variables. As expected, the relationship between sexual assault and self-compassion was significantly inversely correlated ($r = -.12$, $p < .01$). Similarly, the relationship between sexual assault and flourishing was significant in the inverse direction ($r = -.12$, $p < .01$). The relationship between self-compassion and flourishing was significantly positively correlated ($r = .40$, $p < .01$). These correlational patterns were hypothesized in the current study.

Table 2

Correlations among Measures of Sexual Assault, Self-Compassion, and Flourishing in a Sample of Women

Variables	1	2	3
1. Sexual Assault	----	-.12*	-.12*
2. Self-Compassion	----	----	.40*
3. Flourishing	----	----	----

Note: * Correlation is significant at the .01 level.

Moderated Model

To evaluate whether higher reports of self-compassion could reduce the relationship between sexual assault and flourishing, a moderated regression model was analyzed using PROCESS (Model 1). In the regression model, sexual assault served as the focal predictor, self-compassion as the moderator, and flourishing as the outcome

variable. Regression statistics are presented in Table 3. The model highlighted the main and interactive effects for sexual assault and self-compassion on flourishing. In total, the main and interactive effects accounted for 17% of the variance in flourishing scores, $F(3, 507) = 33.94, p < .01$. Within the model, the main effects for sexual assault ($b = -.11, p < .05$) and self-compassion ($b = .23, p < .01$) were significant. At a multivariate level, the sexual assault x self-compassion interaction ($b = -.01, p = .07$) was non-significant (see Figure 5). In total, these patterns of scores suggests that self-compassion does not moderate the relationship between sexual assault and flourishing in a sample of adult women.

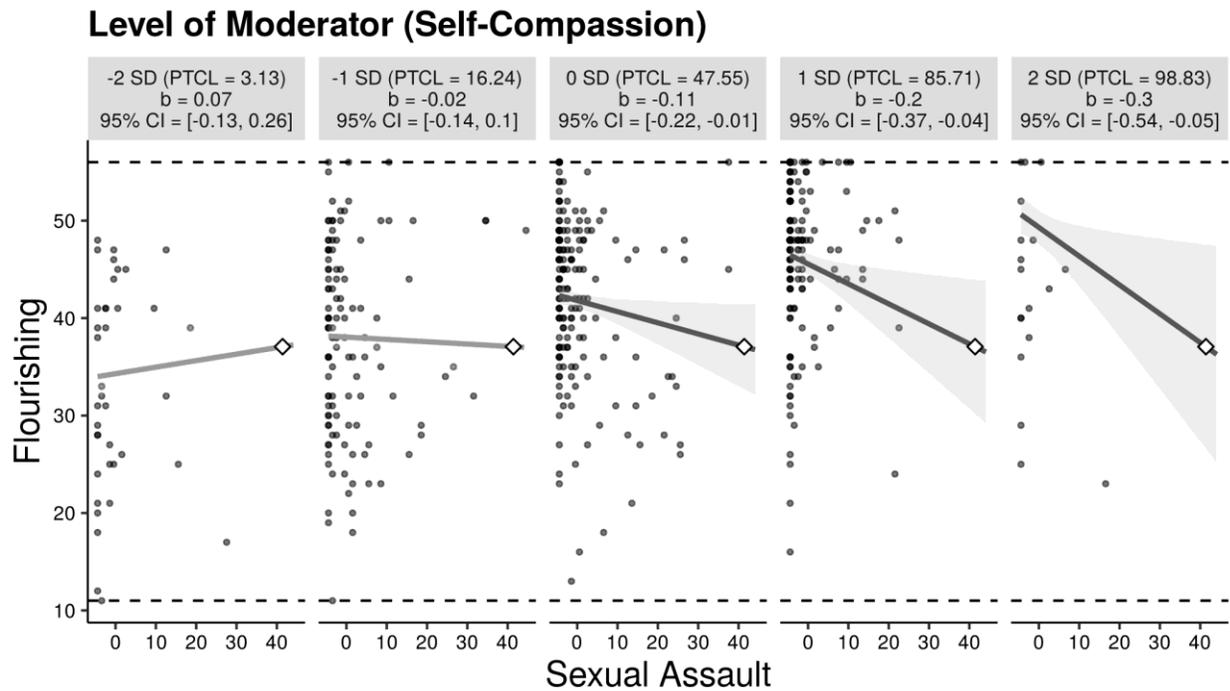
Table 3

Regression Values for the Moderating Effect of Self-Compassion

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>
Constant	41.80	.39	105.97	.00	41.03	42.58
Sexual Assault	-.11	.05	-2.18	.03	-.22	-.01
Self-Compassion	.23	.02	9.50	.00	.18	.28
Sex A. x SelfCom	-.01	.00	-1.81	.07	-.01	.00

Figure 5

Simple Slopes Analysis – Self-Compassion as a Moderator



Because my analysis detected a non-significant moderated effect, I decided to conduct some exploratory analyses. Specifically, in my primary analysis, I used a total score to measure for self-compassion. Self-compassion can also be broken down into 3 subscale scores: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness (Neff, 2003b). These subscales may differ substantially in terms of their ability to serve as protective and promotional factors. Thus, I decided to re-analyze the models (x3) using each subscale as the moderator. Overall, results consistently detected a non-significant moderated effect for each self-compassion subscale.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of the current study was to clarify the nature of the relationships among sexual assault experiences, self-compassion, and flourishing in a sample of women. Specifically, I evaluated the extent to which self-compassion buffers the relationship between sexual assault experiences and flourishing through a moderated model. In total, this line of evaluation can inform whether self-compassion can serve as a method of protection against the negative consequences of sexual assault on flourishing, which in turn, can be used to establish self-compassion-focused interventions for sexual assault survivors. In light of this goal, the present study sought to answer the following questions: (a) do significant relationships exist between self-reported sexual assault experiences, self-compassion, and flourishing? (b) does self-compassion buffer the effects of sexual assault on flourishing? and (c) are potential buffering effects delineated by specific aspects of self-compassion (self-kindness vs. common humanity vs. mindfulness)?

Overarching Rates of Severe Sexual Assault

At a preliminary level, I evaluated participant responses on some of the more severe sexual assault indices. Results confirm previous research indicating that women are experiencing alarming rates of sexual assault (Black et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2017). For instance, approximately 20% of my non-clinical sample reported experiences with severe sexual assault within the past year. More specifically, 6.4% of my sample reported experiences with nonconsensual oral sex, 8.3% reported experiences with nonconsensual vaginal sex, and 6.2% reported experiences with nonconsensual anal sex. In addition, 5.4% of my sample reported that, in the last year, they had woken up with a sore vagina or anus and had little/no memory of what

happened. These findings provide a glimpse of the degree to which women experience sexual assault within their lifetime. Moreover, these findings require a call to action, whereby researchers and theorists need to work collaboratively to create comprehensive prevention programs to lower population rates of sexual assault. Additionally, given the proportion of women who are experiencing sexual assault in their lifetimes, interventions aimed at combating the negative physical, psychological, and emotional effects of sexual assault are gravely needed.

Rural Differences

Across analyses, non-significant differences between women from rural vs. non-rural areas on reported sexual assault experiences, self-compassion, and flourishing were noted. These results suggest that rural and non-rural women report similar levels of sexual assault, self-compassion, and flourishing in their respective communities. However, the lack of relationships may be due to the unsophisticated way that rurality was measured. Specifically, rurality was measured by simply asking participants what type of location they currently reside in. This measure only captures subjective evaluations of rurality, as opposed to a standardized way of defining rural areas. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether participants truly lived in geographically rural or urban areas. In the future, measures of rurality should be assessed using a more well-defined classification system, rather than asking for participants' perceptions of their hometown rural status. Moreover, the lack of statistically significant differences does not necessarily mean that individuals from rural areas do not experience and express unique features of sexual assault, self-compassion, and flourishing differently. For instance, the limited resources and "small-town" culture present in rural communities may affect the ways women perceive and report experiences with sexual assault. In the future, it will be

important to evaluate how these constructs are expressed in rural culture as opposed to urban culture. It will also be important to establish unique outcomes (e.g., suicide, body image difficulties, interpersonal functioning) for sexual assault survivors in rural vs. nonrural areas.

SES Differences

Mean differences were examined among women with low, moderate, and substantial financial resources on the variables of sexual assault, self-compassion, and flourishing. Non-significant differences were noted for varying levels of socioeconomic status on reported sexual assault experiences. These results reinforce the notion that sexual assault is prevalent among women across different socioeconomic statuses. Despite the lack of statistically significant differences, women from different socioeconomic backgrounds may experience and express sexual assault in differing ways. For example, women from lower socioeconomic statuses may have a harder time overcoming sexual assault and fostering posttraumatic growth due to a lack of financial and/or material resources. This may potentially affect the recovery trajectory for women from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Future research should focus on ways to mitigate these potential differences in the experience of sexual assault within women from various socioeconomic statuses.

Conversely, significant differences were found among women of varying socioeconomic statuses on self-compassion. Specifically, women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported lower self-compassion scores when compared to women with some and substantial financial resources. Several features of low socioeconomic status life may make it more difficult for women to marshal self-

compassion, such as fewer financial and material resources and increased stress levels. Women from low socioeconomic statuses may struggle to meet various basic needs for themselves (e.g., food, shelter), leading to increased stress levels and decreased self-compassion. Given this trend, future research should focus on ways to effectively help women from low socioeconomic status communities foster self-compassion for themselves in the face of few material and/or financial resources and elevated stress levels.

A linear trend was noted in differences between socioeconomic status on flourishing, with women from higher-SES backgrounds reporting higher levels of flourishing compared to women with low and moderate financial resources. Additionally, women with moderate financial resources reported higher reports of flourishing when compared to women with low socioeconomic status backgrounds. These findings are consistent with the predominant literature, which suggests individuals from lower SES backgrounds have more difficulties identifying and building positive psychological resources (Gallo, Bogart, Vranceanu, & Matthews, 2005).

Although the adage “money can’t buy happiness” may have some element of truth, women with higher financial and/or material resources are better able to meet their basic needs, paving the way for increased psychological and social well-being. Key elements of flourishing include affirmation, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others (Keyes, 2007). Women with lower resources may spend much of their days working, providing for children, and meeting basic human needs, leading to less time to be devote to building relationships and pursuing personal growth. In addition, women with lower resources

may not feel as if they have control over their environment and may feel unable to manage and mold their environment to suit their needs and passions, leading to lower levels of flourishing. Future research efforts should focus on decreasing barriers to flourishing for women from lower SES backgrounds, including programmatic and policy efforts to help women from all SES backgrounds to flourish.

Correlations

Bivariate correlations were examined to identify significant relationships between sexual assault experiences, self-compassion, and flourishing. A significant, weak inverse relationship was found between sexual assault experiences and self-compassion. This result is consistent with research findings suggesting survivors of sexual assault often experience self-blame and self-judgment following their experiences, both of which are negatively associated with different elements of self-compassion (Bensimon, 2017; Neff, 2003a). A significant, weak inverse relationship was also present between sexual assault experiences and flourishing. This is also consistent with a large body of research highlighting negative physical, psychological, emotional, and social consequences of sexual assault, all of which run contrary to the acquisition of resources needed to flourish (Chivers-Wilson, 2006; Department of Justice, 2014; Jozkowski & Sanders, 2012; Koss & Figueredo, 2004; Krug, 2002; Tangney & Dearey, 2002). Finally, a positive, significant relationship was found between self-compassion and flourishing. This result is consistent with literature noting high levels of self-compassion are associated with greater feelings of social connectedness, life satisfaction, adaptive coping strategies, self-determination, and self-concept accuracy, all important components of flourishing (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). Moving forward, it will be important for future research to

deconstruct these relationships further. For instance, the nature of my design is correlational, which restricts my ability to determine causality among the three variables. To determine a causal relationship between each of these variables, future research should include experimental designs. Specifically, researchers may need to determine if self-compassion interventions can lead to increases in flourishing among women with a history of sexual assault experiences.

Moderated Analyses

In line with the overarching purpose of the present study, I examined the interaction between women's sexual assault experiences and self-compassion to account for variation in flourishing scores. Results revealed a non-significant interaction effect. In other words, self-compassion did not moderate the relationship between sexual assault experiences and flourishing. These findings were inconsistent with literature suggesting that self-compassion has a protective effect against negative psychological consequences of sexual assault (Thompson & Waltz, 2008). It is important to acknowledge that the moderated model was analyzed with each sub-scale of self-compassion. Consistent with the overarching model, non-significant effects were detected for each component of self-compassion. This was surprising as some literature suggests certain aspects of self-compassion hold great potential to protect survivors of sexual assault against negative outcomes. For instance, mindfulness, a core component of self-compassion, serves as a protective factor against symptoms of depression and PTSD for individuals who have experienced trauma (Nitzan-Assayag, Aderka, & Bernstein, 2015).

There may be two reasons why a significant interaction effect was not observed. Methodologically, one reason may be that self-compassion is more effective in promoting flourishing for women who experience high levels of distress following sexual assault as

opposed to lower levels. For example, posttraumatic growth, which may be related to flourishing after sexual assault, is better explained by the severity of exposure to trauma by objective and subjective measures, in that individuals who experience higher levels of distress following trauma experience higher levels of posttraumatic growth (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996). Given the non-clinical nature of my sample, participants may have experienced lower levels of distress related to sexual assault than individuals in a clinical sample may have experienced. In turn, these sample characteristics may have watered down the potential for self-compassion to serve as a moderator in the identified model. In response to this concern, future research should re-examine the protective effects of self-compassion using a diverse clinical sample of sexual assault survivors to determine if self-compassion plays a role in helping women flourish in the face of severe sexual assault distress.

In addition, there are some theoretical positions that may explain my findings. Self-compassion may be specifically related to more delineated aspects of flourishing (e.g., subjective emotional well-being, subjective psychological, social well-being). For instance, self-compassion may help women regulate negative and positive emotions (subjective emotional well-being) in the face of sexual assault but fail to help build a strong social support network (social well-being). Because I used a unidimensional measure of flourishing, I was unable to determine whether differential effects existed within the moderated effects. Future research should tease apart the role of self-compassion in protecting individuals against the effects of sexual assault and promoting very delineated forms of flourishing.

Clinical Implications

From a clinical standpoint, there are some important findings to help guide clinical intervention efforts for survivors of sexual assault. Importantly, self-compassion and flourishing

were inversely related to experience with sexual assault. These findings indicate that women who have experienced higher levels of sexual assault are less likely to report higher levels of self-compassion and flourishing. Although it is important to bolster self-compassion efforts and promote flourishing in all women, it is especially important for women who have experienced sexual assault. Self-compassion may help women decrease negative consequences of sexual assault, including self-blame, shame, and guilt. On a clinical level, special attention should be given to developing effective self-compassion interventions that are tailored to the unique needs of women who have experienced sexual assault. For example, these interventions should promote strength and resiliency rather than judgment and victimhood. Furthermore, clinical interventions should also promote flourishing in various facets for women who have experienced sexual assault. For example, intervention efforts should focus on helping women flourish in social, emotional, and psychological domains.

Limitations

The present study has several notable limitations. The first limitation is the way I assessed for sexual assault experiences. The use of a self-report measure that simply asked about the number of distinct types of sexual assault participants experienced within the past year may have diluted much of the nuance of sexual assault. For instance, reporting the number of instances of sexual assault may not capture information about how women experienced the event emotionally and cognitively. Although women may experience similar amounts of sexual assault, their distress levels may vary greatly. By not capturing distress associated with sexual assault experiences, I may have inadvertently missed important insights regarding how these experiences relate to positive psychological resources, like self-compassion and flourishing. Additionally,

failing to assess for lifetime experiences of sexual assault may have decreased the accuracy of my results.

In a similar vein, online self-report measures were used to assess all three study variables. Self-report measures are susceptible to social desirability, biased responses, and demand characteristic concerns (Mitchell & Jolley, 2007). These concerns may detract from accuracy of findings. Specifically, women may have underreported instances of sexual assault due to privacy and confidentiality concerns or social desirability bias. This may have negatively affected results by reducing the accuracy of the data, leading to minimized relationships with self-compassion and flourishing. Furthermore, due to the nature of online data collection, many participant responses were unable to be used in the final data set due to incomplete responses or violations of validity rules. These women may have been different at some level than the sample at large which may have negatively affected my ability to detect meaningful findings. In the future, it may be beneficial to use behavioral or observable measures of self-compassion and flourishing to increase accuracy and validity of the noted findings.

Moreover, my sample was limited in diversity with regard to gender and ethnicity. In addition, my sample consisted of a non-clinical population. Given these constraints, it is important to determine if this study's findings hold with individuals from different gender, ethnic, sexual, and clinical identity statuses. Future research efforts should seek to replicate these findings with more diverse samples.

Furthermore, the nature of the design and data collected for the study was a limitation. Specifically, the design and data were correlational and cross-sectional, which does not allow inferences about causation. Future research should examine the

relationship between sexual assault and flourishing in an experimental manner. For instance, one might include a self-compassion manipulation or intervention to a sample of women who do and do not report instances of sexual assault, and then measure amounts of flourishing both immediately after intervention and longitudinally across time to further clarify the causal nature of these relationships.

Lastly, the non-normal distributions of each of my variables is a significant limitation in terms of data analysis. Data transformations were attempted, however, no transformation provided a normal distribution for my variables. Given the skewed distributions, I am unable to assume that the magnitudes of the effect sizes are meaningful. The magnitudes are likely to be attenuated due to differences in the distributions, particularly for the relationship between sexual assault and flourishing. The significant skewness of my data may have also affected my moderation analysis.

General Conclusions

The purpose of the current study was to identify unique mechanisms that contribute to a more complete understanding of the relationship between sexual assault and flourishing in women. This study employed a cross-sectional and correlational design to evaluate self-compassion as a moderator in the relationship between sexual assault experiences and flourishing in women. The findings advance the current body of sexual assault literature in several notable ways. First, women from lower-SES backgrounds reported lower levels of self-compassion and flourishing as compared to women from moderate and high-SES backgrounds. Second, sexual assault and self-compassion were inversely related. This highlights a need for effective interventions focused on cultivating positive psychological resources in women who have experienced sexual assault. Finally,

contrary to expectation, self-compassion did not moderate the relationship between sexual assault experiences and flourishing. These findings suggest that other factors may be more useful in explaining conditional effects of sexual assault experiences on flourishing. Specifically, more experimental research is needed to determine effective ways of mitigating negative consequences of sexual assault from a strength-based perspective.

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