The influence of a self-compassion training program on romantic relationships: A multiple case
study

by

Brittany Nicole Budzan

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Department of Educational Psychology
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Abstract

Separation and divorce is a common occurrence within North America. Given that the transition out of a marriage increases psychological distress in both adults and children, preventative interventions are crucial for avoiding serious ruptures and increasing relationship strength and resilience. A potential option for clinicians is to use interventions designed to increase self-compassion. Self-compassion can be conceptualized as the extension of compassion toward the self, and has been associated with a number of intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits. Although quantitative studies have demonstrated a correlation between self-compassion and positive behaviours within romantic relationships, the experiences and perspectives of participants remains unknown. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the influence of self-compassion on romantic relationships. Using a multiple case study methodology, three adults completed a self-compassion training CD, six sets of online questions, and two semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to construct rich accounts of each participant's experience. These findings address four research questions aimed at exploring the influence of self-compassion on relationship conflict and satisfaction, as well as its influence on perceptions of one's partner and oneself as a relationship partner. This study contributes to the field of self-compassion and romantic relationships, and may help inform future relationship interventions.

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Introduction

Background

High rates of divorce and separation among married and common-law couples has become endemic to many countries in the world, and North America is no exception. In the United States, 20% of all first marriages end in separation or divorce after five years, with this number increasing to 33% after 10 years (Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). In Canada, approximately 5 million individuals divorced or separated between 1991 and 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2014). Research suggests that transitioning out of a marriage increases psychological distress for both men and women (Strohschein, McDonough, Monette, & Shao, 2005), which is associated with higher rates of professional care seeking for mental health concerns (Bracke, Colman, Symoens, & Van Praag, 2010). Negative mental health outcomes are also worse for those who believe in the importance of longevity and permanence of marriage (Simon & Marcussen, 1999).

It is not only adults who face adversity as a result of divorce or separation. Almost 40% of couples divorcing in Canada have at least one child together (Statistics Canada, 2014). Depending on their age and developmental stage, children may experience physical symptoms, behaviour changes at school, or a temporary regression in previously acquired milestones (Department of Justice, 2015). Children may also be at an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and hyperactivity (Strohschein, 2012; Uphold-Carrier & Utz, 2012). These problems are affected by socioeconomic difficulties and dysfunctional family processes that can occur prior to and post relationship dissolution (Strohschein, 2012). Given that many of these mental health concerns affect children and adults even prior to the divorce or separation (Strohschein, 2005; Wade &

Pevalin, 2004), it is essential that empirically supported interventions are created to help couples develop the tools and resources needed to prevent major relationship ruptures.

As many couples do not seek help when problems first arise (Doss, Atkins, & Christensen, 2003), the development of strategies and interventions for preventing serious relationship ruptures from occurring in the first place is crucial. Marriage enrichment programs have been shown to increase engagement, intimacy, acceptance, and relationship quality (Cordova et al., 2014; Kalkan & Ersanli, 2008). By integrating non-traditional and alternative approaches, relationship enrichment programs can also increase accessibility, reaching those who would not normally take part in couples therapy (Morrill et al., 2011). In this regard, one approach that merits consideration is using targeted interventions to increase and strengthen self-compassion, which is a capacity shown to have substantial intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits.

Self-compassion consists of mindfulness, self-kindness, and embracing a shared human experience (Neff, 2003a). It involves treating oneself with warmth and understanding in the face of disappointing life events, much the same way as one would comfort a close friend. Self-compassion is associated with multiple aspects of positive psychological functioning, such as the ability to cope with failure (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005) and putting one's shortcomings into perspective (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Although self-compassion is primarily an intrapersonal concept, cultivation of this trait results in interpersonal benefits as well, such as increased perspective taking and empathy (Neff & Pommier, 2013). Within romantic relationships, self-compassionate individuals are more likely to display positive relationship behaviour (Neff & Beretvas, 2013) and to compromise during conflict (Yarnell & Neff, 2013).

Self-compassionate individuals also report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than those with low levels of self-compassion (Neff & Beretvas, 2013).

There are many theoretical reasons why self-compassionate individuals may have more satisfactory relationships. For example, the ability to forgive oneself after committing a relationship transgression is correlated with relationship satisfaction for both partners (Pelucchi, Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2013). This behaviour is more likely to be displayed by individuals who are high in self-compassion (Allen, Barton, & Stevenson, 2015). Partners would be able to recognize that everyone makes mistakes, show themselves kindness and forgiveness, and move forward in the relationship.

Mindfulness is also correlated with increased relationship satisfaction, which Kozlowski (2013) suggests may be influenced by increased positive coping responses and effective emotion regulation. Mindfulness is also a component of self-compassion, which helps individuals to not over-identify with their problems or minimalize them (Neff, 2003a). It may be hypothesized, therefore, that mindfulness could help when resolving conflict with a partner, as disagreements could be put into perspective, avoiding unnecessary escalation or avoidance.

Statement of Purpose

Based on the existing literature, self-compassion may hold promise as a relationship enhancement tool. However, the research on self-compassion and interpersonal relationships has been predominantly quantitative, leaving a significant gap in the literature. It still remains to be seen how self-compassion influences the experiences and perceptions of a romantic relationship. Therefore, qualitative research is required to further expand upon this area of study. Exploring the participant's perspective is crucial for intervention development, and it is through

understanding the participant's experience of this phenomenon that clinicians will be better positioned to make informed recommendations for self-compassion's use with couples.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of practicing self-compassion within a romantic relationship. I was interested in gaining an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of adults who completed a 6-lesson guided program on self-compassion based on the Mindful Self-Compassion training of Kristin Neff (2013). Participants reflected on how the development of a self-compassion practice influenced their experience of their romantic relationship. For this study, I utilized a multiple case study methodology (Stake, 1994), based on the ability of this approach to provide an in-depth, comprehensive, and ideographic understanding of the phenomena of interest.

Research Questions

The central research question for this study was: What is the influence of self-compassion within a romantic relationship? Sub-questions were included to explore self-compassion's influence on conflict and satisfaction within a relationship, as well as participants' perceptions of themselves and their relationship partner:

- What is the influence of self-compassion on relationship conflict?
- What is the influence of self-compassion on relationship satisfaction?
- What is the influence of self-compassion on the perception of oneself as a partner?
- What is the influence of self-compassion on the perception of one's partner?

Overview of Thesis

The remainder of this thesis is comprised of four chapters. Chapter two covers the relevant literature on self-compassion and relationship enhancement strategies. The mental

health outcomes of separation and divorce are also addressed. In chapter three, I describe the case study methodology and methods used in this study, along with my underlying philosophical assumptions. The chapter also covers the steps taken to ensure quality, ethical considerations, and my position and biases as the researcher. The fourth chapter presents the findings of the study. Themes are described and supported with examples from the data. The final chapter discusses the findings within the context of the existing literature and review implications for couples counselling and relationship intervention development. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

Literature Review

Divorce and Separation

Divorce and separation are endemic within North American culture. In the United States, one third of first marriages end in divorce before a 10ᵗʰ anniversary (Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Data from the American Community Survey shows that among all individuals who have been married, almost 50% will have experienced a divorce by their late 50's (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014). Rates in Canada tell a similar story. Approximately five million Canadians divorced between 1991 and 2011, and divorce rates remain stable between 35 and 42% (Statistics Canada, 2014; Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015).

There is a substantial body of literature that links the transition out of a marriage or common-law relationship with mental health concerns. Using data from the British Household Panel Survey, Wade and Pevalin (2004) found that 54.2% of divorced or separated individuals reported poor mental health, compared to 18.8% of married individuals. Reported mental health concerns in cases of separation or divorce include psychological distress, depression, and decreased levels of self-esteem and feelings of mastery (Simon & Marcussen, 1999; Strohschein, McDonough, Monette, & Shao, 2005; Symoens, Colman, & Bracke, 2014). Depressive symptoms are especially elevated for individuals who believed in the longevity and permanence of marriage (Simon & Marcussen, 1999). The link between divorce or separation and poor mental health is supported by the literature on support seeking. Bracke and colleagues (2010) found that in over 25,000 participants across 29 European countries, individuals who are divorced or separated seek professional mental health care more often than those who are married or cohabiting. Compared to married individuals, those who divorce or separate also experience poor mental health in the year prior to the event (Wake & Pevalin, 2004). In addition

to the health risks associated with transitioning out of a marriage, other disadvantages exist as well. For example, many individuals, especially women, face financial difficulties after a divorce (Symoens, et al., 2014).

Almost 40% of divorcing Canadians have at least one child together, who are also faced with adversity as a result of a divorce in the family. The Canadian Department of Justice (2015) outlines difficulties children may have, such as fears of abandonment, hostility, and changes in school behaviour. Parental divorce is correlated with increased levels of anxiety and depression (Strohschein, 2005), and the complete loss of contact with one parent is strongly correlated with increased emotional distress (Reiter, Hjorleifsson, Breidablik, & Meland, 2013). Disruptions within the family have also been linked to academic problems in children, such as lowered reading scores and increased behavioural difficulties (Arkes, 2015). Additionally, experiencing a parental divorce may lead to long-term consequences. Uphold-Carrier and Utz (2012) found that adults who had experienced a parental divorce an average of 36 years prior were at a higher risk for depression, and had lower levels of connection with family. This was true regardless of whether the divorce was experienced as a child or an adult (Uphold-Carrier & Utz, 2012).

Among children, symptoms of psychological distress are not limited to after a parental separation or divorce takes place. Depression, anxiety, antisocial behaviour, and hyperactivity have all been found to be elevated in children prior to a parental divorce compared to children whose parents remain married (Strohchein, 2005; 2012). Strohchein (2012) found that these effects were mainly accounted for by dysfunctional family processes and economic difficulties. Academic difficulties may also be present two to four years before a parental divorce or separation occurs (Arkes, 2015).

Benefits of Romantic Relationships

Not only is improving relationship quality important for avoiding the pitfalls above; being in a romantic relationship can be beneficial for one's health (Symoens et al., 2014). A longitudinal study found that married individuals have higher levels of psychological well-being than those who separate/divorce or never marry (Kim & McKenry, 2002). Marital satisfaction is correlated with lower levels of stress, depression, and greater life satisfaction (Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham, & Jones, 2008). Married individuals also have a greater sense of purpose in life, which Bierman, Fazio, and Milkie (2006) propose may be due to feelings of accomplishment and progress from entering a marital union. Even after experiencing a divorce, those who enter new relationships are less depressed, have higher self-esteem, and are more satisfied with life than single divorcees (Symoens et al., 2014).

Gordon, Heimberg, Montesi, and Fauber (2012) explored the perceived effects of romantic relationships for undergraduate students with high levels of social anxiety. Participants perceived relationships to have improved their overall well-being, lowered their levels of social anxiety, and increased their ability to interact with other people. Similarly, Hart, Turk, Heimberg, and Liebowitz (1999) found that among individuals with a diagnosis of social phobia, those who were single were more likely to meet the criteria for avoidant personality disorder, and single men were more likely to have a mood disorder. Being married was correlated with feeling less fearful around social and performance situations.

Romantic relationships also contribute to cardiovascular health. Compared to a no contact group, Grewen and colleagues (Grewen, Anderson, Girdler, & Light, 2003) found that individuals exposed to warm and affectionate partner contact prior to a stressful task experienced less change in blood pressure and heart rate. Accordingly, partners in supportive relationships

may be at a lower risk for stress-related cardiovascular concerns (Grewen et al., 2003). In a three-year longitudinal study, marital satisfaction was found to be correlated with lower blood pressure and left ventricular mass index, which are both effects of hypertension (Baker et al., 2000).

As can be seen from the above research, being part of a satisfying romantic relationship is advantageous for multiple reasons. The individual gains both mental and physical health benefits, and the negative outcomes associated with relationship dissolution are avoided. It is therefore of the upmost importance to encourage the development of strong, supportive partnerships. Given that health promotion can help to facilitate prevention (Van Vliet, Keats, and Kinzel, 2015), it is essential that effective relationship maintenance strategies are created to assist couples in strengthening their relationships.

Existing Preventative Strategies

Preventative relationship strategies may not only promote relationship wellness and buffer against ruptures; it may also be easier to reach couples before relationship problems escalate. Despite the effectiveness of traditional couples therapy (Shadish & Baldwin, 2003), survey data from the United States shows that most distressed couples do not seek professional help (Johnson et al., 2002). Doss, Atkins, and Christensen (2003) found that rather than seeking counselling when problems first begin appearing, couples must first go through the stages of recognizing there is a problem and considering getting help before any professional help seeking occurs. Additionally, partners do not necessarily progress through these stages at the same speed. When major difficulties in the relationship have become entrenched, couples still may not seek therapy, perceiving that it is too late and that any attempt to seek help will be ineffective (Wolcott, 1986). Helping couples to strengthen their relationship before distress begins to

appear, therefore, is essential for long term relationship health. However, given the popular understanding that couples counselling is for people who are experiencing distress, many satisfied couples are unlikely to seek help. Consequently, there is a call for non-traditional relationship interventions that can increase accessibility and recruit couples who would not normally seek out counselling (e.g. Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Duncan, Steed, & Needham, 2009). This sentiment echoes a call for counselling psychology to strengthen its emphasis on prevention (Van Vliet et al., 2015). To this end, several new enhancement and preventative interventions have been developed.

The Marriage Checkup was developed to resemble other regular health check-ups, such as going to the doctor or dentist, as opposed to being framed as traditional therapy (Morrill et al., 2011). Couples complete questionnaires and a joint interview session, in which strengths and areas of concern are discussed. Partners are then guided through a problem-solving conversation and support exercise. Feedback, which is based on Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2002), is provided two weeks afterwards, and the couple and counsellor work together to come up with a plan to address any areas of concern (Morrill et al., 2011). In a 2011 study by Morrill and colleagues, the Marriage Checkup was successful in soliciting involvement from individuals who did not identify as distressed, as well as those that would not otherwise attend couples therapy. Couples also reported that this approach had fewer barriers than traditional therapy. A randomized controlled trial of the Marriage Checkup with 215 married couples found that when a "booster" session was given one year following the intervention, acceptance and intimacy were higher than the control group after two years (Cordova et al., 2014). However, relationship satisfaction after two years did not differ between the two groups (Cordova et al., 2014).

To increase accessibility, several internet-based strategies have been developed, the most studied being ePREP (Braithwaite & Fincham, 2007). ePREP is a computer-based version of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, which is designed to enhance positive relationship features and constructively handle conflict (Braithwaite & Fincham, 2007). Undergraduate students in the ePREP treatment group showed increases in relationship variables such as trust and constructive communication eight weeks post-intervention, and also had lower levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms compared to the control group (Braithwaite & Fincham, 2007). Despite these results, the study did not find an increase in relationship quality (Brithwaite & Fincham, 2007). Changes in relationship satisfaction in subsequent studies have been inconsistent or not reported (see Cicila, Georgia, & Doss, 2014).

In another online intervention, 101 couples were assigned to either a 4 week excitement enhancing or waitlist condition (Coulter & Malouff, 2013). Couples were asked to come up with a list of 10 exciting activities that could be done together, and were required to plan out time so that at least one of these activities could be done per week. Couples in the excitement enhancing condition reported higher levels of relationship excitement, satisfaction, and positive affect than couples in the waitlist condition (Coulter & Malouff, 2013), and these findings were also maintained 4 months later.

To test the effectiveness of internet-based strategies, Duncan and colleagues recruited 82 married couples and divided them into three groups: online intervention, traditional workshop, and control (Duncan, Steed, & Needham, 2009). Educational materials in the intervention conditions were designed to enhance feelings such as love and friendship, and reduce negative feelings through improved conflict resolution and problem solving. The online group showed

increased relationship satisfaction and empathic communication compared to the control group, and the effects were equal to those in the traditional workshop group (Duncan et al., 2009).

Lastly, a skills program called "Power of Two Online" is currently available to couples online. The program seeks to target declining relationship satisfaction by providing education regarding positivity and intimacy, healthy communication, emotion regulation, and collaborative decision making (Kalinka, Fincham, & Hirsch, 2012). Seventy-nine new and expectant parents were recruited for a randomized clinical trial of this approach. Two months post-intervention, the treatment group had less of a decline in relationship satisfaction, and had better conflict resolution skills compared to controls (Kalinka, Fincham, & Hirsch, 2012). However, this study only looked at new and expectant parents, and the program has been studied less extensively than other online interventions (Cicila, Georgia, & Doss, 2014).

Despite the presence of these programs, less progress has been made on promoting the enhancement and maintenance of satisfied couples than on developing approaches for couples in distress (Bradbury & Lavner, 2012). Additionally, many of the above examples target areas that are expected to cause declines in relationship satisfaction, and consequently focus on skills training around communication and conflict-resolution (Bradbury & Lavner, 2012; Cicila, Georgia, & Doss, 2014). However, Bradbury and Lavner (2012) point out that many couples do not show declines in satisfaction, and that this can actually be a fairly stable trait. Rather than targeting variables that may lead to declines in marriage, the authors suggest focusing on qualities that promote stability, such as empathy and compassion (Bradbury & Lavner, 2012). With these considerations in mind, self-compassion presents itself as a potentially effective approach for maintaining and enhancing relationship quality and satisfaction.

Self-compassion

      Conceptualization. Compassion can be conceptualized as an awareness of and desire to alleviate the suffering of others; being kind, warm, and understanding to those in distress; and recognizing that all humans experience setbacks, failures, and moments of suffering (Neff, 2003a; 2003b). Self-compassion involves turning this compassion inward, which means recognizing and feeling moved by one's own distress, treating oneself with kindness and understanding, and acknowledging that the moment of distress or failure is part of being human (Germer & Neff, 2013; Neff, 2003b). This conceptualization of self-compassion divides the construct into three distinct but related components: self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity (Neff, 2003a). Self-kindness is the opposite of self-criticism. When evaluating one's perceived flaws or inadequacies, self-kindness promotes understanding and acceptance instead of self-judgement and self-condemnation (Neff, 2011a; Neff & Pommier, 2013). Rather than engaging in self-criticism, a loving and caring voice is used, similar to what one would expect from a supportive friend or parent. Warmth and comfort can be provided when it is needed, rather than attempting to "tough out" distressing situations (Neff, 2011a).

      Mindfulness has been defined as an intentional, non-judgemental, present-moment awareness (Paulson, Davidson, Jha, & Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Within the context of self-compassion, mindfulness promotes a balanced perspective and awareness of thoughts and feelings (Neff, 2003a). By being mindful, attention can be drawn to moments of suffering and attended to with gentleness and comfort (Neff, 2011a). Secondly, mindfulness allows suffering to be viewed from an objective angle. One's experience is not minimized or avoided, and by taking a step back from a problem, over-identification with negative thoughts and emotions is prevented and cycles of rumination can be broken (Neff, 2011a).

Common humanity is in some respects the opposite of isolation. It is the recognition that all human beings go through moments of suffering and have inadequacies (Neff, 2011a). Sometimes during moments of suffering or failure, thoughts such as "why me?" arise. When distress is looked at as a unique occurrence, feelings of isolation are likely to occur. On the other hand, by understanding that suffering is part of the human experience and common to all humans, feelings of interconnectedness with others can grow and flourish (Neff, 2011a).

Taken together, when facing a moment of personal suffering or failure, the first step is to recognize it as a moment of suffering (mindfulness) and understand that suffering is a part of the human existence (common humanity). Since suffering is something that happens to everyone, it is important to be kind and not critical toward oneself in that moment (self-kindness). This idea is captured in a series of phrases used by Neff (2011b, p. 119): "This is a moment of suffering. Suffering is a part of life. May I be kind to myself in this moment. May I give myself the compassion I need."

Each of the three components of self-compassion also relates to and enhances one another (Neff, 2003a). By showing self-kindness, the isolation associated with self-criticism decreases, allowing for an increased feeling of connection with other human beings. Being mindful puts the issue at hand into perspective. By not over-identifying with the problem and making it out to be bigger than it actually is, self-kindness can be more easily applied. Mindfulness also helps expand the awareness and appreciation that everyone has moments of pain, suffering and failure, which increases feelings of connection with fellow human beings. Embracing common humanity and understanding that everyone experiences suffering can put personal distress into perspective, increasing mindfulness. This perspective also makes us more

aware that we should not be critical of ourselves for something that happens to everyone, but should be kind instead.

Gilbert (2009) conceptualizes self-compassion through an evolutionary approach. According to Gilbert's framework, humans have three primary affect regulation systems. First is the threat protection system. This allows individuals to quickly locate and focus their attention on any possible threats, and produce a "fight or flight" response. Given that the correct identification of a threat increases chances of survival, this system operates using a "better safe than sorry" approach, and can easily become overactive. Humans also have a drive system, which provides the motivation needed to attain resources and achieve goals. The stimulation and excitement that is felt after success acts as an incentive to seek out new goals. However, this desire for exhilaration makes present-moment contentment difficult, as the focus remains on what can be accomplished next in order to feel rewarded.

In addition to the emotion regulation systems that are threat and incentive focused, humans also have a contentment system. Gilbert theorizes that this system is responsible for feelings of warmth, well-being, and peacefulness that go beyond the absence of threat. When experiencing a moment of distress, the contentment system can be activated through the care and compassion of others. In this way, individuals are able to ensure that their needs are met, increasing chances of survival. However, others are not always available to provide support. By learning to behave in a self-compassionate manner, the contentment system can become self-activated, restoring balance to the overactive threat and drive systems.

Barriers to self-compassion. In order to develop a deeper understanding of what self-compassion *is*, it is also important to distinguish what self-compassion is *not*. One fear that some people may harbour against self-compassion is that it will result in decreased motivation to

improve oneself (Baker & McNulty, 2011). However, self-compassion does not mean that failings are ignored or accepted. Instead, it means that change and wanting the best for oneself is encouraged with understanding rather than criticism (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion can actually lead to personal growth and improvement, since becoming aware of a fault is not met with judgement and criticism. In a series of experiments, Breines and Chen (2012) found that undergraduate students who were instructed to reflect compassionately on their experiences were more likely to: (a) believe they could improve a current area of weakness, (b) feel motivated to make amends for a past transgression, and (c) increase time spent studying after failing an experimental task.

Self-compassion can also be misinterpreted as self-indulgence (Neff, 2011a). However, as Neff (2011a) explains, while compassionate parents are understanding and kind, they still put rules in place based on what is best for the child, such as attending school and eating vegetables. Self-compassion involves promoting choices and behaviours from a place of love and caring, even if they are sometimes difficult.

Finally, self-compassion may be confused with self-pity (Neff, 2011a). When engaging in self-pity, individuals see themselves as a lone victim, forgetting that there are others who have experienced the same difficulties (Neff, 2011a). Self-compassion, on the other hand, encourages thinking about one's own suffering as an experience shared by many, and in this way creates bonds between people rather than separation (Neff, 2003a). By being mindful, self-compassion also prevents people from wallowing and becoming overwhelmed by their problem. Instead, it allows them to view it from a more objective distance (Neff, 2003a).

Self-Compassion and Self-Esteem. It is also important to differentiate self-compassion and self-esteem. These capacities are related, as they are both connected with positive feelings

towards oneself (Neff, 2003b). However, self-compassion is a positive way of relating to oneself, while self-esteem is a way of evaluating one's personal worth (Neff, 2003a). One way of generating feelings of worthiness and positivity is by engaging in downwards comparisons. This involves viewing others in a negative light, thereby putting oneself in an elevated position (Neff, 2003a). However, putting down others is not necessary in order to have self-compassion (Neff, 2003a). Breines and Chen (2012) asked participants to reflect upon a personal weakness and then select if they would prefer to interact with someone who had overcome this weakness, someone with the same weakness, or someone with a worse weakness. Those in the self-compassion condition were more likely to select someone who overcame the same weakness, thereby engaging in an upward social comparison, compared to participants in the control and self-esteem conditions (Breines & Chen, 2012).

The two constructs are moderately correlated. This is expected given that people who are self-compassionate are more likely to have a stronger sense of self-worth than people who are highly self-critical or judgemental (Neff, 2003b). Both constructs are positively associated with self-determination, autonomy, competence and relatedness. However, unlike self-compassion, self-esteem is positively correlated with narcissism (Neff, 2003b). Self-esteem has also been linked with a defensive response pattern to feedback, wherein positive feedback is readily accepted, while the validity of neutral or ambivalent feedback is questioned (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007). This may demonstrate a distancing from personal responsibility for outcomes that is not observed in self-compassionate individuals (Leary et al., 2007). Overall, self-compassion seems to be related to healthy self-esteem that does not involve feeling that one is better than others (Neff, 2003b).

Intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits. The majority of self-compassion research to date has explored the impact of this capacity on individual functioning and well-being. Self-compassion has been found to be positively associated with life satisfaction, emotional processing, happiness, optimism, reflective and affective wisdom, personal initiative, curiosity and exploration (Neff, 2003b; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). Negative correlations have been discovered between self-compassion and anxiety, depression, perfectionism, distress, and neuroticism (Neff, 2003b; Neff & Pommier, 2013; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). Self-compassion is also negatively associated with rumination and thought suppression, which is to be expected given that self-compassionate individuals are mindful of their problems and do not over-identify with them (Neff, 2003b). Additionally, a number of studies have demonstrated that self-compassion appears to provide a buffering effect when reflecting on personal weaknesses (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007) and negative life events (Leary et al., 2007).

In addition to intrapersonal benefits, a growing number of studies have demonstrated that self-compassion is associated with interpersonal benefits. Individuals high in self-compassion report greater levels of compassion for humanity, empathy, perspective taking, altruism and forgiveness (Neff & Pommier, 2013). Self-compassionate individuals also display healthy conflict resolution skills, and are more likely to compromise as opposed to prioritizing their feelings or passively submitting (Yarnell & Neff, 2013).

Self-compassion and romantic relationships. Given the above benefits, one might easily hypothesize that self-compassion would be related to satisfaction within romantic relationships. To test this line of inquiry, Neff and Beretvas (2013) conducted a quantitative study which examined the role of self-compassion on romantic relationships. One hundred and four couples who had been in relationships for over a year completed a series of online surveys

about topics such as self-compassion, their partner's perceived level of self-compassion, well-being, autonomy, verbal aggression, and relationship satisfaction. Self-compassion was correlated with feeling worthy, happy, authentic, and able to express one's opinions within the relationship. Individuals who ranked themselves as more self-compassionate were also judged by partners to be more caring and kind towards them. Partners also viewed self-compassionate partners as more accepting and granting more freedom and autonomy. Individuals were more likely to attribute higher levels of relatedness to self-compassionate partners, while less self-compassionate partners were described as detached, verbally aggressive, controlling and domineering. Participants with self-compassionate partners were also more satisfied with their relationships. Overall levels of self-compassion between partners was significantly correlated with both partners' ratings of relational well-being and satisfaction. The authors suggest that self-compassion acts in a way that promotes healthy relationships functioning, such as accepting responsibility for negative events, as demonstrated by Leary and colleagues (2007).

Potential explanations for the link between self-compassion and romantic relationships can be derived from the small number of quantitative studies that touch upon this topic. It is possible that, as Breines and Chen concluded, self-compassionate individuals are motivated to improve personal weaknesses (2012). Thus, one explanation may be that self-compassionate partners are motivated to improve themselves and their relationship. Baker and McNulty (2011) found that across a series of studies, self-compassion in women was related to increased motivation to resolve conflict and fewer declines in relationship satisfaction. In highly conscientious men, self-compassion was correlated with greater motivation to resolve conflict, more reports of accommodation and compromise, and fewer declines in satisfaction.

Another potential explanation may lie in conflict resolution. Yarnell and Neff (2013) asked participants to provide a written example of a conflict they had experienced with their mother, father, best friend, and romantic partner. Participants were asked to select how the conflict was resolved, choosing from choices that were worded to represent either: (a) subordination of their feelings, (b) prioritizing their feelings, or (c) compromise. When analyzing the conflict resolution between romantic partners, Yarnell and Neff (2013) found that self-compassionate partners were most likely to compromise, rather than subordinate or prioritize their own needs. Self-compassion was also positively correlated with feelings of well-being within a relationship. The authors suggest that the emotional stability provided by self-compassion may allow a person to compromise rather than self-prioritize in conflicts with romantic partners, which can often be very intense.

Although the above quantitative studies provide important clues to the relationship between self-compassion and relationship satisfaction, participants' perspectives and important contextual information appears to be missing in the current literature. Without a rich and nuanced understanding of participants' experiences, it is difficult to determine what aspect or aspects of self-compassion are contributing to positive relationships. For example, emotion regulation, mindfulness, self-forgiveness and secure attachment, all factors related to self-compassion, have been associated with relationship benefits.

Emotion regulation. Bloch and colleagues (Bloch, Haase, & Levenson, 2014) hypothesized that the ability to regulate emotions after a negative event would be positively correlated with relationship satisfaction. At three points during a 13 year longitudinal study, couples completed questionnaires and engaged in 15 minute conversations about a neutral, positive, and conflict topic. Several days after each conversation, the participants watched videos

of the discussion and rated how they were feeling during the interaction. Although men and women were equally able to regulate negative emotional experiences and behaviour, a significant positive correlation was found between wives' regulation and current and future marital satisfaction (Bloch et al., 2014).

Mindfulness. In an undergraduate sample, mindfulness was found to be positively correlated with relationship satisfaction (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007). Barnes and colleagues (2007) also explored how mindfulness influenced coping with relationship-related stressors. Fifty-seven couples completed self-report measures and two videotaped conversations. One conversation was about daily events, while the other consisted of topics that were a source of conflict for the couple. Participants with higher levels of trait mindfulness reported less stress in response to the conflict conversation and also had lower levels of anxiety prior to the conversation (Barnes et al., 2007). State mindfulness was associated with higher levels of support, and negatively correlated with conflict and verbal aggression (Barnes et al., 2007).

Self-forgiveness. Self-forgiveness has also been positively associated with relationship satisfaction. Pelucchi and colleagues (Pelucchi, Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2013) had 168 couples each identify two relationship transgressions; one for which each member of the couple was responsible. Participants then completed measures regarding guilt, self-forgiveness, responsibility, and relationship satisfaction. Participants who had higher levels of self-forgiveness showed increased positive feelings toward themselves, which importantly did not decrease acknowledgement of responsibility. Experiencing more positive and less negative thoughts towards oneself was associated with higher relationship satisfaction for the transgressor,

while having a partner with fewer negative thoughts about themselves was correlated with greater relationship satisfaction for the victim (Pelucchi et al., 2013).

Attachment style. Self-compassion is related to attachment style (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007; Neff & McGehee, 2010), which is another variable that influences romantic relationships. Based on early interactions with primary caregivers, individuals form cognitive working models that inform one's beliefs about the dependability and trustworthiness of others to provide support and meet one's needs (Bowlby, 1969). These schemas extend into adulthood, and play a role in shaping beliefs about romantic relationships and partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Anxious/ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles are classified as insecure types, and these romantic relationships are characterized by frequent experiences of negative emotions (Simpson, 1990). Individuals with a secure attachment style are more likely to have a relationship that features trust, positive emotions, and commitment. Importantly, this attachment style is associated with self-compassion.

Neff and McGehee (2010) recruited 235 adolescents and administered a battery of questionnaires assessing psychological functioning and self-compassion. In addition to lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, adolescents high in compassion were more likely to have a secure attachment style and feel more connected to others (Neff & McGehee, 2010).

As can be seen from the above studies, there are many potential avenues by which self-compassion may influence romantic relationships. While a limited number of quantitative studies have proposed explanations for this association, relatively little is known about how this relationship is experienced. Until participants' perceptions and lived experiences are explored, this gap in the literature remains. This study helps to address this gap by providing an in-depth,

nuanced, and contextualized understanding of *how* self-compassion influences romantic relationships.

Clinical use. Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of self-compassion interventions in experimental and clinical settings. Smeets and colleagues (Smeets, Neff, Alberts, & Peters, 2014) ran a 3-week self-compassion intervention with a group of female undergraduate students. The group met for two intervention sessions and one evaluation session. Participants were provided with psychoeducational information regarding self-compassion, self-criticism, and relating to oneself. Compared to the control group, those in the self-compassion intervention showed increased self-compassion and mindfulness, and decreased rumination one week after the third session. Participants also had increased levels of optimism, self-efficacy, and belief in their ability to overcome challenging situations.

More extensive programs for increasing self-compassion have also been established. Neff and Germer (2013) have developed the Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program. MSC can be used in a group setting with clinical and non-clinical populations, and teaches members self-compassion skills through a variety of formal meditations, informal practices, and retreats. Results from a pilot study found that in adult populations, the MSC program significantly decreased feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress, and increased life satisfaction and happiness (Neff & Germer, 2013). Neff and Germer also conducted a randomized controlled trial of MSC comparing experimental and waitlisted conditions as well as pre-test and post-test results. The experimental group showed greater gains in self-compassion and mindfulness than the waitlist group, and also demonstrated increases in compassion for others, social connectedness, life satisfaction, and decreases in feelings of depression, anxiety, stress and

avoidance. All of the effects were associated with increases in self-compassion, with the exception of decreased avoidance, which was correlated with mindfulness.

Based on his conceptualization of self-compassion (see the section entitled Conceptualization, which appears earlier this chapter), Gilbert (2009) has developed an approach called Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT). CFT was created by working with individuals struggling with high levels of shame and self-criticism (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). CFT posits that many difficulties in functioning are due to overactive threat and drive systems, and an underactive contentment system. Accordingly, psychological wellness comes from balancing the three main emotion regulation systems. By using techniques known as Compassionate Mind Training, self-compassion is increased, allowing for the activation of the contentment system and preventing the threat and drive systems from being overstimulated (Gilbert & Proctor, 2006).

Jazaieri and colleagues (Jazaieri et al., 2013) have developed the Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT) Program. The aim of CCT is to increase the three avenues of compassion: compassion for others, receiving compassion from others, and self-compassion. Course components are designed to help participants (a) become aware of suffering, (b) feel moved by suffering, (c) wish to alleviate suffering, and (d) feel motivated to relieve suffering (Jazaieri et al., 2013). A randomized controlled trial found that compared to the waitlisted control conditions, CCT participants showed increased self-compassion and decreased fear of compassion (Jazaieri et al., 2013). Individuals who spent more time practicing formal meditations showed increases in compassion for others.

Summary

Given the alarming rate of divorce and separation in Western society and the associated mental health outcomes, it is important that couples are provided with strategies to add resiliency

to their relationships. Self-compassion has been positively correlated with relationship wellness and satisfaction (Neff & Beretvas, 2013) and it has been suggested that counsellors may want to develop this capacity with clients to help them resolve conflicts in a productive and healthy way (Yarnell & Neff, 2013). However, while approaches such as CFT and MSC have been developed to address problems like shame and self-criticism, there is a shortage of research exploring how self-compassion interventions can be utilized within a relationship. These interventions have also focused primarily on reducing symptomatology, as opposed to promoting self-compassion as a preventative strategy. Additionally, the handful of studies addressing self-compassion and romantic relationships have examined relationship outcomes, rather than participant experiences.

The present study helps to address these gaps by exploring the impact of Neff's (2013) self-compassion audio program on participants' experiences of their romantic relationships. The aim was to develop an in-depth and contextualized understanding of this phenomenon by examining how self-compassion influenced relationship conflict and satisfaction, as well as perceptions of one's partner and oneself as a partner.

Method

The goal of this chapter is to outline my philosophical and theoretical approach to research and describe the multiple case study design used in this study. I also review my position as the investigator, and outline data collection and analysis procedures, steps taken to ensure the quality of this research, and ethical considerations. Guba and Lincoln (1994) state that it is not possible to describe a methodological outline without first understanding what can be known. For this reason, I will begin by acknowledging my views of the nature of reality, which is necessary for understanding the nature of knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Paradigm and Philosophical Assumptions

Guba and Lincoln (1994) define paradigm as "the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways" (p. 105). Ontology is the nature of reality. Paradigms influence ontological positions, which exist along a continuum reflecting the degree to which reality is believed to be an objective "truth" or a subjective interpretation of the human experience (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A related concept is epistemology, which is the nature of knowledge. Like ontology, paradigms influence epistemological positions by specifying what can be considered legitimate and valid knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These positions also range based on the belief of what knowledge represents: objective facts that can be discovered or interpretative information that is created (Braun & Clark, 2013).

I adhere to a constructivist paradigm, which is a newer paradigm compared to positivism and post-positivism, and which shifts from the latter's worldview of realism to one of relativism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Consequently, proponents of constructivism believe that there is no objective "truth" in the world, and embrace a relativist ontological position (Guba & Lincoln,

1994). Truth and reality are not discovered by the human mind, but are created by it instead (Schwandt, 1994). This means that there are multiple realities, each belonging to individuals and groups based on social knowledge as well as life experiences (Merriam, 2009). None of the constructions are more or less "true" than any other, but some may be less informed or complex (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Following the ontological belief that reality is relative, knowledge becomes subjective to interpretation (Schwandt, 1994). Humans make meaning of their experienced world, and this meaning can change and adapt as new events are experienced (Schwandt, 1994). Because of this, a constructivist paradigm removes the distinction between ontology and epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In constructivist research, the researcher becomes directly linked to the object or event of study, and the "findings" are created through interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

According to Guba & Lincoln (1994), the constructivist paradigm consists of two key concepts, in that it is hermeneutical and dialectical in nature. Hermeneutics is an approach to interpretation that emphasizes the importance of understanding an author's intention and meaning (Merriam, 2009). The dialectical aspect means that constructions are developed and refined through discussions between the investigator and the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Only through this dialogue can a construction be formed that is more complete and sophisticated than any previous understandings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Qualitative Case Study Methodology

Merriam (2009) believes that qualitative research, which focuses on in-depth and nuanced understandings of constructed meanings, has the potential to influence the lives of others in a powerful and meaningful way. As opposed to a quantitative reliance on numbers to explain broad and general patterns, qualitative research analyzes words to create highly

contextualized and nuanced understandings of participants' meanings and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). One such approach that can be used to yield in-depth, rich data is to focus on a single or small number of participants, known as case study.

Stake (1995) defines case study as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi). A case may consist of a single subject, or multiple subjects experiencing the same phenomenon, which is known as a bounded system (Merriam, 1998). This design is appropriate for research that is asking "how" questions, and recognizes that the outcome of research is a socially constructed reality and not an objective "truth" (Boblin et al., 2013). The aim of this methodology is to explore the uniqueness of a specific case. Through knowing a particular case in great detail, we are able to gain a nuanced understanding of a particular phenomenon (Stake, 1995). As a result, generalization is not the goal. Stake's (1995) constructivist approach, which emphasizes the importance of interpretation and relativism, matched my established theoretical and philosophical assumptions, and allowed for an in-depth exploration of self-compassion's influence within romantic relationships.

Case studies can be divided into two types. Intrinsic case studies present themselves for study; a unique feature of the case makes it important (Stake, 1995). The primary goal is the understanding of the specific case itself. In contrast, instrumental case studies are used when greater understanding of a phenomenon can be achieved through the exploration of a particular case (Stake, 1995). The current study falls into the latter category. By understanding the experiences of the participants in this study, I was able to address my research questions and better understand how self-compassion influences romantic relationships. Rather than understanding the case itself, we are trying to learn about something else (Stake, 1995).

The dimension of time was also incorporated into the study design. Thomson and Holland (2003) note that by using a longitudinal qualitative approach, researchers can better understand the "subject in process", and how the participants develop and change over the course of the study. Extending the length of the relationship through repeated interviews and data collection may also increase insight regarding the intervention for both the researcher and participants (Thomson & Holland, 2003).

Position as the Researcher

Coming from a constructivist perspective, I acknowledge that I play an active role in the construction of the findings. Not only is my role active given my constructivist beliefs, but bracketing, the setting aside of one's own feelings about a topic, is difficult because interpretation inevitably incorporates the researcher's assumptions (Creswell, 2013). Nevertheless, to understand my contribution and the role that I play in this interpretive co-construction, it is important that I am aware and honest about my own beliefs and biases.

This research evolved from my previous interest in positive psychology and romantic relationships. One of my professional goals is to specialize in couples therapy and help to enhance and maintain relationship satisfaction. I became acquainted with self-compassion during my undergraduate degree, and have developed a personal self-compassion practice in addition to using this approach with my clients. Seeing the benefits of self-compassion both personally and professionally, I was aware of my bias that this strategy would be beneficial for participants. From my literature review I was also aware of factors related to relationship satisfaction that would likely appear through learning self-compassion, such as self-forgiveness. In order to stay aware of my own role and contribution to the findings, I kept a research journal and recorded my thoughts and hypotheses during data collection and analysis.

Participants

Recruitment and inclusion criteria. Participants were recruited through advertisements posted on the University of Alberta campus and in the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research's weekly emails (Appendix A). Additional advertisements were posted on Kijiji, community bulletin boards (e.g., YMCA, community centres), and at the Department of Educational Psychology Clinical Services at the University of Alberta. The advertisements were written at a maximum grade 9 reading level. Given the length of the study, attrition was expected; therefore, five participants were initially recruited. Four participants dropped out before completing the study, completing between one and five of the six lessons. A second round of recruitment produced seven additional participants, two of whom completed the study. The remaining five participants each completed two or fewer lessons. Data collected from participants who withdrew from the study were not included in the analysis.

All participants were required to be in a romantic relationship and at least 18 years of age. In order to increase the likelihood that participants were regularly spending time with their romantic partner, only individuals cohabiting with their partner were recruited. In order to effectively reflect on the influence of introducing self-compassion as a relationship enhancement strategy, it was important that participants were not already familiar with self-compassion. Accordingly, individuals with a formal self-compassion or mindfulness meditation practice were ineligible.

Given that this study's purpose was to explore self-compassion as a maintenance and prevention strategy and not as a clinical tool, it was important that individuals with clinical levels of relationship distress or those currently in couples counselling did not participate. Since this study was not meant to replace couples counselling it was also important for ethical reasons that

individuals were not delaying seeking professional treatment. Interested individuals were given a screening questionnaire for couples distress, the DAS-7 (Hunsley, Best, Lefebvre, & Vito, 2001) (Appendix B). The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) is the most commonly used assessment tool for relationship satisfaction, with the shortened seven item form displaying equivalent psychometric soundness (Hunsley, Best, Lefebvre & Vito, 2001; Hunsley, Pinsent, Lefebvre, James-Tanner, & Vito, 1995; Sharpley & Rogers, 1984). Based on Hunsley and colleagues' (2001) findings that distressed couples had a mean score of 15.7 (out of a possible 36), participants with a score under 16 were to be excluded from the study and provided with a list of counselling referrals. No one who completed the DAS-7 had a score under 16.

Demographics. All three participants were female, ranging from 26 to 47 years of age. The average relationship length was seven years and four months. Two participants were students, and one worked full time. Participant relationship statuses consisted of dating, common-law, and married. Culturally, participants were Caucasian and identified as Canadian or European-Canadian.

Data Collection

Materials. Participants were given a copy of Neff's (2013) audio guide, *Self-Compassion Step By Step: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*. Each of the six lessons is approximately one hour in length, focuses on a particular aspect of self-compassion, and provides psycho-educational information as well as guided exercises and meditations. This audio guide covers much of the material that is part of the Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) training program. The main topics of each the lessons are as follows: an introduction to self-compassion, self-kindness, mindfulness, interconnectedness, dealing with difficult emotions, and using self-

compassion to embrace life. For further program details, I have written a short summary of each lesson's content (Appendix C).

In addition to the audio training, participants were given optional supplemental worksheet exercises selected from Neff's (2011) book, *Self-compassion: Stop beating yourself and leave insecurity behind*, which were paired with the appropriate sessions. For example, in an optional exercise for the second lesson, which focused on self-kindness, participants were invited to reflect on how kindness may be a better motivational tool than self-criticism. For the fifth lesson, which focused on coping with strong emotions, participants were asked to identify their emotional "buttons." As the majority of the exercises in the audio guide are meditations, these worksheets provided an additional avenue for deepening self-compassion. Worksheets that were above a grade nine reading level were adapted with permission from the author.

Procedure. Interested participants were emailed copies of the information form (Appendix D), DAS-7, as well as consent forms for both the study and DAS-7 (Appendixes E & F). Individuals were asked to read over the screening questionnaire consent form and send me their DAS-7 responses if they were interested in participating.

Individuals who met all requirements were invited to an initial meeting at the Department of Educational Psychology Clinical Services. During this initial interview the scope and limitations of the study were discussed, and the consent form was reviewed and signed. Participants completed a demographics form (Appendix G), were provided with the study materials, and were instructed on how to proceed with the study.

The date of the initial meeting with each participant was designated Day 1. At this point, the participants listened to the audio lesson and completed the optional exercises if they chose. Participants were encouraged to incorporate what they had learned to their lives throughout the

week, and to make the practice fit their lifestyle. On Day 5, participants were emailed a link to answer several short questions through Google Forms. Questions were based on each lesson, and were written below a grade 9 reading level (Appendix H). Responses were recorded in a password-protected Google Spreadsheet. Participants were told that they could submit responses via pen and paper if they preferred, and were instructed to write as much or as little as they would like. After responses were submitted and reviewed I sent each participant an email with instructions to proceed to the following lesson, and that day became the new Day 1. This continued until each of the six lessons was completed. While the original intention was to complete one lesson a week, participants frequently took more time to process the information and respond to the questions, typically completing each lesson in two to three weeks. The average length of time to complete the study was 20 weeks. Participants were asked to contact me if they had any questions or concerns.

After the participant completed the third lesson, a semi-structured interview was scheduled at the University of Alberta. Using a semi-structured approach allowed the exploration of unique experiences of each participant to be shared (Stake, 1995). Questions from the interview protocol (Appendix I) were relatively open-ended (e.g., "What positive or negative impacts, if any, have you noticed so far?"), and the interview was conversational in nature. Additional questions were asked depending on how the interview unfolded. The goal of this interview was to gather first impressions of the study, including feasibility and any personal changes or concerns. Once the final session was completed, a second interview was scheduled. In keeping with the post-test data collection timelines used by Neff and Germer (2013) during their MSC program pilot study, the second interview took place two weeks after the intervention was complete. Questions from this protocol (Appendix J) were also open-ended (e.g., "What has

this program meant for you?"), and explored participants' experiences of completing the study and what it meant for their romantic relationships. Both interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Potentially identifying information was changed or removed.

In order to ensure that interview questions were easy to understand and produced data relevant to the research questions, a short version of the study was piloted on a graduate of the University of Alberta's Counselling Psychology program. During this pilot study, the participant only had to complete the two interviews; he did not answer the online lesson questions and was able to complete the lessons at his own pace. Based on feedback from these interviews, several of the questions were reworded to include less jargon and technical language.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for thematic analysis, and Merriam's (1998) guide to case study analysis. As per Merriam's description of qualitative analysis, data collection and analysis were conducted at the same time. This allows for tentative themes and ideas to form, which can inform future interviews with other participants (Merriam, 1998). Simultaneous collection and analysis also allows for each set of data to be given careful thought and consideration, and reduces the risks of unfocused and repetitive analysis (Merriam, 1998). As each participant completed the study, thematic analysis was used to conduct within-case analysis, wherein each case is "treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself" (Merriam, 1998, p. 194).

Thematic analysis is a flexible research tool and is compatible with a constructivist approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In keeping with the process described by Braun and Clarke, my first step was to familiarize myself with the data. Both interviews and all responses to the six lesson questions were read multiple times to ensure full immersion in the data. Initial thoughts,

hunches, and questions were recorded in a research journal. My second step was to generate initial codes. This involved identifying segments of the data that contained a relevant feature or element. My research question and sub-questions were used as lenses to help focus the coding process. Once I completed initial coding of the data, the third step involved exploring the connections and relationships between codes. Corresponding codes were grouped together to create potential overarching themes.

Once these themes were developed, I began the process of revision. This included comparing the theme to the codes and meaning units it was related to, as well as to the entire data set. This allowed me to reword, split apart or remove themes as needed, and code any data that was initially missed. Once the themes were coherent and finalized, I reflected on each theme to ensure that its name accurately reflected the data. For the final step I reported each of the themes in relation to my central research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After thematic analysis was complete, each participant's data was carefully reviewed chronologically. This allowed me to observe shifts and developments in relationship perceptions and experiences over time (Thomson & Holland, 2003).

Stake (2006) notes that each multi-case study must navigate a dialectic between the individual cases and the phenomenon of interest, and that qualitative studies will prioritize the experiences of the participants. Within the scope of this study, the primary focus was an idiographic exploration of each case. Given the small number of participants, a between-case analysis may have reduced the richness of each case, and produced reductionist findings with limited use to readers. This is a risk when comparing cases in qualitative research, as the process inherently means that some of the original details are "stripped away" (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003). By conducting an in-depth analysis of each case, the contextualized and nuanced

experiences of each participant was maintained. This is an approach that has been utilized by other multi-case researchers interested in a rich understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences (e.g. Boyd, Tuckey, & Winefield, 2014). As suggested by Stake (2006), my research questions were used as a framework for conceptualizing the findings and are presented in the discussion chapter.

Establishment of Quality

A set of criteria is identified by Guba and Lincoln (1994) for evaluating constructivist qualitative studies: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. Credibility parallels internal validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and establishes how well the findings reflect "reality" (Merriam, 1998) as experienced by each of the participants. To address this criteria, all participants were invited to review their transcripts and lesson responses and inform me if certain portions did not properly convey their meaning. When receiving the responses to the lesson questions, I emailed participants asking for clarification if I was not sure what they meant.

Transferability is similar to external validity, which determines the extent to which the findings are applicable to other situations (Merriam, 1998). While generalizability is not the goal in case study research, one option for addressing transferability is to present the information to readers and allow them to decide how to make use of the findings (Merriam, 1998). Another way of assessing transferability is naturalistic generalization, in which "certain descriptions and assertions are assimilated by readers into memory" (Stake, 1994, p. 240) because they fit with their actual experiences and beliefs. Naturalistic generalization can be enhanced by including rich, thick descriptions, which allows readers to determine how closely the data matches their

experiences (Merriam, 1998). The findings from this study fulfill this requirement and use quotations to fully explain the meaning of each theme.

Dependability is similar to reliability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The idea of reliability does not fit with most qualitative research studies, since the aim is not to be able to isolate and replicate human experiences. In a qualitative sense, dependability aims to determine if the results make sense, and if they accurately reflect data gathered from participants are (Merriam, 1998). One way of establishing dependability is for researchers to explicitly state their position and biases (Merriam, 1998). In keeping with Merriam's suggestion, I reflected on my position and biases as the researcher and described them in this thesis (please see section Position as the Researcher). Additionally, a detailed account of the data collection and analysis procedure is included in this thesis. Throughout the study I kept memos to record decisions and insights, which allowed me to reflect on the data, results, and analysis process.

Confirmability is similar to objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and involves establishing that the findings truly emerge from the data. By engaging in thematic analysis and analyzing the data during collection, I was able to constantly compare my findings and reflections with the data. The emerging codes and themes were also peer reviewed by my supervisor. This ensured that while I had an active role in interpreting the findings, they remained grounded in the data and made sense.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are essential to a well-done study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This study was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. Participants were provided with contact information for myself and my supervisor, as well as the Research Ethics

Office, in order to ensure that any questions or concerns were addressed. Participants were informed of the planned use and dissemination of the collected data.

It was possible that after taking part in an interview, participants might have regretted a self-disclosure or some of the information they provided. For this reason, member checking was used in this study to ensure that participants were comfortable with the data that was to be analyzed. Within three weeks of completing each interview, the participant was emailed a typed copy of the interview to review. A copy of the participant's online responses was also included with the transcript of the second interview. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw their data up to four weeks after receiving the online responses and second interview transcript.

Participant safety was also a priority. Participants were instructed to listen to sessions in a quiet space, not while they were driving or operating heavy machinery. While the study was not expected to pose any risk to participants, sometimes "backdraft" can occur when an individual initially begins self-compassion training (Germer, 2009). The experience of suddenly offering oneself kindness in place of criticism can be overwhelming and difficult to handle. Backdraft is discussed in the audio guide, and participants were instructed to only practice as much as they could handle, and take breaks if necessary. Participants were instructed to contact me if they were experiencing difficulties so that a list of counselling referrals could be provided.

I also informed participants that while those currently in couples counselling were ineligible from the study, they were able to begin couples counselling during the study if they chose to do so. This could be for reasons unrelated to the study or because of an issue that emerged for them through practicing self-compassion.

Participants received cash reimbursement for parking or busing costs at the rate of $15 per visit for up to three visits for a total value of $45.00. All participants were permitted to keep their copy of the *Self-Compassion Step By Step* (Neff, 2013) guide and were given Neff's (2011) book, *Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind*. These incentives were deemed to be appropriate given the length and time required to participate, without constituting an excessive inducement to participate.

Throughout the study, participant confidentiality and anonymity were a priority. Interviews were audio-recorded and transferred to an encrypted and password protected USB drive, which was stored in a locked filing cabinet in the supervisor's lab. Transcripts were also kept in a locked cabinet in the supervisor's lab, separate from identifying information such as the consent forms. Data collected through Google Forms was password protected, and responses were submitted using email addresses that I created for the study. This ensured that participants' responses were not connected with their personal email accounts. Participants were also assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity, and potentially identifying information was changed or removed. In addition, participants were informed that all information would be stored for at least five years, in keeping with University of Alberta ethics policies.

Findings

In this chapter I present the themes constructed from the data of each participant. To protect anonymity, names and other identifying information have been changed. In order to accurately convey the longitudinal element of this study, each theme is presented in a narrative manner.

Jennifer

My first participant was Jennifer, a 26 year-old Caucasian student who identified as European-Canadian. Jennifer had been in a relationship with her common-law partner for six years at the onset of the study. Within the context of this study, Jennifer frequently discussed conflict between herself and her partner. She also described how her previous actions and insecurities had resulted in damage to the relationship. This was a source of shame for Jennifer, and she described herself as resisting the pain around these feelings. Through learning about self-compassion, Jennifer began accepting these negative emotions and forgave herself for past relationship transgressions. By accepting her whole emotional experience, she also developed greater insight into her own needs and how she could act as a source of support for herself. Jennifer also discussed how further self-compassion within the relationship would be beneficial. These developments are encompassed within the four themes that were constructed from Jennifer's data: (a) self-acceptance, (b) emotional independence, (c) potential for further growth, and (d) increased self-awareness and reflection during conflict.

Self-acceptance. During the course of the study, Jennifer's resistance toward distressing feelings such as guilt decreased significantly, and she became able to sit with these formerly avoided emotions. In addition to accepting her emotional experience, Jennifer also forgave herself for behaviours within her relationship. Prior to the study, Jennifer frequently engaged in

extensive self-criticism for "snapping" at her partner, but as early as the first lesson she was able to offer herself forgiveness:

> I snapped at my partner for a stupid reason. However, I was able to not
> feel guilty and appreciate the context which triggered me to get quick-
> tempered.

The emergence of this theme continued to increase over the next two lessons and first interview, with Jennifer continuing to appreciate the context in which she unintentionally had damaged the relationship. Rather than condemning herself, self-compassion allowed her to accept the past with empathy and understanding, and move forward in her relationship:

> I believe that [self-kindness] has made me accept that I have done things
> that contributed to damage in our relationship in the past. Now I can
> better accept that I've done those damaging things, appreciate the
> circumstances, and move forward.

Similarly, during the first interview she remarked:

> Given the context, I can empathize with myself and be understanding and
> be like, "Okay this is why I reacted in this certain way," based on the
> circumstances at the time and what I knew. It wasn't perfect but I need to
> not be so hard on myself.

By the third lesson, a noticeable shift had occurred. As Jennifer continued to accept her actions and past transgressions, through learning about mindfulness she developed insight into how resisting her feelings of pain and guilt influenced her relationship. It was during moments of resistance that Jennifer realized she would "close off" and "say something mean" to her partner. Jennifer was particularly struck by an equation that Neff (2013) used to illustrate the

added difficulty that can come from attempting to avoid distressing situations: suffering = pain x resistance.

> It really makes life harder when you try to resist whatever pain or feeling
>
> or whatever, and knowing just to be more accepting of it and embracing,
>
> even if you're feeling like crap for whatever reason, just *embracing that*
>
> is therapeutic, just to meet myself in the emotion and feel like, "You
>
> know what, this is what it is, I'm just going to be here with myself
>
> feeling this way."

After this point, Jennifer was able to see that it is "okay to have these powerful emotions" when experiencing a moment of frustration or anger. She recognized that it is not only beneficial to accept negative emotions, but that they have purpose and value, remarking after the final lesson:

> Negative emotions have a purpose!! I should not beat myself about this
>
> because their purpose is to *focus* your attention. So, let's blame evolution
>
> - not *me*.

Jennifer reported that this attitude helped her to appreciate herself more. Rather than berate herself for having strong feelings, she was able to normalize this as part of the common human experience. She believed that by enhancing feelings of acceptance and gentleness toward herself, they would flow into her relationship as well, allowing her to deepen her love for her partner.

Emotional independence. As the study progressed, Jennifer became able to provide herself with the emotional nourishment that she normally sought exclusively from her partner. This theme was most salient toward the end of the study. During the second interview, Jennifer

described how she was now cared for her own needs, and gave herself affection, validation, and

support:

> It's just kind of really cool and I've never just thought about it, that
>
> instead of having somebody else say, "Oh, you know it's okay," or, "Oh I
>
> understand why you feel this way," you could do that for yourself. I don't
>
> know why I didn't figure that out before but it's really helpful.

When asked about her final impressions of the study, Jennifer commented that it had

been helpful during times of "emotional turmoil" and stress. By treating herself with self-

kindness, empathy, and understanding, Jennifer now provided herself with the support that her

partner was sometimes unable to give. By ensuring that her needs were met, she could stay calm,

which prevented conflict from escalating:

> I think [the study]'s helped me be, emotionally, maybe available to
>
> myself. If we were having a heated discussion or something I was
>
> expecting him to validate my feelings or something like that and he
>
> couldn't just because he's stressed himself. I think it really helps us as a
>
> couple because I can sort of be that support for myself, and then it
>
> prevents things escalating out of control. So it's been really, really
>
> positive that way.

Jennifer explained that mindfulness and being able to take a step back helped to facilitate this

emotional independence:

> If we're disagreeing about something and then he says something to
>
> trigger me…I can kinda be like, "Woah, that's upsetting," whereas before
>
> I would just react to it, and now I can be like, "Wow, that's really

upsetting," like I say it to myself, you know? I try to just be with myself,

like, "That makes me angry," and "Of course it makes me angry,"…I

find it comforting to do that.

Jennifer explained that it was still nice to "cuddle with your partner" and receive affection in that way, but to "give that to yourself, you know, is just, I think, really, really, nice." Jennifer also felt that by not relying solely on her partner to fulfill her emotional needs, she was able to be a better partner:

I feel in a way like I can emotionally take care of myself better than

before, I was a little more dependent on him to do that. Which is sad but

true. I feel like because [of] that independence like I'm a better partner,

in the long run.

Potential for further growth. Jennifer expressed a strong desire to continue learning about self-compassion and incorporating it into her relationship. This theme predominantly appeared early on in the study, as Jennifer identified early benefits and hypothesized how it could further enhance her relationship. She hoped that her partner would take the time to learn about self-compassion as well, as she felt they could both treat themselves with a bit more "love and respect." After learning about self-kindness in the second lesson, she commented:

I think if I learn to love myself more, and thereby be happier, [then] I can

love my partner more.

This theme reappeared toward the end of the study, as Jennifer reflected on the influence that self-compassion had had thus far, and the benefit that it could possibly have in the future. She remarked after the final session:

I think being very intentional about giving myself self-compassion will

be helpful. I think that by acknowledging what I like about myself I will

be a happier person. In turn, I think this will have a positive effect on my

relationship.

Seeing the benefits within her relationship also reaffirmed Jennifer's belief that self-compassion

would be important for her partner as well:

I'm trying to convince him to listen to them because I think it will help us

even more…I think just having one of us being more emotionally

insightful is helpful, and I think having two of us would be even better.

Increased self-awareness and reflection during conflict. During the study, Jennifer

learned that self-reflection helped during arguments and conflict with her partner as a way of

preventing escalation. This theme first appeared after Jennifer completed the third lesson, which

covered mindfulness. In response to a question asking if she had experienced mindfulness during

the past week, Jennifer wrote:

I believe I experienced mindfulness in the fights and argument[s] that I

have with my partner. When we argue, I try and think about how my

emotions are affecting me in the present moment.

Jennifer elaborated on this point during our first interview, explaining that mindfulness helped to

prevent her from escalating conflict with her partner:

Whenever we're having an argument I think I'm more insightful *at the*

time that we're having the argument, rather than in hindsight. So I think

while we're arguing that I'm less reactive and more, just, realizing what

I'm feeling in that moment and less likely to do something or say

something I would regret.

This awareness also aided in conflict resolution. After completing the fifth lesson, which focuses on strong emotions such as anger, she wrote:

In one argument, I identified the emotion (anger) in the moment and told

my partner, "Sorry I'm not in a good space to talk right now," and we

were able to resolve the dispute. Historically, I would have continued on

in a hostile conversation and things would escalate and get out of control.

Jennifer continued to reflect on this newfound awareness of her emotions, commenting during the second interview that this mindfulness provided her with a sense of control over her responses. Bringing awareness to her thoughts and feelings also allowed Jennifer to treat herself with compassion:

Whereas before…things used to just kind of unfold…I just feel like I

have more awareness in the moment of, "Oh this is what I'm doing," or,

"This is what I'm doing, oh I shouldn't be so hard on myself," or "I need

to just take a minute to be with myself and the emotion," or something

like that.

Having control increased Jennifer's confidence and belief in herself to navigate interactions with her partner, stating at the end of the second interview: "I feel like I can use like my whole brain now."

Lauren

The second participant in this study was Lauren, a 47 year-old Canadian student who had been with her husband for 15 years at the onset of the study. Lauren described her relationship as

being fairly stable, and reported that she was always "very satisfied" with her marriage. She believed that it was important to work on relationships, and frequently took advantage of opportunities to enhance her marriage. As Lauren learned about self-compassion, she began to increase her present moment focus, drawing her attention to new aspects of her partner and her relationship. Lauren also became more aware of her own internal processes, which allowed her to recognize when she was putting pressure on the relationship or when she needed to take a step back and consider her partner's perspective. These developments are represented by four themes: (a) deepening emotional connection, (b) freeing the relationship from pressure, (c) recognizing alternative perspectives, and (d) seeing partner through fresh eyes.

Deepening emotional connection. Over the course of the study, Lauren described a deeper level of connection that developed between her husband and herself. After the lessons on self-kindness and mindfulness, Lauren noted that she was being kinder and more patient, remarking during the first interview that she had a "better grasp on some empathy." Shortly afterwards, Lauren noticed that her partner was opening up more frequently and sharing more of his thoughts and feelings. She reported that they were now able to connect more, noting after the fifth lesson:

> I am finding that my [husband] and I are talking more. He is sharing his
>
> challenges at work, he's talking about what he's reading or learning or
>
> doing. We did talk before, of course, but this seems far more granular.

Elaborating on the meaning of "granular," Lauren explained that while she and her partner had always spoken openly, their conversations had reached a new level of depth. The thoughts and feelings being shared were now more detailed.

In the final interview, Lauren reflected that prior to learning about self-compassion, she did not always use her husband as a source of emotional support. She explained that she often turned to her friends when she had a problem or complaint, and felt that it was not necessary for her partner to hear about each small vexation in her life. However, the increased connection with her husband facilitated a shift in this belief, and Lauren was able to turn towards her partner and share more of her inner experience:

> I can bring to him and say, "The world impacts me in this way, and what
>
> do you think about it?" Because then he can say, "The world is impacting
>
> *me* in this way, what do you think of it?" And then we can, regardless of
>
> who is out there in the world, the two of us can be that bridge of support
>
> for each other, and that works really well.

In this way, Lauren and her partner provided each other with enhanced mutual support, deepening their already strong connection.

Freeing the relationship from pressure. Lauren realized that there were times when she unknowingly created pressure on her relationship. This theme was first introduced after the third lesson, which focuses on mindfulness. Lauren commented that mindfulness would help her "recognize when I am putting demands on my relationship that are not necessary." She elaborated on this idea during our first interview, using the example of a recent home renovation project. She explained that she would become very frustrated with her partner when there were delays and the project was not progressing the way she thought it should be:

> There's some frustration around that and so these exercises have been
>
> useful to try to think, "Yeah, well, it's not going the way I wanted, but is
>
> it really the end of the world? No."

Lauren was able to put these issues into perspective, which reduced the frustration she brought into her relationship.

By the end of the study, Lauren recognized that she had previously allowed the comments of others to bring pressure into her relationship. During the second interview she described how, rather than internalizing other people's comments about her renovation project, she could now hear the comments, offer herself compassion, and let the remarks go:

> It was interesting in that moment to reflect on how self-compassion gave me the ability to absorb their comments….They're annoying and trivial and whatever, but they didn't irk me as much as they might have in the past. And I didn't transfer that urgency that they were imparting to me onto our project, it was like, "Yup, that's the way you would do it, for sure, it's not the way we're doing it."

Lauren realized that she "doesn't need to push it" trying to live up to the expectations of others. Instead, she focused on completing the project according to the plan that she and her husband had agreed on:

> It was really useful to have reminders on a weekly basis that it was a stressful time for both of us and that it doesn't matter so much the *external* influences of what people expect…it's really about negotiating how *you're* doing it.

Recognizing alternative perspectives. Over the course of the study, Lauren began to consciously take the perspective of her partner and others. She recognized that alternative thought processes, although different than her own, could still be valid. This theme first appeared during the first interview. Lauren explained that taking her partner's perspective helped her to

not "rag" on him when they had different ideas about how to complete a task. Rather than instantly disagree with his opinion, self-compassion acted as a reminder for Lauren to pause and reflect before reacting:

> "I think this way but you think that way and they're both equally valid so
>
> we can do it your way, sure." That's what I'm finding more, that there is
>
> that reminder to do more reflectivity in my general processing.

By taking the time to reflect on the differences in how Lauren and her partner made decisions, she recognized that there are multiple pathways to reach an "equally valid" result.

During the second interview, Lauren had developed further insight into perspective taking, and how this increased reflectivity lowers defensiveness. She explained that it was helpful during conflict, as it "opened the opportunity to hear" what her partner was saying, so she could focus on what he was trying to express without feeling blamed:

> I'm able to put everything to one side and focus on what he's saying
>
> without feeling defensive.

Being able to listen to her partner's concerns helped Lauren convey to her husband that she was listening and understood what he was trying to say. Rather than letting conflict come between them, she was now able to express to her partner that they are on the "same team."

Seeing partner through fresh eyes. During our final interview, Lauren explained that she was making new discoveries about her partner. She had become increasingly aware of how he interacted with his environment and those around him. As Lauren continued to mindfully attune to her husband, she gained a more nuanced understanding of his approach to the world:

> So I know that he's getting ready to do stuff when he cleans the kitty
>
> litter or has tasks that he habitually does in preparation of doing other

things, and that has been useful for me to recognize; that it's not a

delaying tactic, it's more of a *processing* tactic.

Lauren recognized that she had made assumptions about some of these behaviours in the past and found that these new insights were very helpful. As a result she was now "more conscious" of asking him to share what he was thinking about and how he was approaching a particular problem, rather than assuming that she knew the answer.

This has helped to recognize that he's proactively getting to all these

things in a way that makes sense for him, and if it doesn't make sense for

you, you should ask, and he will explain it, and then you can move on

from there.

In addition to examining behaviours, Lauren also took a closer look at the type of relationship that her husband had with himself. She noted that at times he could be quite self-critical, and that "he could use some help with self-compassion." Lauren felt that this experience had been helpful for herself and her relationship, and hoped that if her husband also learned about self-compassion it would "give us the opportunity to take our relationship to the next level."

Melissa

Melissa, a 32 year-old Caucasian woman who identified as European-Canadian, was my final participant. At the onset of the study, she and her boyfriend had been dating for 8 months. Initially, Melissa reported some "resistance" toward completing the study. She realized that as a "giver" it was difficult to make time for herself outside of her relationship and to prioritize self-development activities that she believed would only indirectly improve her relationship. However, as the study progressed, Melissa recognized that self-compassion was "feeding

something I knew I was hungry for." Self-compassion reflected a way of being in the world that she had wanted to achieve, but never knew "how to start the journey." As her self-compassion increased, Melissa became able to let go of expectations of perfection within her relationship and show herself kindness in moments of distress. Self-compassion was seen as a choice that could be mindfully used when interacting with her partner. These developments are encompassed within the four themes: (a) accepting imperfection within the relationship, (b) attunement to partner's needs, (c) developing intentionality when interacting with partner, and (d) interpersonal calmness.

Accepting imperfection within the relationship. Throughout the course of the study, Melissa began to let go of expectations of perfection and accept that there would always be annoyances and frustrations in her environment that cannot be changed. By allowing such expectations to fade away, Melissa experienced less pressure within the relationship and found it easier to cope with stressful circumstances. This theme first appeared after the second lesson, which focuses on self-kindness. Melissa realized that focusing on negative situations "makes the here-and-now harder to deal with." In the first interview she elaborated on this point and explained that by keeping the messages of "patience and softness" in her mind, she could accept that events will not always play out in the manner in which she had envisioned:

> I kind of like that as the reminder of, in the moment, whatever the item is
> in the relationship that's coming up, that we aren't always going to get
> our way and I can't always be that cranky baby who's like, "This is so
> unpleasant! Let me tell you how unpleasant this is for me," and that
> sometimes I can just relax into it not working out *exactly* how I'd
> pictured it, and then by doing that it automatically feels better.

After the fifth lesson, which focuses on how self-compassion can help people cope with strong emotions such as anger, Melissa explained how accepting imperfection had not only increased her resiliency, but had also helped to reduce frustration with her partner:

> If I'm feeling frustrated that my partner isn't doing exactly what I want, when I want it, in the exact right way I try to recognize that he is his own person, he isn't a mind reader, and that it's unfair to put undue pressure on him for small tasks or chores. By releasing my expectations on him or a situation I feel lighter, more adaptable to whatever may happen as a result.

Letting go of expectations of perfection also reminded Melissa that many stressful events are temporary, and there is no use in "grasping" these situations in an effort to control them. Additionally, attempting to change frustrating situations often involved transferring negative energy to her partner, which was seen as "incredibly unfair" given that the event was often "not important in the least." By focusing on the more permanent aspects of her life and prioritizing her relationship with her partner, Melissa was able to put small frustrations and disagreements into perspective:

> The amount of negative energy that it would create by grasping onto whatever the heck it is, is so disproportionate to the importance of the thing that I'm grasping to. And that kind of helps put it back into perspective.

Attending to partner. Melissa reported that there have times in her relationship when she was too immersed in her own feelings to adequately support her partner when he needed help. Over the course of the study, she was able to notice these moments and redirect her focus to

support and attend to her partner. This theme first emerged after the third lesson, which focuses on mindfulness. Melissa immediately recognized that even during pleasant interactions with her partner there had been moments when her attention had begun to waver:

> One instance was with my partner. Despite enjoying a conversation I
>
> found my mind wandering. I was able to ground myself in the moment
>
> and stay present.

Melissa reported that being able to attend to her partner was helpful when he experienced moments of distress. Rather than become upset herself or impose her own thoughts and ideas onto her partner, she could take a step back and simply be there for him. Melissa stated that by refocusing her energy in those moments she was able to "have compassion for my partner's feelings instead of allowing my wants to railroad his needs." Discussing the growing impact of self-compassion, she noted:

> It is also helping me be a better partner by taking his needs into
>
> consideration. I have felt almost an out-of-body experience where my
>
> usual emotions and reactions are removed from a potentially volatile
>
> situation and instead I'm able to "be there" for him, or for a friend, hear
>
> them, be present and receiving without having my own agenda,
>
> interjections.

This reminder to stay present helped during conflict, particularly in situations where Melissa felt offended. She recognized that some of her partner's frustrations came from external circumstances and past experiences, and were not necessarily a response to her personally. This insight encouraged her to be less "reactive" and "spiteful" when her feelings were hurt

unintentionally. After the final lesson, Melissa provided an example of how this reflectivity and attunement to her partner's needs was helpful when deescalating conflict:

> He had a frustrating family moment which was upsetting him, and he was
>
> being a bit short. I call it being prickly. I was offended and started to be
>
> prickly back to him. I realized that he was hurting and needed me to be
>
> gentle with him instead of defensive and "right" about it.

Developing intentionality when interacting with partner. As the study progressed, Melissa learned that she could actively and intentionally choose to relate to her partner with greater kindness, gentleness, and understanding. During the first interview, Melissa explained that the decision to treat her partner with compassion was something that she could control and was not dependent on external factors:

> Recognizing that it is something that I am capable of actively engaging,
>
> that it's not just like, "I had a really good day today so I'm going to be a
>
> little more compassionate with you than usual," that it's very much like I
>
> can *choose* to open up my heart and be more *aware* of other
>
> circumstances that are in the room with us right now.

Melissa also reflected on times in the past when she made the choice to not respond to her partner in a kind and compassionate way, and the damage that this can do over time:

> In those moments where I was able to choose compassion over
>
> judgement or lashing out or whatever, recognizing that I have chosen the
>
> negative versions before and how that makes me feel, not just how it
>
> makes *him* feel, which is probably really shitty and bad and then
>
> defensive, but also the toxicity of the feelings that happen as a result of

choosing the negative path, is such an important reminder to keeping you

choosing the positive path.

Later in the interview, Melissa noted that by interacting with her partner in a patient and understanding way, a similar response was elicited from him. This allowed both of them to be more open and vulnerable, and created a safe space from which they could discuss sensitive topics:

I feel like as a result of having more compassion and patience and

gentleness around any of those issues it kind of *breeds* the same from

him. I think that it builds trust and that's such a huge thing when we're in

a vulnerable state, that our partner isn't going to engage maybe an

archetype that we carry from our childhood that is excessively painful

and a core part of our being that we protect and are ashamed of, or scared

of hurting further. And so softening around that and recognizing that he

can trust me around that has been a huge thing… I think I have more

patience than I've had in the past and he's recognizing and appreciating it

very much.

This theme continued to build during the latter half of the study, as Melissa described an increased ability to choose compassionate responses when interacting with her partner. She reported that she was able to give her partner more patience, sympathy and gentleness. After the final lesson, Melissa reflected that showing compassion and kindness "breeds trust and mutual respect, knowing that the other person will be kind to you when you're down."

Increased calmness and equanimity. As Melissa approached the end of the study, she noted that she could now calm herself when feeling agitated or triggered by stressful

interpersonal situations. After the final lesson, Melissa reflected on the process she had used to calm herself during an upsetting conversation with her partner:

> I took a quick time out, locked myself in the bathroom and took three
>
> deep breaths, tried to locate the feeling I was having in my body in order
>
> to soften it, and then I told myself it was really icky that I was frustrated,
>
> that it was okay that I felt that way.

Acknowledging her feelings made Melissa feel "understood" and "heard." She stated that "even though it's 'only' by my own self, it still counts and is immensely comforting." During the final interview, Melissa stated that by calming herself down, she provided better support to her partner:

> Just being gentle, patient and kind, I felt like I was able to be there for
>
> him in a much more helpful and meaningful way than if I was just like,
>
> "but it really sucks for you, can't do anything about it." And so feeling
>
> like I was able to be in the situation next to him and give him kindness
>
> and understanding because I was trying to calm the part in myself that
>
> was being triggered by the situation by being compassionate with those
>
> parts that were kind of agitated and angry. And so it felt like a very
>
> direct, calm myself down, be there for my partner cause and effect that
>
> was fantastic.

Feeling soothed and calm was also beneficial when Melissa received constructive feedback from her partner. Melissa reported that her usual response to feedback was to become agitated and "super apologetic" in a way that highlighted her faults and lowered her self-esteem.

However, by remaining calm, she kept her composure and processed her partner's comments with less self-criticism:

> Like, [in] the example of him saying that I could be more patient
>
> outwardly when there's a situation going on, instead of beating myself
>
> up, I feel a little bit more like those edges have been rounded, just a little
>
> bit.

This equanimity to feedback helped Melissa feel "continually more open" to conversations with her partner about what was and was not working within their relationship. Rather than feeling critical about "not being perfect," she was able to see these comments as opportunities for growth within the relationship.

Discussion

Summary

This multiple case study explored the influence of self-compassion on romantic relationships through the perspectives and experiences of three participants. Each participant completed a six-part CD set based on the MSC program (Neff, 2013), submitted online responses, and completed two semi-structured interviews. For each participant I developed a set of themes to capture patterns, context, and nuances in the particular case. By incorporating a longitudinal element into the design, I was also able to explore how these themes progressed over time.

Based on the participants' perspectives, it appeared that self-compassion influenced relationship conflict, the perception of oneself as a partner, the perception of one's partner, and relationship satisfaction. In terms of relationship conflict, participants perceived that they became more self-aware and reflective, leading to greater emotional insight during arguments. Pausing to reflect also allowed them to consider their partner's perspective before responding, which may have prevented escalation during conflict. Additionally, the three women in this study offered themselves kindness and comfort when feeling upset and triggered. This seemed to facilitate a calmness that helped participants talk to their partners in a less turbulent manner. By accepting imperfection in their partners and relationship, participants perceived that they freed their relationships from frustration-producing pressures and expectations. In terms of self-perception, self-compassion appeared to facilitate self-forgiveness for past relationship transgressions. Participants also perceived an increased ability to be present with their partners and to meet their needs with compassionate care. Regarding the perception of one's partner, self-compassion seemed to help participants notice new aspects of their partner and their way of

being in the world. This included an awareness of their partner's ability to treat themselves in a kind and caring manner. For relationship satisfaction, the women in this study felt that self-compassion had enhanced their relationship, and they expressed a desire to keep building on these developments. A deeper level of connection with one's partner was also experienced.

The following sections will review the findings within the context of the current literature. Limitations, considerations for future research, and implications for counsellors will also be discussed.

Relationship Conflict

Participants in this study felt that self-compassion facilitated a mindful awareness of their emotional experience, which appeared to be particularly beneficial during moments of relationship conflict. The increased present-moment focus allowed for the recognition of upsetting or triggering comments at the time, rather than in retrospect. Participants were then able to further reflect on how these remarks made them feel, increasing personal insight and understanding of their emotions. The women in this study then attended to their feelings, and provided themselves with comfort, kindness, and understanding. This was important given that partners may not have been in a position to meet these needs. Once participants felt calm, they could re-engage with their partner in a more productive manner.

This finding suggests that by increasing self-awareness and reflection, self-compassion may promote an emotionally self-sufficient way of being, which in turn may potentially prevent conflict escalation. This is a new and important contribution to the emerging literature on self-compassion and romantic relationships. The decreased reactivity and verbal hostility experienced by participants is consistent with previous research that demonstrated a negative correlation between mindfulness and verbal aggression in conflict (Barnes et al., 2007). Additionally,

Yarnell and Neff (2013) found that self-compassionate individuals experience less emotional turmoil when resolving conflict with a romantic partner (Yarnell & Neff, 2013). The findings from this study suggest that self-compassion helps individuals notice and attend to their emotional distress, reducing the intensity of the conflict.

One way of thinking about this finding is to conceptualize it in terms of Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, which posits that positive emotions expand our "thought-action repertoires" (p. 219). Whereas negative emotions are evolutionarily designed to narrow our focus, positive emotions have the ability to expand our attention. This allows for more global and creative problem solving, facilitating greater resiliency to stressful life circumstances and increasing personal resources (Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels & Conway, 2009; Fredrickson, 2001). Positive emotions are also able to "undo" the effects of negative emotions (Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, Tugade, 2000), resulting in enhanced coping in situations associated with negative emotions, such as conflict. It is possible that by eliciting positive feelings such as support and validation, self-compassion enhances the ability to intentionally engage in conflict resolution, rather than reacting automatically and potentially escalating the dispute. Additionally, loving-kindness meditations, which are taught in MSC, have been shown to increase experiences of positive emotions (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008). By extension, it is possible that individuals with high levels of self-compassion may be benefiting from cumulative broaden-and-build effect over time.

There is some evidence to suggest that broaden-and-build theory may play a role in relationship functioning. In a study of military couples, Baptist and Goff (2012) found that positive emotions in services members were correlated with increased coping and resilience

during deployment. At the same time, an increase in negative emotions in spouses was associated with lower levels of resilience.

Within the context of the current study, self-compassion helped to facilitate perspective taking. Instead of becoming closed off or defensive during moments of conflict, perspective taking seemed to allow participants to fully hear and understand the message that their partner was trying to convey. This appeared to help promote compromise and resolve disputes before they escalated. Rather than trying to find one "right" solution to a particular problem, participants learned that both sets of perspectives and ideas were of equal merit. Perspective taking also reminded participants that they and their partners are on the "same team," promoting a collaborate effort to resolve disputes rather than defensive attempts to win an argument. In this way, self-compassion may have helped to unite couples and prevent conflict from beginning in the first place.

The findings from this study are consistent with the existing literature on self-compassion and on perspective taking within romantic relationships. For example, self-compassionate individuals have been found to report higher levels of perspective taking and other-focused concern (Neff & Pommier, 2013). Additionally, perspective taking has been shown to increase the likelihood of constructive responding versus retaliatory responding when reacting to a relationship transgression (Arriaga & Resbult, 1998). Perspective taking may be beneficial not only for the insight it can provide for the reflecting partner, but for the validation and empathy it conveys. In a 2015 study, Leong and colleagues had participants experience a pain-inducing task while in the presence of their romantic partner (Leong, Cano, Wurm, Lumley & Corley, 2015). Individuals whose partners were instructed to take their partner's perspective felt more validated and also reported lower levels of pain. By bridging together self-compassion and perspective-

taking within the context of romantic relationships, this study helps to expand this important area of research.

The women in this study perceived that in many cases, conflict occurred as a result of their own perfectionistic expectations. Participants recognized that they held idealistic beliefs regarding both their partners and their relationships. Pressure was created when reality did not meet these expectations, resulting in relationship disputes. By accepting imperfection, difficult interpersonal situations became easier to cope with. Small annoyances and agitations were acknowledged as a part of life. This not only caused participants less distress, but additionally allowed the women to prioritize their relationships over small conflicts.

This finding presents important new information regarding self-compassion's influence on relationship conflict resolution, and suggests that disputes may be prevented by freeing the relationship from expectations of perfection. This is consistent with research by Neff and Beretvas (2013), who found that self-compassionate individuals show their partners more acceptance. The authors propose that by facilitating self-acceptance, self-compassionate individuals may be more likely to extend the same understanding of one's own flaws, limitations, and imperfections to one's partner (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Acceptance is also considered an adaptive quality in psychotherapy. According to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), psychological flexibility increases when difficult circumstances can be mindfully accepted (Hayes & Smith, 2005). As a result, the situation produces less emotional distress. There is some evidence to suggest that increasing acceptance in this way may be beneficial for couples. In a case study by Peterson and colleagues (Peterson, Eifert, Feingold, & Davidson, 2009), the authors found that using ACT as a couples intervention increased marital satisfaction,

mindfulness, and acceptance. The authors hypothesized that as participants increased awareness of their cognitions and patterns, they were able to change their reactions during conflict.

Perception of Oneself as a Partner

Within the context of their romantic relationships, participants experienced the ability to give themselves kindness and understanding in response to feelings of shame, guilt and self-criticism. Prior to learning about self-compassion, the women in this study perceived that they tended to judge themselves harshly for committing interpersonal mistakes and relationship transgressions. By accepting and examining their behaviours, participants were able to identify external factors that contributed to their actions. While these factors did not excuse the transgressions, participants no longer condemned themselves as poor relationship partners. The women appeared to accept themselves as imperfect human beings, and granted themselves forgiveness. By acknowledging their contribution to relationship difficulties, participants experienced the ability to learn from these stressful circumstances and move forward in the relationship.

These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating the importance of showing kindness and forgiveness toward oneself within an intimate relationship. Similar to the experiences of participants in this study, Wohl and colleagues (Wohl, DeShea, & Wahkinney, 2008) posit that self-forgiveness allows individuals to see themselves in a positive light and discourages thoughts of personal flaws and deficits. Self-forgiveness is associated with relationship satisfaction for both partners following a transgression (Pelucchi, Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2013), and relating to oneself in a compassionate and accepting manner has also been linked to a greater feeling of connection to one's partner (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). In contrast, being self-critical and judgemental may lead to a focus on oneself that creates distance and

disengagement in the relationship (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). For example, in a study of couples undergoing fertility treatment, Lowyck and colleagues (Lowyck et al., 2009) found that self-criticism was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. Taken together, it is clear that when seeking to improve the satisfaction of couples it is not enough to attend to the relationship as a whole; each partner's relationship with oneself must also be considered (Lowyck, Luyten, Demyttenaere, & Corveleyn, 2008). The findings from this study suggest that in this way, self-compassion's promotion of kindness, self-acceptance and self-forgiveness may be very beneficial for strengthening the overall relationship.

In the current study, participants perceived an enhanced ability to recognize when their partner needed support. In those moments, the women prevented themselves from becoming overly engrossed in their own feelings, and were instead able to sit with their partner's distress. The ability to notice internal urges and impulses and redirect focus to one's partner seemed to be connected to mindfulness, and often appeared after this topic had been introduced on the CDs. This is congruent with Neff and Pommier's (2013) finding that of three different participant groups in their study (undergraduates, community adults and Buddhist meditators), the meditators displayed the most concern and empathy for others, and reported the least amount of distress when faced with another's suffering. The authors hypothesized that an ongoing focus on mindfulness and interconnectivity increased the ability for this group to feel moved by and sit with the feelings of others. Together with the findings from the current study, this suggests that self-compassion may help individuals better attend to their partners by promoting a present-moment focus during interactions.

In addition to recognizing their partners' moments of pain and distress, participants also felt that self-compassion helped them to better meet their partners' needs. Participants felt that

they were able to provide their partners with more patience, kindness, and empathy. Although this cannot be confirmed given that partners were not interviewed, there is evidence to suggest that self-compassion is associated with positive relationship behaviours. In a study by Neff & Beretvas (2013), 104 couples completed a series of surveys regarding self-compassion and perceived relationship behaviours. Compared to individuals with low self-compassion, partners were more likely to describe participants with high levels of self-compassion as caring, thoughtful, and warm. The current study adds support to these previous findings, and suggests that self-compassion may promote caring and supportive behaviours within intimate relationships.

The current study also provides evidence on the intentionality with which one's partner can be supported. For the women in this study, compassion was experienced as something that could be deliberately and purposefully chosen when interacting with their partners. Additionally, this compassionate manner of responding was described as readily available to participants, and was not contingent on other variables such as the participant's mood. This is an interesting new finding within the expanding self-compassion and romantic relationship literature, and will require further research to fully understand. One possible explanation relates to the effects of broaden and build theory. By increasing the experience of positive emotions, self-compassion may potentially increase the accessibility of compassion as a communication tool. Compassion would become part of an individual's mental repertoire, and could be intentionally selected when meeting a romantic partner's needs.

An alternative explanation may lie in self-compassion's ability to deactivate the threat protection system. As per Gilbert's (2009) conceptualization, this system is responsible for detecting and responding to potential threats in the environment and has the potential to become

overstimulated. The process of deactivating this system is likely related to mindfulness. Focused mindfulness interventions such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) have been found to significantly reduce feelings of depression, anxiety, and distress (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). By reducing activation of the threat protection system, mindfulness may help to create space in which individuals are able to access alternative responses. Recent evidence suggests that this process may in fact take place within romantic relationships. In a study by Khaddouma, Coop Gordon and Strand (2016), 20 individuals participated in an 8-week MBSR course. Romantic partners were not enrolled. The results found that mindfulness increased the participants' ability to act in a purposeful and intentional manner, which was correlated with relationship satisfaction for both partners. Together with the findings from the current study, this suggests that by using mindfulness to reduce feelings of anxiety and distress, individuals may be able to intentionally relate to their partners with kindness and compassion.

Perception of One's Partner

The women in this study all made new observations and discoveries about their partners. The participants seemed to become more cognisant of their partner's motivations, behaviours, and ways of being in the world. This included an awareness of the encouragement and support provided by partners as well as increased insight into their habits and personality. Additionally, each of the women also felt that their partner's self-compassion level was relatively low. Based on previous research, there is evidence to suggest that assessments of self-compassion are likely fairly accurate. Neff and Beretvas (2013) found that within romantic relationships, individuals' perceptions of their partners' levels of self-compassion were consistent with the partners' self-

reports. The authors went on to suggest that self-compassionate actions and behaviours may be easily perceived and identified within the context of a romantic relationship.

This finding makes an important contribution to understanding self-compassion's influence on romantic relationships. To date there is limited research on the benefits of seeing one's partner in a fresh light and its impact on relationship enhancement. Increasing relationship excitement, which may be considered to be a related concept, has been found to boost relationship satisfaction and positive affect (Coulter & Malouff, 2013). Further research will be required to understand the process by which self-compassion may facilitate increased awareness and understanding of one's partner.

Relationship Satisfaction

The participants in this study perceived that self-compassion helped their relationships to grow and evolve. Additionally, participants were eager to continue building on these developments once the study was completed. Each of the women indicated that they would continue practicing self-compassion as a way of enhancing their relationship as well as their own mental health. While previous research has demonstrated that self-compassionate couples feel satisfied with their relationships, the desire to strengthen one's relationship is an important new contribution that this study makes to the field.

One possible explanation for this finding is that self-compassion may help to lower defensiveness. Within the context of this study, participants processed feedback from their partners without feeling hurt or offended, and worked to strengthen their relationship. This is consistent with previous studies demonstrating that self-compassionate individuals are more likely to improve an area of personal weakness (Breines & Chen, 2012) and are not dismissive of the feedback that they receive (Leary et al., 2007). Defensiveness has long been considered

detrimental to relationships, and is described by Gottman as a feature among distressed couples (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Self-compassion provides a buffering effect when experiencing negative events (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007), which may help to foster an open attitude, rather than withdrawing or becoming defensive. From this place of openness, participants could engage in discussions with their partners without feeling judged or criticized.

The desire to enhance one's romantic relationship may also be related to feelings of self-worth. It is possible that positive beliefs about one's own value encourages individuals to turn towards their partners, strengthening the relationship. This may be especially true in moments of vulnerability or relationship uncertainty. Consistent with previous self-compassion research (Neff & Vonk, 2009), the women in this study perceived that despite flaws and shortcomings, they still had value as a person and were worthy of love and acceptance from others. The same sentiment can also be found in healthy forms of self-esteem, which are not contingent on social comparisons or associated with narcissism (e.g., Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Brown, & Correll, 2003).

In a series of experiments, Murray and colleagues (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002) led high and low self-esteem participants to believe an aspect of their personality had annoyed their partner. This activated concerns about relationship longevity in participants with low self-esteem, causing them to withdraw from the relationship and devalue their partner. High self-esteem participants displayed the opposite pattern and turned towards their partners, feeling assured of their partners' continued affection. The authors suggest that positive self-evaluations create expectations of acceptance and care from others, which may help to buffer high self-esteem individuals from potential feelings of rejection and encourage relationship enhancement behaviours (Murray et al., 2002). Similarly, by fostering feelings of self-worth,

self-compassionate individuals may turn towards each other in the face of relationship concerns or doubts, increasing commitment to the relationship and motivation to make improvements.

Participants in the study found that self-compassion deepened their emotional connection with their partner. Participants appeared to open up and turn towards their partners, and perceived an increase in mutual emotional support. The experience described by the participants strongly resembles the construct of relatedness, which can be conceptualized as "a feeling of connection, inclusion, and intimacy with others" (Hadden, Smith, & Knee, 2014, p. 155). Relatedness has been identified as a strong predictor of relationship satisfaction and is also associated with the motivation to provide one's partner with support and compassion (Hadden et al., 2014; Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007).

Within the self-compassion and romantic relationship literature, Neff and Beretvas (2013) found that self-compassionate individuals are perceived by partners to have high levels of relatedness. The authors proposed that the open and caring nature of self-compassion may be associated with feelings of connection and closeness toward others. The findings from the current study add support to this existing research. By promoting an open and compassionate mindset, self-compassion may help to increase both relatedness and relationship satisfaction.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that must be taken into consideration. Firstly, due to the nature of case study research, there were only three participants. The findings are not meant to be generalized to larger populations; while a rich, nuanced account of participant's experiences and perspectives was constructed, there are likely other themes and benefits that were not accounted for within the scope of this study. Secondly, the attrition rate for this study was quite high, and apart from one exception, reasons for withdrawing from the study were not

provided. It is therefore possible that participants who did not find self-compassion beneficial were not motivated to finish the study, biasing the final data. This study also did not capture the experience of the partners, resulting in one-sided findings. It is unknown whether or not partners would have agree with the participants' perception of self-compassion's influence within the relationship. Finally, participants in this study were relatively homogeneous. As a result, perspectives and experiences that may differ based on gender, sexual orientation, ability and non-European ethnic backgrounds were not captured.

Considerations for Future Research

This aim of this study was to gain a preliminary understanding of self-compassion's influence on romantic relationships by exploring the experiences and perspectives of three participants. Future research should include quantitative studies with larger sample sizes to aid in generalizability and theory generation. It would also be important to increase the diversity of sample to ensure that many voices are represented. This includes individuals of various gender or non-binary identities, sexual orientations, ethnicities, and levels of ability. Each of the main themes from this study could also be studied in greater depth to understand its nuances and subtleties.

Future studies would benefit from adding process outcome measures and follow-up meetings with the participants. A mixed methods approach would allow researchers to explore pre-post effects and determine if benefits increase, decrease, or are maintained over time. It may also be worth exploring differences based on the setting to see if the influence of self-compassion varies if delivered in an individual or group format.

The participants generally expressed a low level of interest in completing the optional exercises. Given that these worksheets were meant to provide another avenue by which to learn

about self-compassion, future research should incorporate these exercises as a required component in the study design in order to deepen participants' learning.

Finally, the influence of self-compassion within romantic relationships should be studied on both partners concurrently. It would be interesting to explore perspectives of one's partner as they are also developing a self-compassion practice, and determine if mutual self-compassion enhances any of the themes described in this study.

Implications for Clinicians

Based on the findings from the current study, I offer clinicians four scenarios in which incorporating self-compassion into the romantic relationship may be especially beneficial.

1. Preventing conflict escalation. Participants in the current study experienced multiple avenues by which self-compassion helped to de-escalate relationship disputes. This points to several possible options that clinicians might consider when working with couples experiencing frequent conflict. Firstly, promoting the open and receptive message of interconnectedness may help clients begin to put themselves in their partner's shoes. This could increase perspective taking, offering more understanding and validation during conflict. Secondly, teaching clients about mindfulness can help partners to pause and reflect on recurring patterns of conflict. For participants in the current study, conflict frequently arose from external pressures and expectations of perfection. Helping clients gain insight and become aware of these recurring processes may help to stop and disrupt these patterns. Finally, teaching clients about self-kindness can promote emotional independence during conflict. Participants felt that providing oneself with kindness and understanding was extremely validating and soothing. This allowed participants to stay calm and reflective during arguments. Some clients may feel as though they are normally on "auto-pilot" when having a stressful conversation with their significant other. By

learning to treat oneself with compassion, they may develop the capacity to intentionally choose how to respond during moments of conflict.

2. Moving past relationship barriers. As a result of reduced resistance to negative emotions, participants perceived that they were able to move forward in their relationships. For clients, relationship barriers may take many forms. They may be connected to past relationship transgressions or an inability to process feedback. Clients may recognize these barriers as preventing growth within the relationship. Much of the problem may be traced back to avoidance. The participants explained that prior to taking part in the study, they were highly resistant to feelings such as guilt and distress. Once they were able to accept their present-moment experience, the stressful circumstances became much easier to cope with. Clinicians can provide clients with psychoeducation about self-compassion, teaching them that everyone experiences setbacks and moments of frustration, and that these situations can be met with kindness and support. Rather than avoiding relationship barriers, clients can learn to face them and sit with their unpleasant feelings. Clinicians can then assist clients in problem solving and moving forward in their relationships.

3. Refocusing on one's partner. Although self-compassion is commonly considered to be primarily an intrapersonal concept, it carries the added benefit of opening up one's heart to others. Just as they notice and attend to their own suffering, self-compassionate individuals can recognize and sit with the suffering of others, offering support and comfort. Clinicians can facilitate compassionate discussions between clients to demonstrate how it feels to be understood and validated.

In addition to providing partners with support when required, participants in the current study experienced attunement towards one's partner in other ways. Participants noticed new

behaviours and aspects of their partner's personality, and also treated them as a newfound source of emotional support. By promoting self-compassion, clinicians may help clients to increase their relatedness, connection and intimacy.

4. Concurrently improving individual mental health. In addition to experiencing benefits in their romantic relationships, participants in the current study also perceived intrapersonal benefits. Participants felt that they were kinder to themselves, offered themselves greater understanding and support, and allowed themselves to sit with difficult emotions. This finding is especially important given Lowyck and colleagues' (2008) comments regarding the significance of attending to each partner's mental health when looking to increase relationship satisfaction. Additionally, within the current study the individual benefits frequently had a positive influence on the relationship, and vice versa. For example, learning to sit with strong negative emotions helped participants to access this ability during relationship conflict.

By promoting and encouraging a self-compassionate way of being, clinicians might simultaneously improve an individual's relationship with oneself as well as the romantic relationship that they are a part of. This may be especially helpful in situations where financial resources are limited, or when partners are not interested in or not willing to attend individual counselling.

Conclusion

Within the literature on relationship interventions, there is a call for approaches that move away from simple skill acquisition and encourage the development of feelings such as empathy and compassion. After the completion of this study, it appears as though interventions rooted in the principles of self-compassion may have the potential to meet this need. The participants in this study reported a number of individual and relationship benefits as a result of developing self-

kindness, mindfulness, and interconnectedness. Additionally, they were eager to continue their self-compassion practice, and extend this newfound knowledge to their partners. For these participants, self-compassion was more than a skill or capacity; it became an integral component of a healthy relationship. As one participant stated:

> [Self-compassion] is one more tool in my toolbox of maintaining a relationship. I think a relationship thrives on trust and hope and recognition and love and appreciation, and now, self-compassion.

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Appendix A

Study Recruitment Advertisements

Want to add something new to your relationship? Self-compassion is a way of treating oneself with kindness and empathy. But how does this capacity impact couples? Research participants are needed to explore the experience of practicing self-compassion in a relationship. Participants will complete a training CD, online questions, and two interviews. The time requirement for this 8-week study is about 2 hours per week. To take part you must be 18+ and living with your romantic partner. Email Brittany Budzan (budzan@ualberta.ca) for more details.

Want To Add Something New To Your Relationship?

Self-compassion is a way of treating oneself with kindness and empathy. But how does this capacity impact couples? Research participants are needed to explore the experience of practicing self-compassion in a relationship.

Participants will complete a training CD, online questions, and two interviews. The time requirement for this 8-week study is about 2 hours per week. To take part you must be 18+ and living with your romantic partner. Email Brittany Budzan (budzan@ualberta.ca) for more details.

This research has been approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board

Self-compassion Study budzan@ualberta.ca
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Self-compassion Study budzan@ualberta.ca
Self-compassion Study budzan@ualberta.ca
Self-compassion Study budzan@ualberta.ca

Appendix B

DAS-7

Most persons have disagreements in their relationships. Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for each item on the following list.

5	4	3	2	1	0
Always Agree	Almost Always Agree	Occasionally Disagree	Frequently Disagree	Almost Always Disagree	Always Disagree

1. Philosophy of life __

2. Aims, goals, and things believed important __

3. Amount of time spent together __

How often would you say the following events occur between you and your mate?

0	1	2	3	4	5
Never	Less than once a month	Once or twice a month	Once or twice a week	Once a day	More often

4. Have a stimulating exchange of ideas __

5. Calmly discuss something together __

6. Work together on a project __

7. The dots on the following line represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point, "happy", represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please circle the dot which best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, or your relationship.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Extremely Unhappy	Fairly Unhappy	A Little Unhappy	Happy	Very Happy	Extremely Happy	Perfect

Appendix C

CD Content Description

Self-compassion step by step: The proven power of being kind to yourself

Session 1: What is self-compassion?

The first lesson introduces the concept of self-compassion and its three components
(kindness to self, common humanity, and mindfulness). Self-criticism and self-compassion are
discussed in terms of physiological effects (cortisol, oxytocin production, etc.) as well as
evolutionary developments. Neff discuses reasons that self-compassion is not encouraged in our
culture, distinguishing self-compassion from other constructs such as self-pity and self-
indulgence. The physical and emotional benefits are discussed, as well as therapeutic approaches
based on self-compassion. Exercises teach listeners about what self-compassion feels like
physiologically and introduce listeners to self-compassion meditations. Listeners are encouraged
to go at their own pace, and take a break if any unexpected emotions emerge and become
overwhelming.

Session 2: Self-kindness

The second lesson focuses on the first component of self-compassion, self-kindness, and
its two forms; loving kindness (emphasis on positive wishes) and compassion (emphasis on
suffering). Society's use of self-criticism as a motivational tool is discussed, as well as the
negative effects when this approach backfires. Exercises distinguish the sensations of loving
kindness and compassion, and the difference between motivating ourselves with self-compassion
or self-criticism. A loving kindness meditation helps listeners develop the intention for positive
feelings.

Session 3: Mindful self-compassion

The third lesson explores the second component of self-compassion, mindfulness.
Research on the 'default brain network' is discussed, explaining why mind-wandering occurs
and the difficulties of getting our minds to rest. Neff explains that by practicing mindfulness, we
are able to take a step back and recognize that our thoughts are not reality and are often
inaccurate. She explains that mindfulness also helps to free ourselves from the reality avoidance
that often occurs if we are trying to resist a painful experience. The types of mindfulness
meditations are reviewed, as well as the three stages of self-compassion practice: 1) infatuation
2) disillusionment 3) true acceptance. Exercises introduce listeners to present moment awareness
and turn the attention inward during a compassionate body scan.

Session 4: Self-connection and inter-connectedness

The fourth lesson explores the third component of self-compassion, common humanity.
Barriers to connection are discussed, the main focus being on the separation that occurs when we
compare ourselves to others to protect our self-esteem. Neff explains that self-esteem is

contingent on success and being better than average when it comes to culturally valued traits. This encourages disconnection and competition as we attempt to enhance our own self-worth by putting down others through bullying, prejudice, ego-defensiveness and anger. Self-compassion provides us with a way to accept and embrace the full human experience, connecting us with others. Neff highlights that common humanity also acts as a reminder that we need to treat ourselves with compassion, especially if in a caregiving position, in order to avoid burn-out. Exercises expand loving kindness feelings to others, encourage the acceptance of all qualities (including flaws), and practice compassion for caregivers.

Session 5: Working with difficult emotions

The fifth session explores how self-compassion can be used to work with difficult emotions. Neff discusses the research in this area, which shows that self-compassion is helpful when working with painful circumstances including divorce, chronic pain, childhood trauma, and PTSD. Anger and forgiveness are examined in more detail, as well as how mindfulness can be used to take a step back from painful emotions and view them more objectively. Learning to locate the emotions within the body also helps to cut down on rumination. Exercises include loving kindness for difficult emotions, learning to soften, sooth, and allow, as well as exercises for working with anger, forgiving the self and forgiving others.

Session 6: Embracing your life

The final lesson explores ways in which self-compassion can be used to fully embrace your life. Neff explains that many individuals are hesitant to embrace our strengths for fear of being arrogant and setting oneself up for a fall. Listeners learn that self-compassion can be used to mindfully notice strengths, kindly acknowledge them, and remember that everyone has strengths. The evolutionary benefits of generating positive emotions are discussed, and Neff discusses the idea of a 'silver lining' through her own personal experience. Tips are provided for integrating a self-compassion practice into daily life. Exercises focus on savouring, self-appreciation, looking at silver linings, and making a wish for your well-being.

Appendix D

Information Letter

University of Alberta
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of Educational Psychology

Information Letter

Study Title: The Influence of Self-Compassion on Romantic Relationships

Research Investigator	**Supervisor**
Brittany Budzan	Dr. K. Jessica Van Vliet
Department of Educational Psychology	Department of Educational Psychology
University of Alberta	University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2R3	Edmonton, AB, T6G 2R3
budzan@ualberta.ca	jvanvliet@ualberta.ca

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. This study is for completion of the principal researcher's Masters of Counselling Psychology. The results may be presented at conferences and reported in academic journals. Here is information that you need to know before you agree to participate.

What is the purpose of this study?
Self-compassion is a way of treating oneself with kindness and compassion. The purpose of this study is to explore the experience and influence of practicing self-compassion on romantic relationships. It is hoped that this study may contribute to research and practices at helping couples build stronger and happier relationships.

Am I eligible?
You can participate if the following are true about you:
- You are 18 years old or older.
- You are currently in a romantic relationship.
- You are living with your romantic partner.
- You do not have a current self-compassion practice.
- You are not currently in couples counselling.
- You speak and understand English.
- Your relationship is not considered "in distress", as measured by a screening questionnaire

What will the study involve?
- The researcher will meet with you and tell you about the study.
- You will be given a self-compassion CD. Each of the six lessons on the CD are about 66 minutes long. You will listen to a lesson every 1-2 weeks at home in a quiet space. You will also be provided with optional exercises.

- There will be two interviews. The first will be approximately 30 minutes in length, and the second will be between 45 minutes to 1 ½ hours long. The interviews will take place at Clinical Services at the University of Alberta. The first will be mid-way through the study, the second will be 2 weeks after the study is complete. You will be asked about your experiences with this study, and any impact it has had on your relationship. The interviews will be recorded and typed out by the researcher.
- After completing each lesson you will be emailed a series of 5 short questions through Google Forms. You may write as much or as little as you like in response to these questions. If you prefer, you can answer using pen and paper and the responses will be collected during the second interview.
- Within 3 weeks of each interview you will be emailed a typed copy to review. A copy of your responses to the online questions will be sent with the copy of the second interview.
- Your overall involvement in this study will last approximately 2 ½ months.

What are the potential benefits?
- You may receive benefits from learning self-compassion. This may include an improved sense of well-being and a more positive way of relating to oneself.
- Learning about self-compassion may benefit your romantic relationship.
- You will be helping to provide new information about a possible relationship maintenance strategy.
- Transportation costs for the interviews and initial meeting will be covered up to $15 per visit with proof of payment provided on the same day.
- For your participation you will be able to keep the audio guide and will also be given a book about self-compassion.

What are the potential risks?
- For some people, being self-compassionate may bring up negative or upsetting feelings. However, such a risk is expected to be minimal. If you become upset, you will be provided with a list of low or no-cost counselling options.

How will my privacy be protected?
- The findings of this study will be used in a Masters thesis. The results may also be presented at conferences or reported in academic journals.
- Any identifying information collected in the online responses or interviews will be removed or changed. All collected information will be labelled with a fake name so you are not connected to any of the documents.
- The principal researcher and her supervisor are the only two people who will have contact with your data.
- Documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the University of Alberta. Audio files will be encrypted and kept on a USB drive in a locked filing cabinet. Typed copies of interviews and online responses will stored on a computer in a locked lab. Anonymized versions of the transcript may be stored on the primary investigator's personal computer. Both computers will be encrypted and password protected.
- Four weeks after you have been sent copies of the second interview and online responses, all identifying information will be destroyed. Audio files will be destroyed after 5 years. Anonymized versions of your interview and responses may be used in a future study and will be destroyed after 15 years.

<u>Voluntary Participation</u>
- You are under no obligation to participate in this study
- When completing the interviews and lesson questions you do not have to answer if you do not want to.
- If you wish to withdraw your data from this study, you must notify the researcher within 4 weeks of receiving the typed out copy of the second interview and online responses. After this time your data cannot be removed because it may have become part of the analysis.
- You can choose to end your participation in this study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw you can have your data removed, as long as it has not been more than 4 weeks since receiving the typed out copy of the second interview and online responses.
- You can request a copy of the summary of the report once the study is done.

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact Brittany Budzan at budzan@ualberta.ca. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Jessica Van Vliet, at jvanvliet@ualberta.ca if you have any concerns about this project. The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615. This office has no direct involvement with this project.

Thank you for your interest in this study.

Sincerely,

Brittany Budzan, B.A., Masters student
University of Alberta
Department of Educational Psychology

Appendix E

Consent Form

University of Alberta
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of Educational Psychology

Consent Form

Study Title: The Influence of Self-Compassion on Romantic Relationships

Research Investigator	**Supervisor**
Brittany Budzan	Dr. K. Jessica Van Vliet
Department of Educational Psychology	Department of Educational Psychology
University of Alberta	University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2R3	Edmonton, AB, T6G 2R3
budzan@ualberta.ca	jvanvliet@ualberta.ca

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. This study is for completion of the principal researcher's Masters of Counselling Psychology. The results may be presented at conferences and reported in academic journals.

Please read the information below and ask any questions you may have before deciding if you want to participate.

Purpose
Self-compassion is a way of treating oneself with kindness and empathy. The purpose of this study is to explore the experience and influence of practicing self-compassion on romantic relationships. It is hoped that this study may contribute to research and practices at helping couples build stronger and happier relationships.

Eligibility
To participate, I agree that the following statements are true about me:
- I am 18 years old or older.
- I am currently in a romantic relationship.
- I am living with my romantic partner.
- I do not have a current self-compassion practice.
- I am not currently in couples counselling.
- I speak and understand English.
- My relationship is not considered "in distress", as measured by a screening questionnaire.

Study Procedures
- The researcher will meet with me and tell me about the study.

- I will be given a self-compassion CD. Each of the six lessons on the CD are about 66 minutes long. I will listen to a lesson every 1-2 weeks at home in a quiet space. I will also be provided with optional exercises.
- There will be two interviews. The first will be approximately 30 minutes in length, and the second will be between 45 minutes to 1 ½ hours long. The interviews will take place at Clinical Services at the University of Alberta. The first will be mid-way through the study, the second will be 2 weeks after the study is complete. I will be asked about my experiences with this study, and any impact it has had on my relationship. The interviews will be recorded and typed out by the researcher.
- After completing each lesson I will be emailed a series of 5 short questions through Google Forms. I may write as much or as little as I like in response to these questions. If I prefer, I can answer using pen and paper. In this case, the responses will be collected during the second interview.
- Within 3 weeks of each interview I will be emailed a typed copy to review. A copy of my responses to the online questions will be sent with the copy of the second interview.
- My overall involvement in this study will last approximately 2 ½ months.

Benefits
- I may receive benefits from learning self-compassion. This may include an improved sense of well-being and a more positive way of relating to myself.
- Learning about self-compassion may benefit my romantic relationship.
- I will be helping to provide new information about a possible relationship maintenance strategy.
- Transportation costs for the interviews and initial meeting will be covered up to $15 per visit. Proof of payment must be provided on the same day.
- For my participation I will be able to keep the audio guide. I will also be given a book about self-compassion.

Risks
- For some people, being self-compassionate may bring up negative or upsetting feelings. Such a risk is expected to be minimal. If I become upset, I will be provided with a list of low or no-cost counselling options.

Confidentiality
- I am aware that the findings will be used in a Masters thesis. They may also be presented at conferences or reported in academic journals.
- Any identifying information collected in the online responses or interviews will be removed or changed. All information will be labelled with a fake name so I am not connected to any of the documents.
- The principal researcher and her supervisor are the only two people who will have contact with my data.
- Documents will be kept in a locked lab at the University of Alberta. Audio files will be encrypted and kept on a USB drive in a locked filing cabinet. Typed copies of interviews and online responses will stored on a computer in a locked lab. Anonymized versions of the transcript may be stored on the principal researcher's personal computer. Both computers will be encrypted and password protected.
- Four weeks after I have received copies of the second interview and online responses, all identifying information will be destroyed. Audio files will be destroyed after 5 years. Anonymized versions of my interview and responses may be used in a future study and will be destroyed after 15 years.

Voluntary Participation
- I understand that I am under no obligation to participate in this study.
- When completing the interviews and lesson questions I do not have to answer if I do not want to.
- I am aware that I can withdraw my data from this study. To do so I must notify the researcher within 4 weeks of receiving the typed out copy of the second interview and online responses. After this time my data cannot be removed because it may have become part of the analysis.
- I can choose to end my participation in this study at any time without penalty. If I withdraw I can have my data removed, as long as it has not been more than 4 weeks since I received the typed out copy of the second interview and online responses.
- I can request a copy of the summary of the report once the study is done.

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact Brittany Budzan at budzan@ualberta.ca. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Jessica Van Vliet, at jvanvliet@ualberta.ca if you have any concerns about this project. The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615. This office has no direct involvement with this project.

Having read and understood all of the above, I _____ agree to participate freely and voluntarily in this study.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Researcher as Witness   Date

Thank you for your participation in this study.

Appendix F

Consent for Screening Questionnaire

University of Alberta
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of Educational Psychology

Consent for Screening Questionnaire

Study Title: The Influence of Self-Compassion on Romantic Relationships

Research Investigator	**Supervisor**
Brittany Budzan	Dr. K. Jessica Van Vliet
Department of Educational Psychology	Department of Educational Psychology
University of Alberta	University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2R3	Edmonton, AB, T6G 2R3
budzan@ualberta.ca	jvanvliet@ualberta.ca

Thank you for your interest in this study.

You are being asked to participate in a screening questionnaire for a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore the experience and influence of practicing self-compassion on romantic relationships. It is hoped that this study may add to research and practices to help couples build stronger and happier relationships.

Please review the information below. Ask any questions you may have before deciding if you want to take part.

The screening questionnaire will take about 5 minutes to complete. It consists of 7 questions, and is used to detect possible distress in couples. There are no foreseeable risks to taking part in this screening questionnaire. If your score suggests that there may be distress, you will be given a list of low and no-cost counselling referrals. Please be aware that your score is a current snapshot of your life with your partner. It does not reflect your relationship as a whole. It is normal for all couples to go through periods of distress once in a while. If you have any questions about your result, please ask the primary researcher.

All information collected will be kept confidential. Information will be labelled using a fake name so you are not connected to the responses. The principal researcher and her supervisor are the only people who will have contact with this data. Electronic data will be encrypted and stored on a password protected computer in a locked lab. The data will be destroyed after 5 years.

Your participation in this screening questionnaire is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without penalty. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to. Your consent is implied by completing the questionnaire.

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact Brittany Budzan at budzan@ualberta.ca. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Jessica Van Vliet, at jvanvliet@ualberta.ca if you have any concerns about this project. The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615. This office has no direct involvement with this project.

Thank you again for your interest in this study.

Appendix G

Demographics Form

Please provide the following demographic information. You may skip any questions you do not feel conformable answering.

_____

Pseudonym:_____   **Age:**_____

Gender (please circle one):   Male   Female   Undisclosed

Ethnicity:_____   **Religion:**_____

Highest level of education of the adults in the household (please circle one):

a. 8 years of schooling or less

d. High school diploma/GED

g. College/university degree

b. Junior high school graduate

e. Certificate in a trade/technology

h. Graduate/professional education

c. Partial high school training

f. Partial college/university

Employment status (please circle all that apply):

a. Full-time

c. Not employed

e. Other:_____

b. Part-time

d. Student

Relationship Status (please circle one):   dating   married   common-law   other:_____

Length of current relationship: _____year(s) and/or _____month(s)

Appendix H

Weekly Online Questions

Session 1: What was your first impression of this week's lesson? Have you had any experiences of self-compassion this week? What impact, if any, has it had on your relationship? What impact, if any, do you think it could have in the future? Do you have any other comments about this week's session/optional exercises?

Session 2: What was your first impression of this week's lesson? Have you had any experiences of self-kindness this week? What impact, if any, has it had on your relationship? What impact, if any, do you think it could have in the future? Do you have any other comments about this week's session/optional exercises?

Session 3: What was your first impression of this week's lesson? Have you had any experiences of mindfulness this week? What impact, if any, has it had on your relationship? What impact, if any, do you think it could have in the future? Do you have any other comments about this week's session/optional exercises?

Session 4: What was your first impression of this week's lesson? Have you had any experiences of interconnectedness this week? What impact, if any, has it had on your relationship? What impact, if any, do you think it could have in the future? Do you have any other comments about this week's session/optional exercises?

Session 5: What was your first impression of this week's lesson? Have you had any experiences of anger or forgiveness this week? What impact, if any, has it had on your relationship? What impact, if any, do you think it could have in the future? Do you have any other comments about this week's session/optional exercises?

Session 6: What was your first impression of this week's lesson? Have you had any experiences of self-appreciation this week? What impact, if any, has it had on your relationship? What impact, if any, do you think it could have in the future? Do you have any other comments about this week's session/optional exercises?

Appendix I

Interview One Protocol

Questions:

1) Tell me about your first impressions regarding what it's like to take part in this study as a way of potentially enhancing your relationship?

2) What positive or negative impacts, if any, have you noticed so far within the context of your relationship?

3) How easy or difficult has it been to find time for this study?

4) Is this study something you enjoy doing? Why or why not?

5) What, if anything, has resonated with you during the lessons within the context of your relationship? What, if anything, hasn't resonated with you?

6) Is there anything else you want to tell me at this point?

Appendix J

Interview Two Protocol

Questions:

1) Tell me about what it was like to take part in this study as a way of potentially enhancing your relationship.

2) Can you tell me about what this experience was like for you, as a relationship partner? Did your experience have any influence on your perception of your partner?

3) What influence, if any, has this experience had on your romantic relationship? Has it had any influence on conflict? Relationship satisfaction?

4) How practical was it to incorporate this study into your everyday life?

5) What exercises or strategies or teachings, if any, do you think you'll continue to use within your relationship?

6) Can you tell me about any particular exercises or meditations that you preferred? Can you tell me about anything that you would change?

7) What has this program meant for you?