

**A JOURNEY WITH SELF-COMPASSION: EXPLORING SELF-COMPASSION
WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH**

by

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ABSTRACT

The construct of self-compassion has been a central component of Buddhism for centuries, but it has only recently entered into psychology research and practice (Neff, 2003b). Despite the spiritual roots of self-compassion, the impact of spirituality on the development of self-compassion has not been explored. The following study sought to understand how Christian faith experiences impact the experience and development of self-compassion. The listening guide method and autoethnography were combined to explore the lived experience of self-compassion from a Christian faith perspective. Seven individuals took part in semi-structured interviews to tell their stories about how self-compassion is lived out within the context of their Christian faith. The participant co-researchers' narratives revealed three categories of voices. The voices of shame and criticism included oppression, internalized oppression, and judgment. These voices appeared as the participants discussed what makes self-compassion difficult. The voices of love and acceptance included connection, unity, openness, and warmth. Together, these voices were used as participants discussed their development of self-compassion, and the embodied experience of self-compassion. Finally, the voices of resistance included the voices of struggle and advocacy. These voices appeared to facilitate the development of self-compassion. This study offers a deeper understanding of the natural development of self-compassion and of how the Christian faith may facilitate or hinder self-compassion. Based on these findings, implications for counsellors, pastors, and future research are discussed.

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CHAPTER 1: BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short, again and again. –*Theodore Roosevelt*

In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown (2012) quotes the above excerpt from a speech by Theodore Roosevelt and describes the courage it takes to venture into the arena of life and risk engaging with our whole hearts. As Roosevelt wisely acknowledged, it may be easy to point out and criticize imperfections, both in others and in our own lives, but it takes real courage and strength for people to embrace their own vulnerabilities and suffering.

At the heart of fully embracing our vulnerabilities and imperfections is the ability to respond toward our own suffering with compassion; in other words, to have self-compassion (Brown, 2010; Gilbert, 2005; Neff, 2003b). Self-compassion is associated with numerous psychological benefits including positive affect (Phillips & Ferguson, 2013), perseverance (Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2014), emotional intelligence (Heffernan, Griffin, McNulty, & Fitzpatrick, 2010), self-improvement motivation (Breines & Chen, 2012), and relationship satisfaction (Baker & McNulty, 2011). Research supporting the benefits of self-compassion abounds, but most of the research focuses on self-compassion that has been developed through cognitive behavioural skill development, mindfulness, and meditation (Germer, 2009; Gilbert, 2010; Neff & Germer, 2013). The psychological understanding of self-compassion is closely associated to Buddhist teachings on self-compassion (Neff, 2003b). However, though the Buddhist roots of self-compassion suggests that there are spiritual elements

involved, there is a dearth of research on the connection between spirituality and self-compassion. The role of spirituality has been mentioned in association to self-compassion, though it has never been thoroughly explored (Birnie, Speca, & Carlson, 2010; Patershuck, 2013). It is in this direction that I have chosen to start our journey.

This is a story about seven individuals who are discovering self-compassion as they move through the arena of faith and life. One thing that they all have in common is that they attributed their ability to hold a compassionate stance toward themselves as coming from God¹. They also shared that their journeys have been met with challenges and setbacks, and that they are still working toward fully embodying self-compassion on a regular basis. In the spirit of insider research, I have chosen to enter into this journey as well (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013).

Holloway and Biley (2011) argue that the reflexive nature of qualitative research makes it inevitable that the person of the researcher will influence the way that the research is represented. I am aware that I am not a distanced and purely objective researcher; it seems only fair that I would let you, the reader, see how my experiences may interact with the words I used to tell the participant co-researchers² stories. I am emotionally invested in the lives of each participant, and I am grateful for the ways that they have changed my understanding of faith and self-compassion. I hope that you too can be changed by our stories.

This thesis is also part of a larger journey that I am on- a journey to discover my personal, professional, and academic voice. At first this thesis was simply a continuation in my study of self-compassion, but as I refined my ideas and developed my research question I

¹ Throughout this document the general name God is used to refer to the Christian Trinitarian God, which includes God the Father, God the Son (i.e. Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit.

² To avoid confusion with the graduate student co-researchers, the participant co-researchers are referred to as participants throughout the document. The substantial contribution they made by telling their stories and influencing our understanding of self-compassion made them an integral part of the research team.

realized the irony in my situation: my self-criticism was getting in the way of my motivation to research self-compassion. I was, and continue to be, acutely aware of the ways in which my personal experiences influence my conceptualization of self-compassion. Feminist scholars would argue that there is a way to situate and use the researcher's "insider" knowledge within the research process (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013; Yost & Chmielewski, 2012); yet in the beginning, my critical voice was clearly saying that (a) there is no place for personal disclosure in research and (b) even if there was, my experiences are insignificant anomalies. This journey would be a lot easier if I had more confidence and self-compassion. Each step of the thesis process has been plagued by that critical voice, but I am too stubborn to let it win. With tenacity (or maybe stupidity?), I dared to merge my academic and personal life to, hopefully, produce a research project that shows the purely human, messy side of the lives counselling psychology research is meant to impact.

My Method

In Chapter 3 I describe my method in greater detail, but given the divergence from traditional research formats, I want to acknowledge the careful thought that has gone into my choice to use first-person language, personal disclosure, and a narrative format in writing my thesis. Granek (2013) warned:

Writing in more [of an] emotional style can be perceived as unscientific and biased, and blurring the lines between academic work and journalism or a personal diary. These are indeed very real risks and it is why I called this paper *Putting Ourselves on the Line*. To think of ourselves as intersubjectively linked with our participants and with our audiences is *both* to understand ourselves as being the hyphen *and* to acknowledge that this untraditional stance in research relationships is risky within the current academic

climate. (p. 188)

Despite her warnings, Granek (2013) suggested that this “untraditional” stance is necessary for socially responsible research, because in order to fairly portray the stories of our participants to our audience, we must communicate the emotional and interpersonal impacts that affected our understanding of the participants’ stories.

Inspired by evocative autoethnography, I have chosen to incorporate it into my methodology as a tool to help me express the more nuanced, personal, and emotional aspects of my research. Evocative autoethnographies use a narrative style of writing that requires the author to explicitly place herself within every context of the research process (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Holloway suggested that all qualitative research, because of its reflexive nature, inherently incorporates autoethnographic elements (Holloway & Biley, 2011). Furthermore, qualitative researchers advocate for the place of narrative and emotional expression in the representation of qualitative research (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Holloway & Biley, 2011; Richardson, 2000). Rather than trying to forge my own way, I have allowed the literature on autoethnography to guide my conceptualization of the research process.

The main method of analysis for this study is the Listening Guide (Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2006), but autoethnography provides a framework in which to situate my own experiences as a researcher and insider to the topic I am researching. Both methods are able to complement one another as they incorporate the feminist relational values that are inherent in this research project (Allen & Piercy, 2005; Gilligan et al., 2006). Blending these two methods is useful for multiple reasons, including that I am a Christian, I am a psychology student who has studied self-compassion, and I am continually trying to develop self-compassion in my own life. As an insider to the population and subject I have chosen to

study, I too have experiential knowledge that may add to the topic and influence my understanding of the participants' experiences. Autoethnography allows me to draw on my own vast array of experiences with self-compassion to help give people a window into the way that the Christian faith can influence self-compassion. I bring unique insights to this topic because I have been studying self-compassion for a number of years now (Van Vliet & Kalnins, 2011). In the process I have continually sought to understand how my faith fits within the things I am learning about in psychology. Autoethnography allows me to share the depth of insight and understanding that I have developed over time and draw together both Christian culture and the culture surrounding the field of psychology. Conversely, I still have a lot of questions and I know that I am far from having a complete understanding of how my faith and self-compassion intersect. Therefore, I have also included the stories of other Christians who regularly show compassion and kindness to themselves.

Autoethnographies are “designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). They are written with evocative emotion and creativity that challenges the traditional style of thesis writing. In their own autoethnography, Ellis and Bochner (2006) point out the risk of writing from a removed third person perspective:

I become a detached spectator. I become only a head, cut off from my body and emotions. There's no personal story to engage me. *Knowledge and theory become disembodied words on the page and I lose connection* [emphasis added]. I want to linger in the world of experience, you know, feel it, taste it, sense it, live in it. (p. 431)

Through this journey, I want you to linger in the world of the participants' experiences and mine. I want you to really feel it, taste it, sense it, live in it. This is real life, it is not some piece of knowledge to store away for an intellectual conversation. A core component of common

humanity is recognising that all humans are connected by the fact that we have imperfect and messy stories (Neff, 2003b). By inviting you to share the experience of this journey with me, I hope you will experience a deepening sense of common humanity that will enrich your life. To start us off, let me share the story of how I ended up here in the first place.

My Story

I was convinced that self-compassion is good long before I saw the vast amount of empirical evidence to support that claim. Actually, it was an experience of self-compassion that convinced me that Jesus was real and I wanted to know him. You see, I have always had a strong self-critical voice and for a long, long time it was all I knew. It reminded me that everything was my fault. If something went wrong in my life, it was always because I messed it up. Even when I was teased or my parents broke their promises, that voice told me it was my fault because if I was good enough they would not want to hurt me. Honestly, the thought that I deserved to be comforted and nurtured never even crossed my mind until one weekend when I was 16 years old. I had been invited to a church youth conference, and I remember being surrounded by exuberant peers while I sat trying to withstand the attack of my self-critic who questioned why I was not as excited as everyone else. The fact that I had never been to anything like this and I still barely knew who I thought God was did not matter to the critic. But somewhere among the self-critic's attack, a new voice came in: "Maybe it is okay that I am not as happy as everyone else?" I paused for a moment, thinking that sounded too good to be true. Then the next thought came: maybe God saw the pain I felt . . . still too good to be true. Yet, I distinctly remember feeling an emotional shift, something deep inside my gut and my heart that was convinced it was true— God did see my pain, and he did not think it was my fault. The next few days were filled with grieving, peace, confusion, and joy as I started to get to know this new

voice. Could I really believe that sadness is sometimes warranted? Do I really deserve to be comforted? Would others really care about me in spite of my imperfection? Emotionally, these thoughts felt both scary and incredibly freeing. I really wanted to believe that they were true.

Throughout the following months and years, I began to recognize that voice as the voice of God, and in hindsight it was also a voice of compassion for me. After the youth conference I decided to join my friend's church and there I learnt what it was like to have others compassionately love me. Each week I grew in confidence, joy, and peace. But what was most predominant for me was that my self-critical voice was weaker and less frequently tried to attack me. After everything I had experienced I was convinced that experiencing love from God and from other Christian believers was the source of all emotional strength, encouragement, and healing. I wholeheartedly believed that an experience of love ultimately leads to a more accepting, mindful, and self-aware relationship with the self. I still believe that.

Given the journey I was on, the construct of self-compassion seemed like a natural fit to me. I remember being enamoured when I first came across it halfway through my undergraduate degree. All my friends heard about how cool I thought it was that what I had experienced through my Christian faith could loosely be supported by research! I was planning to continue on to do a master's degree in counselling psychology and I thought I had finally found a way to be authentic and "fit" in the academic world. I worked hard to learn all I could about self-compassion so that I could confidently defend my beliefs that were rooted in what I knew about the Christian faith. The ironic thing was that the harder I worked to understand self-compassion the stronger my self-critical voice became. Month by month, God seemed so much further away. The research proved that it was okay to like myself, even if I was imperfect, but the feelings would not come anymore.

I pushed through though. “Fake it ‘til you make it” was my motto. I tried to spend more time on self-care. I got really good at allowing myself to sleep in, saying “no” to activities when I was run down, or treating myself to a latte if I was really cranky. I diligently tried everything I had learnt through my studies. “Give your self time,” I told myself. But that self-critical voice would not shut up. I tried to practice mindfulness but I just got anxious. I tried to read my bible but I just got angry. I began to question if I was even a Christian. I still believed that God existed; my past experiences had been so tangible I could not deny that. However, maybe I had “fallen away” from God. All good Christians are filled with love, joy, and peace, right? But I wasn’t. Yet something (God) kept me convinced that I still loved God. I definitely was not getting the Christian of the year award, but even when I could not read my Bible I was comforted by verses that promised that no one could snatch me away from God (John 10:28-29) and that he, not me but he, would finish the good work he had started in me (Philippians 1:6). It was with this confidence that I entered graduate school – still living with my “fake it ‘til you make it” attitude.

For years I had kept my self-critic quiet by carefully perfecting work before I handed it in and never allowing myself to get too vulnerable with people. Suddenly these coping strategies were ripped away from me. There is no way to “perfect” counselling skills on your own. It takes practice, with real people – like classmates (who eventually got their chance to dig into my vulnerable spots) or even worse yet, real clients. My self-critic seemed to love every moment of this. It pointed out how I missed pronounced words or sounded awkward with the new skills I was practicing. Even more deviously, it mocked me for talking about self-compassion when I obviously was not very good at it. The worst part is that it practically took away my ability to speak at all. Alone in the safety of my room, just me and God, I still truly believed that I had

something to offer my clients, but the moment I saw another person my self-critic reminded me how pathetically inadequate I have always been and always will be.

I still had a whisper of that voice of self-compassion (even if it was frail and weak) and I was determined that my voice of self-compassion would overcome that self-critical voice. For God had not given me a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7). So when it came time to design my thesis on self-compassion, the only way I knew how to quiet that critical voice was to find my voice of self-compassion. And that is how I got here. Though this is a personal journey, I hope that others will learn from it too.

Starting Points

I am not alone in struggling with self-compassion. In previous research, participants have admitted that self-compassion sounds like a good idea but they find it difficult to feel self-compassionate (Gilbert & Irons, 2004; Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Pauley & McPherson, 2010). As I began to search the self-compassion literature for answers to this struggle with self-compassion, some evidence seemed to point to spirituality as influential in the development of self-compassion (Patershuck, 2013). While I can resonate with the importance of spirituality in my life, it is difficult to understand how the Buddhist spirituality that is talked about within the self-compassion literature fits with my own Christian views. Are they compatible? Although self-compassion may not be a familiar term to many Christians, the behaviours and experiences of having self-compassion may be more familiar. Compassion is a core characteristic of God, and grace is a similar concept that would more likely resonate with Christians (Watson, Chen, & Sisemore, 2011).

It is important to be aware of these issues and respect these possible concerns when working with Christian clients (Gonsiorek, Richards, Pargament, & McMinn, 2009). If, as some

research suggests, spirituality is involved in the development of self-compassion (Birnie et al., 2010; Patershuck, 2013), incorporating a person's Christian faith may be extremely useful in helping them develop a greater sense of self-compassion. A better understanding of these questions may also help Christians who are struggling to be kind to their selves and inform pastors and counsellors working with this population. Additionally, an understanding of how the Christian faith intersects with self-compassion may further expand the psychological understanding of the construct, which currently is still closely tied to the Buddhist faith.

The purpose of this study, then, is to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how the culture and experiences surrounding the Christian faith influence self-compassion. Specifically, I want to understand how self-compassion is lived out in the lives of Christians and how our lived-out faith influences the thoughts, feelings, and actions we have toward ourselves when we experience feelings of inadequacy, failure, and suffering.

The Road Map

We are only at the beginning of this long journey. In Chapter Two I will introduce the relevant literature on self-compassion and spirituality. I have been moving toward self-compassion for years and along with my experiences, the literature is both the source of my hope and frustration. Chapter Three will elaborate on the methodology used for this study. In Chapter Four, I will introduce you to the participants who were my teachers and fellow sojourners on this journey with self-compassion. In Chapter Five, I will explore how this whole thesis journey, from beginning to end, has changed my ability to be self-compassionate. Finally, Chapter Six concludes this journey with a reflection on what has been learnt in the process and the indicated implications for both practice and research. I invite you to join us on this journey to better understand the ways that the Christian faith influences self-compassion.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT WE STARTED WITH

If you look for it, self-compassion can be integrated into all aspects of life; whether I am discussing the Bible, talking with colleagues, or encouraging a friend, they are likely to hear me weave self-compassion into the conversation. My perception of self-compassion, however, is filtered through the lens of my Christian faith. As I embark on this journey to understand what self-compassion means for my life and the lives of those I serve, it seems most natural to begin by carefully revisiting the literature on self-compassion and spirituality.

Defining Self-Compassion

Compassion and self-compassion have become popular constructs in psychology research and clinical practice (Gilbert, 2005, 2010; MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Neff, 2003b). The Merriam Webster dictionary defines compassion as a “sympathetic consciousness of other’s distress, together with a desire to alleviate it” (Merriam Webster Online). Self-compassion is simply compassion turned toward one’s self; in other words, a sympathetic consciousness of *one’s own* distress together with a desire to alleviate it. This simple definition succinctly identifies two defining qualities of compassion and self-compassion: (a) an experiential and conscious awareness of distress, and (b) and a desire to alleviate or lessen that distress.

Drawing on Buddhist philosophies, Neff (2003b) describes self-compassion as being composed of self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-kindness involves taking a gentle, understanding and non-judgemental stance to pain and failure. When self-compassionate individuals experience distress they respond in ways that comfort them and avoid behaviours that invalidate their feelings, and criticize or blame them. Common humanity is about recognizing that every human being experiences challenges and distressing emotions, including oneself. Self-compassion helps individuals recognize that their personal experiences, including perceived

flaws and imperfections, do not separate and isolate them from humanity, but rather unify us in that we all fail to live a life free of struggle. Finally, Neff describes mindfulness as the ability to maintain an awareness of painful thoughts and feelings without over-identifying with them. This allows individuals to acknowledge their cognitive, affective, and somatic experience, whether painful or positive, without allowing distressing thoughts and feelings to consume and overwhelm them.

Gilbert takes a biopsychosocial approach to understanding self-compassion that is grounded in attachment and social mentality theory (Gilbert 2005, 2009; Gilbert & Proctor, 2006). Social mentality theory suggests that humans have developed physiological predispositions, called social mentalities, that encourage the development and maintenance of social relationships (Gilbert, 2005). Each social mentality has a unique pattern of brain activity and physiological arousal that engages the attention and resources needed to manage a particular social relationship and final goal (Gilbert, 2005). Self-compassion is associated with the affiliation-focused system (Gilbert, 2005; Gilbert & Proctor 2006). The affiliation-focused or affiliate-bonding system facilitates care giving and care eliciting behaviours that help create a felt sense of contentment and safety (Gilbert, 2005; Liotti & Gilbert, 2010). Gilbert describes the affective quality produced by the affiliation system as warmth – an emotion characterized by its soothing, peaceful, and safe qualities (Gilbert, 2009, Gilbert & Proctor, 2006). Self-compassion draws on the care giving and care eliciting social mentalities by turning them toward one's self (Gilbert, 2005). Gilbert (2005, 2010) suggests that responding to one's self with nurturing behaviours that convey tolerance, understanding, and warmth, especially when confronted by challenges, inadequacies, and failure, can activate the affiliate-bonding system and the corresponding feelings of safety and warmth. Therefore, key characteristics of self-compassion

include concern for one's physical and emotional well-being; recognizing, sympathizing and tolerating one's distress; developing understanding for the causes of distress; being non-judgemental and non-critical; and creating self-warmth (Gilbert & Procter, 2006).

In both Neff and Gilbert's definitions, self-compassion is about recognizing and tolerating distress; responding to that distress with kindness, understanding, and warmth; and recognizing the importance of feeling connected with the social environment around us. Self-compassion is applied in two main areas: (a) when we experience a distressing circumstance outside of our control, and (b) when we perceive inadequacies or flaws within ourselves. Despite the similarities in both these definitions, the differences in the language and perspectives taken by each author begin to demonstrate the complexity and nuanced understanding in such an experiential concept as self-compassion. Personally, I connect more strongly with Gilbert's definition because it focuses on the lived experience of self-compassion. In contrast, Neff's definition feels overly simplistic and I find it difficult to relate to Buddhist overtones within the definition. By bringing my voice and that of the participants into the discussion of self-compassion, I hope to deepen and elaborate our understanding of self-compassion.

Benefits of Self-Compassion

As you will see in the following section, the applications and benefits of self-compassion are vast and have implications for multiple areas of life. I have organized the breadth of research on the benefits of self-compassion into four broad categories: overall wellbeing, coping and resilience, mental health, and shame and self-criticism.

Overall wellbeing. Self-compassion is frequently associated with measures of psychological wellness such as happiness, optimism, positive affect, life satisfaction, social connectedness, and feelings of warmth (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude,

2007; Neff & Vonk, 2009; Wei, Liao, Ku, & Shaffer, 2011). Some evidence suggests that self-compassion may even be more important than self-esteem in promoting overall wellbeing (Marshall et al., 2015; Neff, 2003b; Neff & Vonk, 2009). Comparing self-compassion and self-esteem, Neff and Vonk (2009) found that self-compassion had a stronger association with decreases in social comparison, public self-consciousness, self-rumination, anger, and need for cognitive closure. Furthermore, self-compassion is positively correlated with measures of identity development, meaning in life, and emotional intelligence (Heffernan et al., 2010; Hope, Koestner, & Milyavskaya, 2014; Phillips & Ferguson, 2013).

Self-compassion does more than simply make people feel good, it is also associated with healthy lifestyle choices, such as exercise, healthy eating, and self-improvement motivation (Adams & Leary, 2007; Breines & Chen, 2012; Magnus, Kowalski, & McHugh, 2010). In a study on the role of self-compassion in women's motives to exercise, Magnus and colleagues (2010) found that self-compassion was positively correlated with intrinsic motivation to exercise and negatively correlated with social physique anxiety. Results from a study on female athletes also suggest that self-compassion plays a role in perseverance, responsibility, initiative, and self-determination (Ferguson et al., 2014). Furthermore, self-compassion appears to promote positive social engagement (Baker & McNulty, 2011; Birnie et al., 2010; Neff, 2003a). In a study conducted by Baker and McNulty (2011), self-compassion was associated with increases in motivation to correct interpersonal mistakes, constructive problem-solving behaviours, and relationships satisfaction.

Coping and resilience. Other than overall wellbeing, self-compassion also has implications for coping with negative life events. Neff and Faso (2014) sought out to investigate how self-compassion influences positive coping in parents of children with autism. As they

predicted, the results from their study showed a positive correlation between self-compassion, life satisfaction, and hope, and a negative correlation between self-compassion, parental stress, and depression. Other studies implicate self-compassion as a resource for coping and adjusting to chronic pain (Wren et al., 2012), cancer (Pinto-Gouveia, Duarte, Matos, & Farguas, 2014), body satisfaction after breast cancer (Przedziecki et al., 2013), menopause (Brown, Bryant, Brown, Bei, & Judd, 2014) and HIV (Brion, Leary, & Drabkin, 2014; Dawson Rose et al., 2014). In older adults experiencing difficulties with their health, higher levels of self-compassion are associated with subjectively less distress to illness, and an increased sense of wellbeing (Allen, Goldwasser, & Leary, 2012). Despite being a psychological construct, self-compassion has implications for coping with physical health problems.

Furthermore, studies indicate that self-compassion promotes psychological resiliency when one is confronted with failure and negative life events, such as academic challenges and distressing social events (Leary, Tate, Adams, Batts Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick et al., 2007; Neff & Vonk, 2009). In a longitudinal study, Terry, Leary, and Mehta (2013) investigated the buffering effects of self-compassion on the challenges faced by first year college students. Prior to starting college students completed a measure of self-compassion and at the end of the semester they were assessed for social and academic difficulties, homesickness, depression, and satisfaction in university. On all measures, students who scored higher in self-compassion experienced greater resiliency and greater satisfaction with their decision to attend college. Self-compassion also appears to buffer against mental health issues in people with low self-esteem and to buffer against post-traumatic stress disorder in high risk youth exposed to traumatic events (Marshall et al., 2015; Zeller, Yuval, Nitzan-Assayag, & Bernstein, 2015).

Mental health. Self-compassion appears to play a significant role in mental health and resilience, and it may also buffer against psychopathology (see MacBeth & Gumley, 2012 for a review). In terms of general mental health, self-compassion is associated with decreases in depression, anxiety, self-criticism, shame, rumination, thought suppression, and perfectionism (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff, 2003a; Neff, Kirkpatrick et al., 2007). More recent studies indicate that self-compassion may be useful in treating mental disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, and psychosis (Carter & Kelly, 2015; Gumley & Macbeth, 2014; Kelly, Carter, Zuroff, & Borairi, 2013; Lawrence & Lee, 2014).

Shame and self-criticism. In opposition to the kind, non-judgement of self-compassion, shame and self-criticism are judgemental, self-attacking ways of being that are associated with a number of psychological difficulties. Self-criticism has been implicated in mood disorders (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992; Gilbert, Durrant, & McEwan, 2006), suicide (Blatt, 1995; Fazaa & Page, 2003), non-suicidal self-injury (Glassman, Weierich, Hooley, Deliberto, & Nock, 2007), anger (Gilbert & Miles, 2000), social anxiety (Cox et al., 2000), post-traumatic stress disorder (Lee, 2005), psychotic voice hearing (Gilbert, et al., 2001), affect regulation (Fichman, Koestner, Zuroff, & Gordon, 1999), and interpersonal difficulties (Zuroff, Moskowitz, & Cote, 1999). Shame has also been associated with a number of psychological difficulties including depression (Kim, Thibodeau, & Jorgensen, 2011), anxiety (Fergus, Valentiner, McGrath, & Jencius, 2010), posttraumatic stress disorder (Robinaugh & McNally, 2010), and eating disorders (Troop & Redshaw, 2012).

Attempts to decrease shame and self-criticism are often difficult and not always effective (Rector, Bagby, Segal, Joffe, & Levitt, 2000). For example, some people are successful at using cognitive behavioural therapy approaches to challenge dysfunctional thoughts and generate

alternative ones but never feel reassured, which may lead to even stronger feelings of shame and self-criticism for not being “successful” (Lee, 2005). In an attempt to overcome some of the gaps in standard cognitive therapy, Gilbert and colleagues (Gilbert & Irons, 2004; Gilbert & Proctor, 2006) began to focus on helping individuals with intense shame and self-criticism develop self-compassion. In a pilot study using compassionate imagery in a support group for people with depression, Gilbert and Irons (2004) found that after only four group sessions the participants, who all identified with strong self-critical voices, were better able to foster feelings of warmth and soothing after practicing compassionate imagery. Despite the promising increase in compassionate skills, the participants still found it difficult to stop self-critical thoughts and some participants were unsuccessful at developing a compassionate image or experiencing positive emotions in conjunction with this exercise. In a second study conducted by Gilbert and Proctor (2006), compassionate imagery was used with a group of people with high shame and self-criticism, who were being treated for severe, long-term and complex difficulties. After 12 weekly meetings, members experienced decreases in shame and self-criticism as well as decreases in depression and anxiety. They also experienced significant increases in their ability to self-soothe, and focus on feelings of warmth and self-reassurance.

Considering the wide range of positive psychological outcomes associated with self-compassion, it is not surprising that psychologists are trying to promote and develop self-compassion as a healthy way of relating to oneself (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003b). Given the array of applications for self-compassion, the impact of promoting and developing self-compassion may positively impact multiple areas of a person’s life. This has led some clinicians to suggest that self-compassion interventions may be useful as a transdiagnostic approach to psychotherapy (Gilbert, 2010; Wall, Warner, FitzMedrud, & Sanders Merritt, 2015).

However, much less is known about the development of self-compassion and the experience of self-compassion within different populations and cultures.

Development of Self-Compassion

One thing that is still unclear about self-compassion is how it develops (Lawrence & Lee, 2014). Searching through the literature on self-compassion, it is easy to find studies that demonstrate the benefits of self-compassion, but little is available on how self-compassion develops in the first place. To better understand what is currently known about the development of self-compassion, I explored some of the theoretical ideas that researchers have proposed, descriptions of psychotherapeutic interventions used to increase self-compassion, and some of the obstacles and struggles people face in developing self-compassion.

Theoretical conceptualizations. There is a lot of literature describing the benefits of self-compassion but little about how it develops. Gilbert (2005) suggests that self-compassion is a function of the affiliation-focused affect system and care giving mentality described earlier. This system is developed through safe and nurturing relationships, typically from the soothing and guiding presence of caregivers (Gilbert, 2005). From his social mentality theory, Gilbert suggests that self-compassion is the internalization of compassionate abilities that are developed as we experience compassion from others. Conversely, people who grew up in cold and threatening environments tend to be more self-critical and struggle to be kind to themselves (Gilbert, 2005; Gilbert, Baldwin, Irons, Baccus, & Palmer, 2006). Supporting the importance of caregiving in the experience of self-compassion, Breines and Chen (2013) found that activation of a care-giving schema was associated with increases in state self-compassion. The affiliation-focused system has many similarities to the attachment systems described by Bowlby (Gillath et al., 2005). Some researchers believe that the ability to experience and give compassion is closely

connected to attachment development (Gilbert, 2005, 2009; Gillath et al., 2005). There is strong correlational evidence to support an association between self-compassion and secure attachment (Neff & McGehee, 2010; Pepping, Davis, O'Donovan, & Pal, 2015; Raque-Bogdan, Ericson, Jackson, Martin, & Brayn, 2011; Wei et al., 2011).

Lawrence and Lee (2014) present a model for moving from self-criticism to self-compassion. In their qualitative study looking at the experience of developing self-compassion, Lawrence and Lee asked individuals diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder to share about their experience of compassion-focused therapy. Five main themes emerged from the data and the researchers synthesized the themes into a model of development from self-criticism to self-compassion (see Figure 1). The first two steps in the journey from self-criticism to self-compassion that they proposed had to do with fears of self-compassion. Self-criticism was so familiar to participants that they feared giving it up would mean losing part of their identity (theme 1). Furthermore, self-compassion was experienced as something alien and “bewildering” (theme 2). At first self-compassion was resisted by the participants. The third step they identified was the emotional experience of therapy and the therapeutic relationships (theme 3). In this stage participants began to experience a sense of hope and comfort as they encountered the generosity and kindness of the therapist. For those that participated in group therapy, there was also a sense of common humanity that created a positive emotional experience. In the fourth step, participants began to internalize and accept self-compassion as a positive emotional experience (theme 4). Lawrence and Lee added that after individuals accept self-compassion they develop a more compassionate relationship with the self and experience positive affect from self-compassion. In turn, self-criticism is managed by self-compassion. The final part of their model is a changed outlook on life and increased hopefulness for the future (theme 5).

Participants described enjoying life more after developing self-compassion and having a new sense of hope for the future. Lawrence and Lee present an intriguing model of the development of self-compassion, however, they do not describe how individuals move from acceptance of self-compassion to having the skills of self-compassion. Moreover, their model is based on a therapeutic intervention rather than an understanding of how self-compassion develops naturally. Further research is needed to confirm the validity of this model.

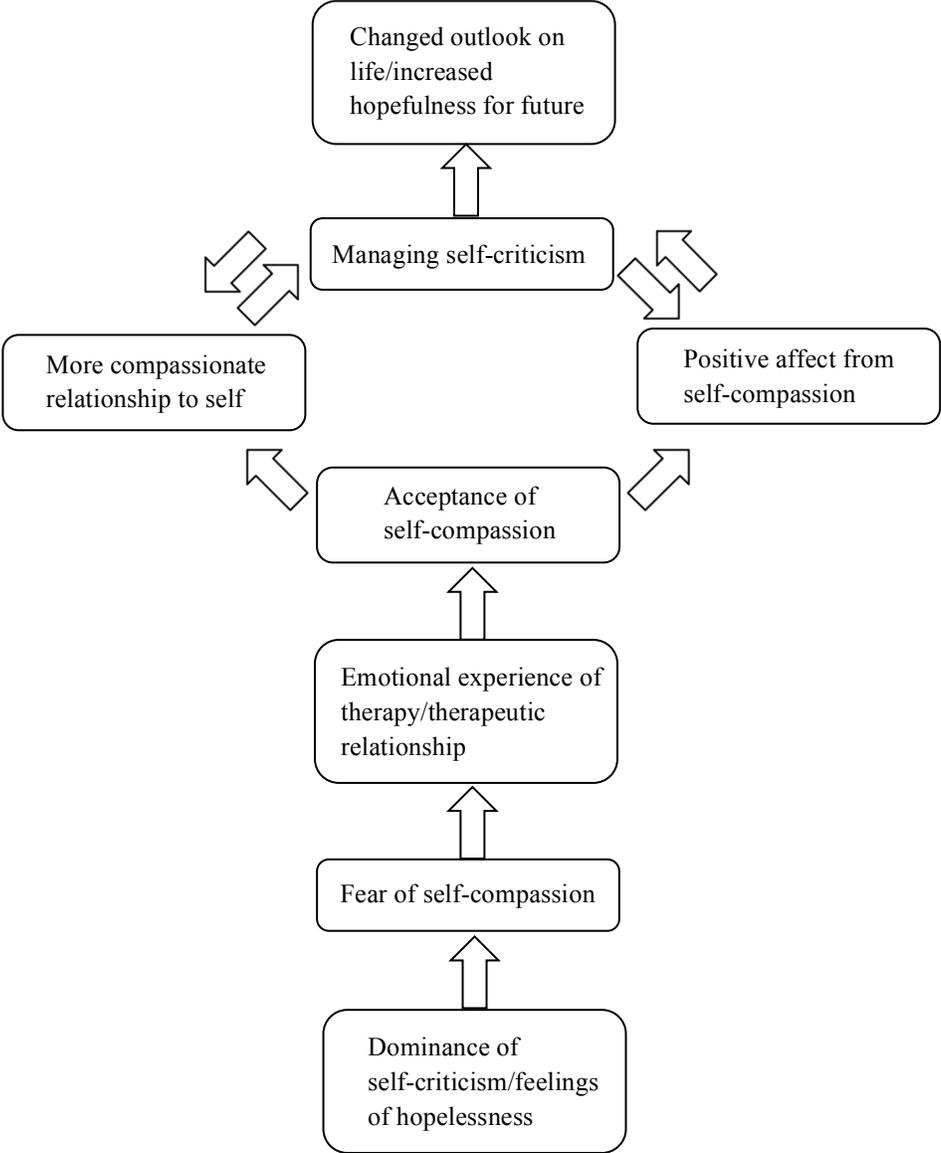


Figure 1. Lawrence and Lee’s (2014) model for the development of self-compassion.

Finally, in a recent qualitative study it was found that participants perceived self-compassion as continuing to develop and increase over time (Patershuck, 2013). Patershuck (2013) conducted qualitative interviews with seven practicing psychologists to explore how they understood self-compassion. One of the themes that arose was growth from life experiences. The participants described their self-compassion as continuing to grow and develop through life experiences and age. Spirituality was also identified as a foundational part of developing self-compassion. What spirituality meant to the participants was not defined but it was considered important in gaining perspective and moving toward personal growth. The continual development of self-compassion and the impact of spirituality on self-compassion is an area for further investigation.

Interventions that increase self-compassion. A number of psychotherapeutic interventions directly or indirectly promote self-compassion. Mindfulness, for example, is a core component of self-compassion that has become popular in the field of psychology. Interventions specifically focusing on mindfulness have been successful in increasing self-compassion (Birnie et al., 2010; Shapiro, Brown, & Biegel, 2007). As part of the third wave of cognitive behavioural approaches, mindfulness has become the focus in a number of interventions such as acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), mindfulness-based stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013). Key components of mindfulness include paying attention to the thoughts, emotions, and body sensations, in the present moment, without judgment (Farmer & Chapman, 2008; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013). Linehan (1993) also includes mindfulness as part of dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT). She described mindfulness as having three parts: observing, describing, and participating. Observing entails simply noticing the thoughts,

emotions, and body sensations that one is experiencing, in the present moment. Describing entails describing one's experiences, in the present moment, without judgment, inferences, or explanations. Finally, participating entails being aware of the present moment and letting go of ruminating thoughts. In addition to mindfulness, DBT promotes self-acceptance and self-soothing abilities.

The Gestalt two-chair intervention has also been suggested as a technique for increasing self-compassion (Gilbert & Irons, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2005). As part of her dissertation research, Kirkpatrick used a modified version of the Gestalt two-chair with 40 undergraduate students. The students participated in a single session using the Gestalt two-chair intervention designed to increase self-compassion. Measures of self-compassion were taken before and after the intervention and compared to a control group matched for similar levels of self-compassion. The results indicated no significant difference between the control group and intervention group. The small number of participants and single session do limit the interpretation of the study. Kirkpatrick suggests that self-compassion may take time to develop and need to be worked with over multiple sessions.

Compassion-focused therapy (CFT) focuses on developing a sense of nurturing and care for oneself (self-compassion) and others (Gilbert, 2009). CFT and compassionate mind training (CMT) were developed by Gilbert and colleagues for people with high shame and self-criticism, but is also useful for working with a number of presenting issues, including long-term and complex difficulties (Gilbert, 2009; Gilbert & Irons, 2005; Gilbert & Proctor, 2006). Taking a multimodal approach, CFT uses psychoeducation, mindfulness training, and therapist modelling to help clients recognize the importance of self-compassion and develop the skills to be more self-compassionate. Both cognitive and experiential approaches are used to help individuals

become more aware of their negative self-talk and encourage them to counteract self-attacking thoughts and emotions with more compassionate, self-nurturing thoughts, behaviours, and feelings. Used within CFT, CMT is a tool that is used to foster compassionate skills (Gilbert, 2009; Gilbert & Proctor, 2006). Activities that are part of CMT include imagery, letter writing, and mindfulness, each of which are used to generate feelings of warmth, nurturance and social connectedness. Therapist behaviours and compassion are also an important part of CFT (Gilbert, 2009, 2010). Based on the social mentalities model described above, the goal of CFT is to strengthen the affiliate-bonding system which responds to care from others as well as self-compassion (Gilbert, 2005, 2009, 2010).

In a pilot study of CMT, outpatient clients who were being treated for severe, long-term and complex difficulties participated in a weekly CMT group program for 12 weeks (Gilbert & Proctor, 2006). At first the group focused on exploring the nature of self-criticism but conversations about self-criticism and self-attacking continued throughout the group, as this was an ongoing struggle for the members. Psychoeducation, compassionate imagery and mindfulness practice were used to introduce members to the idea of compassion and self-compassion as a source of healing and growth. In the beginning, the group members found it difficult to generate compassionate imagery. With practice, most group members were able to generate a compassionate image and compassionate feelings at least some of the time, but sometimes with great difficulty. Ongoing discussions about the rationale for CMT and self-compassion occurred throughout the group to address a number of concerns, fears, and difficulties with self-compassion that arose. At the end of 12 sessions, participants had increased their ability to self-soothe and focus on feelings of reassurance and they experienced decreases in shame, self-criticism, depression, and anxiety. The results from this pilot study indicate that it is

possible to increase self-compassion but it can be difficult and take significant support and practice.

Neff and Germer (2013) also designed a group format that incorporates psychoeducation and mindfulness practice to increase self-compassion. In a pilot study and randomized control trial (RCT) of their Mindful Self-Compassion program (MSC), 25 participants took part in an eight-week workshop specifically designed to train participants to become more self-compassionate. Although mindfulness is an important component of self-compassion, Neff and Germer describe them as two different orientations toward an experience. Mindfulness, they argue, is focused on observing and accepting the sensations, emotions, or thoughts that are being experienced, whereas, self-compassion is focused on the person who is experiencing the same event. A self-compassionate response to distressing experiences is to comfort or soothe oneself as they go through the experience. MSC uses psychoeducation and homework activities to explicitly teach self-compassion skills. The course describes self-compassion and addresses misconceptions that people may have about self-compassion, teaches skills for developing a compassionate inner voice and learning to deal with difficult emotions, and provides a foundational knowledge of mindfulness. In the first study, participants improved on measures of self-compassion, mindfulness, life satisfaction, happiness, depression, anxiety, and stress after completing MSC. The second study was a RCT and participants were randomly assigned to MSC ($n = 25$) or a waitlist control group ($n = 27$). Compared to the control group, MSC participation resulted in greater increases in self-compassion, compassion for others, mindfulness, and life satisfaction. MSC participants also experienced less depression, anxiety, stress, and avoidance, compared to the control group. These gains remained at the 1-year follow-up. In fact, life satisfaction for the MSC group had increased at the 1-year follow-up.

Difficulties with self-compassion. Even when a person believes in the benefits of self-compassion and is actively trying to be more self-compassionate, he or she may continue to struggle to stop the self-critical voice and feel the kindness and warmth that accompanies self-compassion. In a study using compassionate imagery one participant stated that they were “aware of benefits of being compassionate but unable to do [it]” (Gilbert & Irons, 2004, p. 513). Pauley and McPherson (2010) heard similar views in their study with clients struggling with depression and/or anxiety. Their phenomenological study explored the experiences and meaning of compassion and self-compassion with individuals diagnosed with depression or anxiety. Three main themes emerged: compassion is a kind and active response, self-compassion is meaningful and useful, and being self-compassionate is difficult. Many participants believed that developing self-compassion would help them to feel better, but they felt that their depression and anxiety made it difficult, or even impossible, to be self-compassionate toward themselves.

Most of the research on self-compassion to date has focused on its relationship to positive psychological functioning and its use in therapy, but no studies have focused on why some people have difficulty developing self-compassion. Various struggles, however, have been noted in the literature including difficulty generating compassionate images, various fears of compassion, and simply seeing it as a weakness rather than something to be developed (Gilbert & Irons, 2005; Gilbert, McEwan, Matos, & Ravis, 2011; Gilbert & Procter, 2006).

Despite the increasing popularity of compassion, some people have preconceived views of self-compassion as something that makes a person vulnerable, is self-indulgent, unrealistic and cannot be trusted (Gilbert & Irons, 2004; Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff, 2004). The focus of self-compassion on kindness, understanding and non-judgement can lead people to believe it promotes passivity and acceptance of weaknesses (Neff, 2003b, 2004). However, in actuality,

self-compassionate qualities may create a less threatening environment for a person to acknowledge their weaknesses and try to improve on them. In support of this, Leary et al. (2007) found self-compassionate individuals were more likely to acknowledge their role in negative events, while other studies have linked self-compassion to personal initiative, constructive problem-solving behaviour, and increased motivation to correct interpersonal mistakes (Baker & McNulty, 2011; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007).

More commonly, people experience difficulties as they try to foster self-compassion. In studies on the use of compassionate imagery, some participants found it difficult to think of compassionate qualities or develop a compassionate image (Gilbert & Irons, 2004; Gilbert & Procter, 2006). When these difficulties were discussed, many of the participants talked about having few memories of care and kindness. Instead, they discussed having experienced the opposite, growing up in cold, sometimes abusive and neglectful homes. In support of this, Irons, Gilbert, Baldwin, Baccus, and Palmer (2006) found that self-reassurance is related to recall of parental warmth, which is negatively associated with self-criticism. Another study found that people with high self-criticism find it easier to generate hostile and powerfully self-critical images (Gilbert et al., 2006).

Fears related to the feelings associated with self-compassion have also been described as an obstacle to self-compassion (Gilbert & Irons, 2004; Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Lawrence & Lee, 2014). Gilbert and Procter (2006) suggest that persistent memories of abuse and neglect, and bullying or parental/peer criticism can make it difficult for people to feel safe. These memories may have qualities similar to trauma memories, which can arouse feelings present when the incident occurred and trigger a sense of current threat (Lee, 2005). Physiologically, some people appear to respond to compassionate imagery with a stress response reaction

(Rockliff, Gilbert, McEwan, Lightman, & Glover, 2008). Gilbert also suggests that the contentment and calm associated with self-compassion may not have been safe for people who grew up in an abusive environment (Gilbert & Irons, 2005). For these people, feelings of peace and warmth may trigger a sense of vulnerability and fear that they are not protected from potential dangers (Gilbert & Irons, 2005; Gilbert & Proctor, 2006).

Surveying the literature available on self-compassion, it is clear that our knowledge on the development of self-compassion is limited. In contrast to the diversity of topics and issues that self-compassion has been applied to, the research on the development of self-compassion is sparse and largely confined to three major areas of exploration: (1) attachment theory, (2) psychoeducation and mindfulness interventions, and (3) fears and resistance to self-compassion. This gap in the research leaves many questions that need to be explored, one of which is the influence of faith and spirituality in the development of self-compassion.

Defining Religiosity and Spirituality

There is no clear consensus in the literature on how to define religiosity and spirituality. Traditionally, religiosity appears to have represented “some greater-than-human power, the feelings in those who have sensed such a power, and the ritual acts they have subsequently carried out” (Wulff, 1996, p. 46). By this definition, religiosity is a broad concept that includes both experiential and behavioural aspects of interacting with some power that is beyond human capacity. However, the psychology of religion literature has begun to diverge from this understanding of religion by distinguishing religiosity and spirituality as two distinct constructs (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Pargament, 1999; Wulff, 1996). Religion started out as a dynamic, experiential, and personal construct, but now it is often defined as simply the institutions, rituals, and ideologies that organize a belief system (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Pargament, 1999; Wulff,

1996). On the other hand, spirituality has been assigned the role of defining the more experiential, dynamic, and transcendent aspects of relating to the world (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Pargament, 1999; Wulff, 1996).

Despite the attempts to distinguish religiosity and spirituality, the definitions of each term continue to be unclear and are often used interchangeably (Anderson & Grice, 2014; see Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005 for a review). Some scholars argue that distinguishing religiosity and spirituality as two separate constructs sets up a false dichotomy that is largely biased toward spirituality (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Wulff, 1996). The separation of religiosity and spirituality has essentially polarized the two terms, where religiosity is viewed as institutional and bad, and spirituality is viewed as personal and good (Pargament, 1999). Pargament (1999) argues that these false dichotomies obscure the complex interplay between institutional religion and spiritual experiences. Spiritual development, he argues, is a core goal embedded within most religious traditions. It is true that some religious activity has become more about routines and traditions than personal experiences, but for the most part these are the exceptions to the norm (Pargament, 1999). To address these concerns, Anderson and Grice (2014) present religiosity and spirituality as two distinct but interconnected constructs. They suggest that spirituality is best represented as an experiential knowledge of an intangible reality. For example, an inner sense of purpose and meaning cannot be perceived by our physical senses (i.e. seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting) and thus is an intangible reality that is perceived by the spirit. In order to be spiritual, Anderson and Grice argue that one must strive toward some sort of standard. Religion, therefore, can be understood as the values and doctrine that provide an “intellectual understanding of the ideals that must be attained” (p. 4). These values and doctrine can be personally defined and do not need to be part of an organized religion. Together, religion and

spirituality work in partnership where religion provides an intellectual understanding of what is sought after and experienced as spiritual, and spirituality represents the experiential knowledge that one receives. Anderson and Grice also assert that one cannot be spiritual without being religious, however, they can be religious without being spiritual. In order to communicate spirituality one must have a framework for which to understand the experience, which in essence is the definition they use for religion. However, in order to be spiritual, one must also actively pursue and experience the ideals defined by their religious beliefs. Anderson and Grice illustrate this point using prayer as an example. If someone believes that prayer is important but never prays, he lacks the spiritual experience that integrates religion and spirituality. Also, if someone prays only because she feels pressured, she is equally not experiencing the fullness of spirituality. In this way, religion is not pushed to the sidelines but remains an important part of spiritual growth.

Anderson and Grice's conceptualisation of religion and spirituality fits well with the goals of this study. I was specifically interested in talking with people who have an experiential faith (i.e. spirituality), but also share beliefs that are core to Christianity (i.e. religion). Each person who identifies as a Christian has different personal experiences and theological views on what it means to be a Christian. Therefore, I was interested in how people whose faith is influenced by a Christian narrative understand and develop self-compassion. In this way, faith is viewed as personal and dynamic but I also recognize that those who identify themselves as Christians have specific beliefs that create similarities in their faith development and how they live their lives. In addition, given the negative connotations that some people have around the word "religion", spirituality is referred to most often and distinctions between religious traditions and personal experiences are made. Christian scriptures and traditions influence one's personal

faith and thus cannot be separated from individual spiritual experiences. Still, careful awareness must be paid to how institutional ideologies and traditions influence individual's experiences of spirituality and self-compassion.

Self-Compassion and Spirituality

In the psychology literature, the current understanding of self-compassion has been heavily influenced by Buddhist beliefs and values (Germer, 2009; Gilbert, 2009; Neff, 2003b). Kabat-Zinn (1990) popularized the integration of Buddhist spirituality into clinical practice with his introduction of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). Compassion for the self and others is a core component of many Buddhist meditations and paved the way for the current prevalent understanding of self-compassion (Germer, 2009). Despite its Buddhist roots, spirituality has not been widely researched in regards to self-compassion. In addition, most major religions talk about compassion but are even more rarely discussed in relation to self-compassion (Balslev & Evers, 2010).

In the Patershuk (2013) study described above, spirituality arose as a subtheme of “gaining perspective”. Gaining perspective had to do with recognizing both positive and negative life experiences as part of a larger context. Within this theme participants described that self-compassion helped them to see the world in a more positive light, accept life's struggles, and have a greater sense of spirituality. Spirituality was described from the participants point of view as helping them to “let go” and accept things they cannot change, helping them to understand the self and the world better, and enhancing personal growth through their increased awareness of the self and others. It was apparent that “spirituality” enhanced these participants experience of self-compassion but more in-depth investigation is necessary to understand what spirituality meant to them and how their spirituality was helpful in their

experience of self-compassion.

Spirituality was also included as one of multiple measures in a quantitative study on the influence of MBSR on self-compassion and empathy (Birnie et al., 2010). Participants completed self-assessment measures of self-compassion, empathy, spirituality, mindfulness, and mood prior to and immediately after participating in an eight-week MBSR course. Analysis revealed that self-compassion was positively correlated with spirituality both before and after the course, suggesting that people who are self-compassionate tend to be more spiritual. In this study, the authors used the Functional Assessment of Chronic Illness Therapy-Spiritual Well-Being to assess spirituality. Designed for patients with chronic illness, Birnie et al. (2010) adapted the scale to replace illness specific items with more general terms such as “hard times have strengthened my faith/spirituality” (p. 363). This scale considers two subscales of spirituality: meaning, and peace and faith, but once again specific spiritual practice that may be influencing self-compassion are not addressed in this study.

Given the connection between secure attachment and self-compassion (Gillath et al., 2005; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Pepping et al., 2015), the literature on attachment to God may also have implications for the development of self-compassion. There is strong evidence to suggest that people relate to God as a symbolic attachment figure who can provide a safe haven and a secure base to draw near to in times of distress (Beck, 2006; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013; Miner, 2009). Within the attachment to God literature, there are two competing models that explain attachment patterns in relationship to God: the compensation model and the correspondence model (Hall, Fujikawa, Halcrow, Hill, & Delaney, 2009). Proponents of the compensation model suggest that God acts as a substitute attachment figure for individuals with insecure attachment patterns (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 1997). Alternatively,

the correspondence model suggests that an individual's attachment to God will correspond to their general attachment style with human attachment figures (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013; Hall et al., 2009). There is evidence to support both models and some scholars suggest that the compensation model is a motivator toward religious conversion, but once a relationship with God is established, individuals revert back to their prior attachment patterns (Beck, 2006; Hall et al., 2009; Miner, 2009). Another explanation is that the correspondence model works via implicit relational knowledge, while the compensation model is a reflection of explicit spiritual knowledge (Hall et al., 2009). In light of this, Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2013) suggest:

An important research question to address in this context ... is whether people who have earned a certain degree of attachment security via their surrogate attachment to God also come to view God as increasingly accessible at implicit levels of processing, or, put differently, in their "ways of being" with God. (p. 149)

Further research is needed to answer this question, but developing a more secure relationship with God may have positive implications for the development of self-compassion.

Drawing on a Christian understanding of God, Homan (2014) conducted a study exploring the relationship between self-compassion, attachment to God, and mental health (i.e. depression and anxiety). The sample of 181 participants included both religious and non-religious individual, with 15% reporting no religious affiliation and 33% reporting that they never attend worship services. A number of religious backgrounds were represented in the study including Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and other Christian. Findings showed a negative correlation between self-compassion and anxious and avoidant attachments to God, and depression and anxiety. Self-compassion also appeared to mediate the connection between anxious and avoidant attachments to God and depression and anxiety. Drawing from

attachment theory, Homan suggests “people who perceive God as loving, accepting, and available retain a sense of positive self-worth while recognising their own weaknesses and shortcomings. Essentially, those who perceive God as compassionate are able to extend compassion to themselves” (p. 985). Homan described God as the ultimate attachment figure: stronger, wiser, and always available. If placed into the context of CMT, God would thus be the “perfect nurturer” who is always loving and compassionate. It is important to note that in this study, “God” refers to whatever spiritual power the participant identified with.

Of specific interest for this study is the influence of Christian faith experiences on self-compassion. Watson, Chen, and Sisemore (2011) began to highlight some of the ways Christian beliefs may be associated with self-compassion in their quantitative study of grace, beliefs about sin, and self-compassion. They found that self-compassion was significantly correlated to Christian beliefs about grace and sin. In this study, grace was measured using the Richmond Grace Scale (Sisemore et al., 2011); items on this scale address Christian beliefs about grace such as grace overcomes legalism by recognizing that grace cannot not be earned, a true understanding of grace still acknowledges the reality of sin, and receiving God’s grace facilitates love and forgiveness for others (Watson et al., 2011). Watson et al. (2011) suggested that grace would have a positive association with self-compassion because grace has a quality of kindness for the self that is experienced through relationship with God. The Beliefs about Sin Scale (Watson, Morris, Loy, Hamrick, & Grizzle, 2007) focuses on the psychological benefits of Christian beliefs about sin. Four adaptive sin-related beliefs are identified within the scale: self-improvement (i.e. “beliefs about sin help me see my faults so I can correct them and become a better person”), perfectionism avoidance (i.e. “knowledge of my personal sinfulness has lifted the burden from my shoulders of trying to be perfect”), healthy humility (i.e. “knowing that I am

sinful helps keep me from being arrogant”), and healthy self-reflection (i.e. “my understanding of sin helps me achieve true self-insight”). Watson et al. (2011) argued that beliefs about sin can facilitate the acknowledgement of suffering, failure, and inadequacies that Neff (2003b) suggested are at the heart of the common humanity component of self-compassion.

In conclusion to their study, Watson et al. (2011) found that strong beliefs about grace and positive beliefs about sin were positively correlated with self-compassion.

Self-compassion and Christian Theology

The term self-compassion is not common in Christian writing, but Christian values and doctrine speak about the value of compassion and the forgiven identity of Christian believers. It is difficult to review the entire breadth of Christian theology, even in how it relates to self-compassion, because it covers vast topics relating to life and spirituality, and there are many differing views even within the Christian faith. In his book *Understanding Doctrine*, McGrath (1990) explains the difference between doctrine and theology. He describes doctrine as the values that a community strives toward, and theology as the values of the individual. However, most Christian leaders would agree that Christian doctrine and theology both rest on an experience of God (Barad, 2007; McGrath, 1990). Describing the relevance of doctrine in the Christian spiritual life, McGrath (1990) explains how doctrine is developed through a combination of scripture and the experience of the truth of scripture being lived out in our lives. He asserts:

The Christian belief in the divinity of Christ did not arise as an intellectual theory, but through the impact of *experiencing* Jesus Christ as God. The early Christians were thus faced with the intellectual task of thinking through the implications of their experience of Christ as God, and expressing it in as clear and persuasive a manner as possible. (p. 40)

Therefore, a lived Christian faith includes a relationship with God, meaning that the Christian experiences the transcendent presence of Christ (Keating, 2000; McGrath, 1990). Through this relationship, many resources are opened up to the individual, such as compassion, transformation, and healing (Benner, 2012; Bobrinskoy, 2003; Frenette, 2005, Ward, 2007). A full understanding of Christian doctrine is beyond the scope of this project, but I have endeavoured to pull together some of the key Christian doctrines as they relate to self-compassion.

The problem of sin. Ultimately, the idea that humans are imperfect and commit sins against God is at the centre of the Christian faith, but the way this has been interpreted differs across church history (McGrath, 1994). However, the unifying element of most Christian doctrine is the belief that the resurrection of Christ is able to free humanity from sin and death (which is essentially at the root of all human suffering; Hughes, 2004; McGrath, 1990). Hughes (2004) talked about the difference between the Orthodox view of ancestral sin and Augustine's contribution to the idea of original sin. Ancestral sin, according to Hughes, focuses on sin as a disease that plagues all of humanity, and God's response to sin is one of compassion. In contrast, Hughes asserts that original sin bears the image of an angry, vengeful God who demands retribution for sin. Mahoney and Pargament (2004) describe two types of spiritual conversion that also take different perspectives on sin. First is what they called the "classical Christian perspective". From the classical Christian perspective, everyone struggles with the primary sin of pride, meaning that we rebel against God believing that we can succeed in life without him. Mahoney and Pargament suggest that this view "renders a person vulnerable to denial of his/her limitations and compromises his/her judgment about ethical choices" (p. 484). The second type of conversion they identify is the "reformist feminist Christian perspective".

This perspective suggests that the traditional view of sin as self-exaltation is patriarchal, with many women struggling with self-negation more so than self-exaltation. Instead, the feminist Christian perspective suggests that the primary sin for some people is putting others at the centre of their life instead of God. Mahoney and Pargament describe how putting others at the centre of our life can prevent us from building a strong sense of self and prevent authentic connection with God. This model of spiritual conversion suggests that healthy spiritual growth entails developing a healthy sense of self and personal autonomy. Individuals struggling with insecurities, self-worth, and failures to set healthy boundaries may resonate stronger with the feminist Christian perspective as it validates their emotions and value to God (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004). As with self-compassion, the feminist Christian perspective on sin provides a more compassionate way of relating to shame, inadequacy and failure. As you can see, the Christian faith has a long history of ideas on how we should relate to our sinful selves, and some are more helpful than others in promoting self-compassion. Christian values that focus on the love of God, forgiveness, and transformation are more likely to relate to self-compassion, whereas views of individuals as inherently bad may promote self-criticism and unhealthy self-denial.

Christian perspectives on compassion. The construct of compassion has a rich history within Christian doctrine and theology. As one of the most important theologians of the middle ages, Aquinas described compassion as an internal emotion that accompanies the theological virtue of charity, which is given to Christians by God (Barad, 2007; McGrath, 1994). Aquinas believed that the love of God is the source of all acts of charity (Barad, 2007). Throughout the ages, this belief has remained and present day theologians continue to assert that the capacity for compassion requires an inner transformation of the heart and mind through the Holy Spirit (Bobrinskoy, 2003; Dreyer, 2003). Nouwen spoke extensively on the concept of compassion and

its role in healing and transformation (Dreyer, 2003; Nouwen, 1972; McNeill, Morrison, & Nouwen, 1982). For Nouwen, compassion meant “[going] where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish” (McNeill et al., 1982, p. 4). As he explains it, the construct of compassion is intimately tied with suffering and one’s ability to sit with another in places of brokenness and suffering (Dreyer, 2003). The idea of identifying with suffering and brokenness is not typically appealing to most people, which is why theologians assert that compassion requires a transformation of becoming more like God (Dreyer, 2003). This process typically occurs gradually over time and it is often deepened by one’s own experiences of suffering (Barad, 2007; Dreyer, 2003; Nouwen, 1972).

Aquinas suggested a stage model for the development of charity, which he considered the source of compassion (Barad, 2007). He suggests that in the beginning, individuals become aware of and concerned about avoiding sin and desires that oppose charity. The second step is to continue to practice and progress in the virtue of charity. Finally, the third stage is pursuing union with God. Aquinas’ model for developing charity and compassion suggests that this is not a simple or quick task; in fact, it is often accompanied by perseverance in the face of difficulties (Barad, 2007).

The burden of compassion is considered too much to bear without God (Bobrinskoy, 2003; Dreyer, 2003). As Nouwen (1981) so eloquently puts it:

Through prayer, we can carry in our heart all human pain and sorrow, all conflicts and agonies, all torture and war, all hunger, loneliness, and misery, not because of some great psychological or emotional capacity but because God’s heart has become one with ours.
(p. 87)

In order to enter into the pain of others and offer compassion, Aquinas asserted that we should

extend compassion toward our spiritual nature, even more than we extend it to others (Barad, 2007). Barad (2007) expands on this point suggesting that we first need a healthy soul, or a healthy psyche, in order to have compassion for others; he contends, “How can one give what one does not have? In order to give compassion to another, a person must first love herself. In fact, our compassion for others is derivative of our love and compassion for ourselves” (p. 27). In order to give compassion we need to be healthy enough to really be with the other without looking to get anything from them (Barad, 2007). Another thing that can put distance between others and our self is judgement (Dreyer, 2003). The evaluation that comes with judgment creates a distinction and distance between those we judge and our self (Dreyer, 2003). This makes it difficult to truly encounter a person in their suffering. Again, the discussion comes full circle, back to our need for the presence of God to transform us into more compassionate, loving, and grace filled people.

Ultimately, Christians are called to compassion as a reflection of God’s compassionate character. In reading the Gospel accounts of Jesus, compassion was a large part of his ministry and teaching. Benner (2004) uses the story of the Samaritan woman to exemplify Jesus’ compassion, noting:

After he put his finger on her moral failure, the expected did not happen. He did not condemn her! He did not even tell her to go and sin no more. Instead, after revealing her to herself, he revealed himself to her, disclosing his identity as the Messiah. (p. 51)

Jesus’ compassion was freely given and not based on what the Samaritan women deserved. This is true in numerous accounts of Jesus’ life and teachings throughout the Gospels (Yancey, 1997). Taking this into account, Eggemeier (2012) contends “the focus of Jesus’s life was never the sins of the other, but rather the suffering of the other” (p. 46). Even looking back at the Old

Testament, Stassen (2008) explores how the stories of the Old Testament paint the picture of a compassionate God. Our understanding of the character of God is important because it has the potential to affect our willingness to develop compassion in our own lives (Johnson, Okun, & Cohen, 2014). In one study, Johnson et al. (2014) found that the value participants placed on benevolence was positively correlated with the extent to which they thought of God as nurturing, compassionate, caring, generous and forgiving. Jesus teaches, “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate” (Luke 6:36), and as Christian we seek to make this true in our lives.

Comfort in suffering. The transcendent and compassionate nature of God is a source of comfort during times of suffering (Benner, 2012; Bobrinskoy, 2003; McNeill et al., 1982). It may be hard to believe that God is loving and compassionate when we consider all the tragedies that occur in this world, but for many Christians, there is comfort in knowing that even Jesus, who was God and man, experienced pain and suffering (Dreyer, 2003; Hsu, 2012). Biblical scholar John Stott explains:

I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross . . . In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? . . . Our sufferings become more manageable in light of his. (as cited in Hsu, 2012, p. 24)

The idea of common humanity takes on a new meaning when one considers that even God himself is included in the common human experience of suffering. Even more astonishing, the Bible explains that Jesus takes our suffering and bears it as his own (Hsu, 2012). There is something oddly comforting in just simply knowing that we are not alone in our suffering, and that someone has chosen to experience the pain with us (Nouwen, 1972). The challenge is recognizing God’s compassionate work during times of suffering and trusting him to bring us through it (Dreyer, 2003). Jesus taught that there will be trials and suffering in the world, but he

also promised that he would provide comfort, strength, and eventually unending joy, to any who puts their trust in him (Dreyer, 2003). Nouwen suggests that “pain [is] part of, not separate from God’s work in this world” (Dreyer, 2003, p. 720). Therefore, Dreyer (2003) concludes, “healing does not necessarily mean taking away the pain, but rather connecting the individual’s pain with the greater human experience of pain” (p. 720).

Relating to the self. Christians in North America are often criticized for their guardedness toward emotions, self-awareness, and even grace, but these characteristics do not generalize to all Christians (Benner, 2004; Elliott, 2012; Yancey, 1997). As an introduction to his book, *The Gift of Being Yourself*, Benner (2004) writes:

It is a profound irony to write a book promoting self-discovery to people who are seeking to follow a self-sacrificing Christ. It might well make you fear that I have forgotten – or worse, failed to take seriously – Jesus’ paradoxical teaching that it is in losing our self that we truly find it (Matthew 10:39). As you read on I think you will see that I have done neither. (p. 13)

Part of the tension may be that many Christian teachings seem paradoxical and truth is often found in the tension between two extremes. As he continues, Benner identifies the middle ground when he writes:

Still, Christian spirituality has a great deal to do with the self, not just with God. The goal of the spiritual journey is the transformation of self [to be more like Jesus]. As we shall see, this requires knowing both our self and God. (p. 14)

As Benner asserts, knowing ourselves is a crucial step toward allowing God to infiltrate every part of our being. For example, Christians frequently speak about the importance of grace and yet lack the self-awareness to recognize how their own attitudes and behaviours contribute to an

atmosphere of judgment and lack of grace (Yancey, 1997). Yancey (1997) acknowledges that judgment is often easier than grace, but he laments at how inaccurately the Church represents God when they fail to exhibit grace. Reflecting on Jesus' teachings, Yancey described grace as a backwards concept in a world that rewards individuals for success, for grace means to experience favour or reward when one's actions do not merit it. With grace there is freedom to make mistakes and to explore even the darkest and most unwanted parts of our being.

Christians seek to become more like God, and therefore God's compassion towards humanity becomes a model for how we should respond to our own suffering and failures. Using biblical examples to explore the constructs of Christ-like love and forgiveness, Cheong and DiBlasio (2007) conclude that self-love is within God's design for humanity. Furthermore, they propose that the best way to love the self is to love God. Similarly, Aquinas suggested that loving God means that we grow to love what God loves, which in turn means loving others and also loving our self (Barad, 2007). The Christian journey is a journey of getting know God and our self in a more accurate light; and as we grow closer to God we learn that we are deeply loved, warts and all (Benner, 2004). Describing the doctrine of justification by faith, McGrath (1990) explains:

Our status before God is something given, not something earned. As Martin Luther . . . put it: "Sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive." God's love for us is not dependent upon our achievements. We can never earn our salvation. We do not need to be high achievers to become Christians; it is God, not us, who achieves things. (p. 86)

Self-compassion becomes acceptable because God has deemed that we should be treated with compassion, not because we have earned it. Without the pressure to earn love and acceptance,

even seemingly unacceptable parts of our self can be brought into our awareness, where it can be softened and healed by the love of God (Benner, 2004). Benner (2004) suggests that “allowing God to accept me just as I am helps me accept myself in the same way” (p. 56). In support of the idea that we treat ourselves the way that we perceive God feels toward us, McConnell and Dixon (2012) found that self-forgiveness was correlated with one’s perceived forgiveness from God.

Believing that our self is good, worthy, and loveable is different than believing that we are always good and never in need of forgiveness (Pembroke, 2012). Pembroke (2012) distinguishes between one’s personhood and their achievements. From his Christian perspective, Pembroke suggests that our personhood is always good, worthy, and loveable, but our actions are not always good and we are not always successful. In order to grow and be a better person, we should acknowledge the places where we need to improve, loving our self despite our failings (Benner, 2004; Pembroke, 2012). Rather than striving for perfection, Pembroke (2012) counsels that we should aim for improvement that moves us toward the ideal. Regardless, God’s acceptance is not conditional upon our success, and we also should resist putting conditions on our acceptance of our self.

God’s healing presence. Christians’ believe that God is the source of healing for the wounds we experience and the shame we carry from our life experiences (Dreyer, 2003; Pembroke, 2012). Keating refers to God as the “Divine Therapist” who guides the process of healing (Frenette, 2005). The process Keating describes is one where the presence of God has the effect of bringing unconscious wounds into a person’s awareness so that the wounds can be healed (Frenette, 2005). As wounds are brought to an individual’s awareness, God continues to guide the healing process by “reveal[ing] emotional programs for happiness that need to be

released in order for a person to experience life as God originally intended” (Kuchan, 2009, p. 11). To explain this process, Kuchan (2009) uses the example of a client she worked with in spiritual direction. As the client experienced God as present in her inner being, she began to experience feelings of being held, safe, and wanted, which were significant in her healing process. Frenette (2005) also reports that the experience of God’s presence leads to “true” existential security, control, and esteem. Similarly, Keating (2000) suggests that when the words of Christ resonate deep within our being, we will begin to love like Christ, which is to love with great understanding and compassion. In support of this idea, Hardy, Zhang, Skalski, Melling, and Brinton (2014) found that religious activity was positively correlated with spiritual experiences, and spiritual experiences were positively associated with empathy and compassion. Some Christian pastors and psychologists suggest that reflecting on God’s love and presence can reverse preconceived values and ideas, including the shame and negative self-image that people hold (Keating, 2007; Pembroke, 2012).

Christian contemplative and mystic traditions speak about encountering God through processes similar to the mindfulness Neff (2003b) describes as one of the core components of self-compassion (Burton-Christie, 2006; Keating, 2000, 2005, 2007). For example, Thomas Keating (2005, 2007) developed centering prayer after recognizing the similarities between contemplative practices and Eastern methods of meditation. Contemplative and mystic practices embrace the mystery behind the experience of transformation that we experience in the presence of God and the aim of these practices is to become aware of God’s presence in our lives (Burton-Christie, 2006; Frenette, 2005; Keating, 2005, 2007). As a tool for encountering God in this way, the focus of Centering Prayer is on slowing down and paying attention to the transcendent experiences of the divine that occur in each present moment (Frenette, 2005; Keating, 2007).

As it has already been mentioned, it is in this place that transformation is said to occur. In addition, Burton-Christie (2006) describes how the contemplative practice of solitude can bring to light our fragility and the pain of uncertainty in our lives. However, he also notes that when we stand naked and vulnerable before God we begin to recognize our finiteness and it is in this humility that transformation occurs and compassion develops. Overall, the writings of contemplative authors paint the picture of a God who meets people with compassion in their weakness and imperfections. Through practices similar to mindfulness, God's presence becomes a source of comfort in our suffering.

Contemplative practices like centering prayer are similar to mindfulness but many Christians are cautious and hesitant when they hear the words mindfulness or meditation because these terms are more known for their Buddhist roots (Knabb, 2012; Symington & Symington, 2012; Vandenberghe & Costa Prado, 2009). Symington and Symington (2012) argue that the skills developed through mindfulness practice can help Christians become more aware of God's presence and leading. Christian perspectives on mindfulness help to highlight issues that might arise when using spiritually grounded practices, such as mindfulness, in clinical practice. The explanations and language used to introduce interventions can influence people's openness to explore new constructs that may be beneficial in their development. Christians and church leaders may be more open to encouraging self-compassion if they are able to see how it can fit within a biblical framework.

Essentially, the core of Christianity is the love and compassion of God expressed through Jesus dying on the cross for the forgiveness of sins – his expression of grace for all of humanity (Elliott, 2012; McGrath, 1994). In many ways this sets up the perfect environment for self-compassion. Where self-compassion acknowledges failures, inadequacies, and suffering as part

of the human experience, Christian theology recognizes sin and suffering as part of the human reality. Where self-compassion requires extending comfort and kindness toward one's self during times of suffering and failure, God's love models forgiveness, mercy, and hope in the midst of sin and suffering. Finally, where self-compassion encourages mindfulness, Christians are encouraged to walk in humility, recognizing their imperfections in the context of knowing that they will always be accepted and loved by God. As you may be starting to see, there are many ways that Christian theology might inform and broaden our understandings of self-compassion.

Summary

The research is clear that there are many benefits to being kind and compassionate to one's self but there is still much that is unknown about self-compassion. Recently, evidence has been emerging that suggests a link between self-compassion and spirituality (Birnie et al., 2010; Paterchuk, 2013). Exploring self-compassion in relation to spirituality may help increase our understanding of the development of self-compassion. One place to start is the area of Christian psychology. Constructs in the Christian faith such as grace and compassion share important elements with self-compassion, but Christian beliefs remain relatively unexamined in the self-compassion literature. In addition, some Christians are hesitant to embrace psychological ideas that resemble other religions, even if they would be beneficial. Unfortunately, such hesitations may become an obstacle for Christian clients in psychotherapy. This thesis aims to open up the conversation of how Christianity can influence self-compassion and in doing so will hopefully provide us with a broader understanding of the construct of self-compassion and different ways that it may develop.

The Present Journey

There is no formula for the Christian life. Looking at the history of the Christian church, one may find a variety of doctrinal beliefs and even more individuality emerges as you begin to include individual experiences of Christ. It appears that some of the theology and doctrine taught in churches may support self-compassion, while other teaching may become a stumbling block toward self-compassion. The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Christians who demonstrate the ability to be self-compassionate. By sharing with you the participants' experiences, I hope to begin to uncover some answers to lingering questions about how self-compassion, with its inarguable benefits, can be understood, accepted, and experienced within the context of one's Christian faith. At the end of this journey, I hope that all of us will have a better understanding of how to support people toward a more self-compassionate life. In addition, a primary goal of this research is to begin to expand our understanding of the spiritual aspects of self-compassion. To date, Buddhism has had the predominate influence on self-compassion, but it is not the only religion that speaks of compassion and self-compassion. An exploration of self-compassion from a Christian perspective will hopefully provide us with a more diverse understanding of self-compassion, which may aide therapists, pastors, and individuals to find a way of developing self-compassion that fits best for each person.

CHAPTER 3: OUR ROAD MAP

One of the biggest difficulties I encountered in choosing my thesis topic and research method was breaking past my views of what research “should be”. I experienced a mini crisis in my research design class when I learnt that there are different philosophical approaches to research that include different assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology), how reality is known and how the researcher involves themselves in the research process (epistemology), and the place of values in research (axiology; Ponterotto, 2005). Often these assumptions that underpin research go unacknowledged but researchers in the field of counselling psychology stress the importance of understanding these assumptions in order to critically evaluate the quality of the research (Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005; Slife, 2008). As I thought through my own assumptions about knowledge and reality, I realized that my personal understanding of knowledge and truth differed from how I have thought about research in the past. Some of my most valuable knowledge has come through listening to individual stories about people’s lived experiences and allowing it to refine my own understanding of the world. Keeping these values in mind, this chapter discusses how I implemented the listening guide, along with elements of autoethnography, to explore the stories of self-compassion in the lives of Christian individuals.

Research Design and Paradigm Assumptions

I had definitely fallen into the category of people who do not consider the values that underpin research. Naïvely, and partially to maintain credibility as an academic, I never questioned that science and research could be anything but controlled experimental designs that minimize subjectivity in order to find one true reality. However, these post-positivist assumptions – that there is one true reality that can be discovered through objective analysis – do

not seem to fit with my beliefs about counselling (Ponterotto, 2005; Slife, 2008). The more I mature and experience life, the more I recognize that there are aspects of life that are difficult to comprehend objectively, especially in the field of counselling psychology. Feminist post-modern paradigms offer alternative suggestions for the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions that inform research methods and measures for trustworthiness and credibility.

Crawford (2013) speculates that “most U.S. feminist psychologists do not spend a lot of time sitting around thinking about our epistemological assumptions” (p. 256). Based on the multiple orientations toward theoretical issues and research practices that exist between feminist researchers, this is not surprising. Some scholars argue for a feminist epistemology, while others claim that feminist research can be conducted using multiple methods and epistemologies (Crawford, 2013; Millen, 1997; Olesen, 2011). Regardless, what appears to define feminist research are the values of equality, empowerment, reflexivity, and social change (Allen & Piercy, 2005; Crawford, 2013; Millen, 1997; Yost & Chmielewski, 2012). Feminism draws our attention to issues of oppression and privilege that can occur even in the research process (Olesen, 2011). Aware of the researcher/participant hierarchy, feminist researchers take steps to reduce these power disparities (Yost & Chmielewski, 2012). In qualitative research, empowering participants to speak as experts of their own experience is one way to empower participants and create greater equality in the research process (Yost & Chmielewski, 2012). Also, recognizing that the self of the researcher is always present, researchers reflect on their own experience and perceptions within the research process (Yost & Chmielewski, 2012). This reflexivity provides greater self-awareness of the places where a researcher might inadvertently replicate the patterns of oppression and privilege that they are trying to dismantle (Olesen, 2011).

Finally, Crawford (2013) argues that all it takes for research to foster social change is “to make a knowledge claim that is convincing to the relevant community” (p.259). Choosing topics that are relevant to the target community and conducting a well-designed study is the starting point for using research to create social change (Crawford, 2013).

Keeping in mind the values described above, feminists are adept at adapting research methods and blending epistemologies in order to develop a study that will most effectively produce the knowledge and change they aspire to (Allen & Piercy, 2005; Olesen, 2011). There is a willingness among feminist researchers to question the standard way of doing things, including the way that we conduct research (Allen & Piercy, 2005; Olesen, 2011). Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) suggest that qualitative research is moving toward a blurring of research paradigms. They explore how many of the post-modern paradigms include overlapping ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. Considering the significant overlap between post-modern paradigms, the current study integrates feminist values with constructivist and critical-ideological paradigms to guide the research process. Drawing on both paradigms, the ontological assumption that guides this study is that there are multiple interpretations of reality that are socially and historically constructed (Mertens, 2010). Our understanding of reality is therefore shaped by ethnic, cultural, gender, social, and political values, as well as through the interactions between the participant and the researcher (Mertens, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). Since the assumption is that there are multiple versions of reality, researcher subjectivity is accepted as one of the epistemological assumptions (Mertens, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). In line with constructivist values, my desire is understand the participants stories from their own point of view (Mertens, 2010). I acknowledge that my understanding of the research topic is only one possible reality and that others may come to a different understanding without making the results

less valid. However, in order to privilege the participant's point of view they will be given the opportunity to review the summaries I compose of our interview together. An additional goal of this study, which draws on the critical-ideological paradigm, is for transformation to occur from the research process (Mertens, 2010). As I spoke about in the introduction, I hope that not only will the participants be empowered and positively impacted by telling their stories, but also that your thinking and mine would be transformed by hearing their stories. Finally, in terms of axiological assumptions it is probably clear by now that my values have been integrated into the research process. Again, this fits within both the constructivist and critical-ideological paradigms which acknowledge that it is impossible to eliminate the researcher's values from their analysis (Mertens, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005).

The current study. This thesis represents the blending of two qualitative methods, the listening guide (Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan & Brown, 1992; Doucet & Mauthner, 2008) and autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011), unified by a feminist post-modern paradigm that integrates the assumptions of constructivist and critical-ideological paradigms. In designing this study, I considered a number of qualitative research methods, including phenomenology (Wertz, 2005), grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2009), and enhanced critical incident technique (Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, & Amundson, 2009). However, using the listening guide in combination with autoethnography provided the best framework to understand the embodied experience of self-compassion and spirituality, as well as creating a space for researcher reflexivity. Both methods strive to privilege the subjective experiences of the participants and the researcher. The listening guide provides the researcher with a structured analysis designed to identify multiple voices contained within an individual's story (Brown & Gilligan, 1991; Gilligan et al., 2006). These voices reflect individual, social, and cultural narratives that have become part of that individual's

experience and meaning-making. In order to separate the researcher's voice from that of the participant, researcher reflexivity is an important aspect of the listening guide (Brown & Gilligan, 1991). To supplement researcher reflexivity, autoethnographic components are used. Autoethnography is a method that describes and analyzes the experiences of the researcher to gain a better understanding of cultural experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). Consistent with a social constructivist paradigm, the combination of these methods supports the construction of knowledge by privileging the experiences of both the researcher and the participants.

Since it is impossible to remove my beliefs and emotional reactions from my perspective of the data, I have chosen to do my best to acknowledge what I bring to the process so that others can carefully critique my conclusions. In addition, I acknowledge that there is a value-commitment consistent with feminist and critical ideological frameworks inherent in this research design. For example, Ellis et al. (2011) describe autoethnography saying, "this approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially conscious act" (p. 273). As I begin to find my own voice as a professional and an academic, I am beginning to realize how often I have rejected my own personal values and desires in an attempt to conform to what I thought was expected of me. A secondary goal of this thesis is to continue to find that voice by challenging the different cultural voices that have silenced me and thus influenced my development of self-compassion. This focus on understanding oppressive cultural influences is consistent with a critical ideological paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005).

Both methods share many similarities in paradigm assumptions, values, and research foci. First, both autoethnography and the listening guide focus on the way culture influences personal stories (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011; Gilligan & Brown, 1992). A focus on

the multiple voices that influence people's stories is central in both methods (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Gilligan et al., 2006). Second, both methods value the unique embodied inner experiences of those taking part in the research (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Gilligan et al., 2006). Third, the design of both methods requires intimate, authentic relationships between the researcher, the research topic, and the participants (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011; Gilligan & Brown, 1992). A shared goal of these methods is to produce research results that are relatable and more easily applied to people's lives.

Rationale for using the listening guide. Spirituality can be a difficult phenomenon to study as it represents an internal experience as opposed to easily observed behavioural actions and changes (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004). To understand spiritual constructs we must somehow gain access and understanding to one's nuanced, internal experiences, which are not easily communicated through words. The listening guide is a useful method for studying internal experiences because it helps us "listen" to the implicit meanings behind what is said and not said (Gilligan, 2015). The listening guide is designed to sensitise researchers to the multitude of voices that are present as an individual tells their story (Brown & Gilligan, 1991; Gilligan et al., 2006). Each voice represents an internal experience that results from a unique combination of influences from culture, and relationships with oneself and with others (Brown & Gilligan, 1991). Thus, in each individual's story there can be many different voices that tell different stories about the person's experience (Brown & Gilligan, 1991; Gilligan et al., 2006). Listening to the multitude of voices present in each story provides a window into participants' internal experiences, and the nuances that can be implied through tone of voice, context, and paraverbal communication. At its best, the listening guide allows the speaker and the listener to communicate embodied experiences that cannot be defined by words (Gilligan, 2015).

Rationale for using autoethnography. Despite my reluctance, including autoethnography as part of the research design really is the most responsible approach to my research question, given where I am in my life right now. Ellis and Bochner (2006) describe autoethnography as a journey, and I am on a journey to discover my own voice of self-compassion. My journey is inherently value laden, emotional, and vulnerable, which fits perfectly with autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Within a constructivist and critical-ideological paradigm, there is room for researcher's experiences and values in the construction of knowledge. Autoethnography simply makes these experiences and values explicit.

Autoethnography is a useful method for sensitising readers to “issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). Using autoethnography, we strive to identify and illuminate the multivocal influences of language and culture that impact the way individuals' view reality and relate with the world (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Both the participants and myself will have different stories to share. Each one of our stories provides a unique voice and perspective from which to understand the insider experience of developing self-compassion as a Christian. By telling our stories, I hope to begin a conversation that can inform the counselling psychology field about the different ways that Christians interact with and experience self-compassion.

Distinguishing what exactly autoethnography looks like is a difficult task. Part of the reason for this is the autoethnographic researcher has creative freedom in the way that they choose to explore the personal experience that they are seeking to understand (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Wall, 2006, 2008). For example, Doloriert and Sambrook (2009) suggest that a spectrum of auto-ethno relationships are possible when conducting an autoethnography. At one end of the

spectrum the researcher-*is*-researched. With this type of autoethnographic research the researcher reflects only on their experiences and how it relates to the research question. On the other end of the spectrum is the researcher-*and*-researched. Here the researcher chooses to explore the experiences of others but the researcher also has similarities to the population being investigated. In the researcher-*and*-researched scenario, the researcher is not the sole participant but they draw on their experiences to inform the analysis of the data and the presentation of the results. For this study, I have chosen to take the researcher-*and*-researched approach. Interviews will provide descriptions of experiences of self-compassion in Christians, aside from my own personal experience. My personal experience will be included in addition to the participants' experiences but not privileged above them. However, from a social constructivist perspective, I expect that situating the auto-ethno relationship in this way will inform my own ongoing development of self-compassion by allow me to learn how other Christians understand and live with self-compassion.

Autoethnography also varies in the way that information is communicated. Some forms of autoethnography are focused on more traditional and analytic scientific approaches, whereas others are more evocative in nature and emphasize empathy and resonance within the reader (Anderson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; McIlveen, 2008). Again, I have chosen to take the middle ground here. As I begin to find my voice, I am noticing a desire to take a creative and evocative approach to my autoethnography but I also feel the tension knowing that psychology is more comfortable with analytic approaches (McIlveen, 2008). It is with this in mind that I have chosen to take an evocative autoethnographic approach to this thesis while working it into the framework of a (somewhat) traditional thesis.

Finally, Ellis and colleagues (2011) describe multiple approaches to autoethnography,

including personal narratives, layered accounts, reflexive dyadic interviews, and interactive interviews. Each of these approaches has been incorporated within the unique design of this thesis. In personal narratives, the author focuses on telling their story about a particular experience to help others better understand how personal experiences intersect with the cultural context they find themselves in. The main tone of this thesis is a personal narrative; it is the story of my journey of understanding, experiencing, and investigating self-compassion within the context of Christian experiences. But it is more than a description or story of thoughts about my experience. I also am seeking to ground my understanding within the context of the participants' experiences and the literature on self-compassion, which is what Ellis and colleagues call a layered account ethnography. Layered accounts situate the researcher's experience among the data collected, the analysis process, and the relevant literature. The inclusion of interviews also adds creativity in how I will relate to the participants. In reflexive dyadic interviews, the focus is on the emotions and meaning that are stimulated by the interview process. Interactive interviews are collaborative endeavours where the researcher and the participant work together, in conversation, to try to understand the research question. Observations from both a reflexive dyadic and an interactive approach will be included in the data collection and analysis for this study.

One way to understand autoethnography is to break it down into the three main components: the auto (personal experience), the ethno (cultural connection) and the graphy (the research process; Ellis et al., 2011; Holt, 2003; Wall, 2008). These are described below.

The auto: me. The “auto” of an autoethnography refers to personal input and experiences of the researcher (Ellis et al., 2011; Holt, 2003; Wall, 2008). As I have discussed, the emphasis on the person of the researcher can vary in autoethnographic designs. In this

particular study, the focus is on adding my story to that of the participants. The “auto” component is obvious through my personal reflections and inclusion as a participant. In order to systematically include my own experiences, a personal interview was conducted to provide concrete data to this process.

One critique that comes about from the focus on the self of the researcher is a belief that it is self-indulgent (Burnard, 2007; Holt, 2003; Sparkes, 2002). I keep asking myself the same question. Why should I think that my personal story could have any value to you? But it is not just about me, it is also about the participants and the way that everyone has a story that has the potential to influence others (Burnard, 2007; Freshwater, Cahill, Walsh, & Muncey, 2010; Sparkes, 2002). Autoethnography uses the experiences of the researcher to elucidate that experience within the larger cultural context. I am not sharing my story because I simply want you to hear it, I am sharing it because I hope that others will resonate with my story and find themselves with a deeper understanding of self-compassion and a greater appreciation for the influence Christian traditions have on self-compassion. Many have suggested that the quality of an autoethnography should be judged by whether or not it impacts the reader, broadening their understanding of the research question, moving them to action, or helping them cope better in similar situations (Duncan, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011; Freshwater et al., 2010; Holt, 2003). I agree that this endeavour is self-indulgent if I fail to add something unique and valuable to the results. This intimidates me because my critical-voice insists that I do not have anything valuable to add, but my belief in the uniqueness of each individual and the power of connection through sharing our common humanity counters that critical voice. At the end of the day, it is up to you as the reader to decide whether my story has an impact on your understanding of self-compassion.

The ethno: cultural context. The “ethno” in autoethnography is about reflecting on how

culture influences experience. Conducting interviews with the participants and analysing the interviews using the listening guide provides an opportunity to build an understanding of our similar cultural experiences within a relational context. Furthermore, social constructivist scholars assert that all human actions and experiences are situated relationally (Gergen, 2011; Sugarman & Martin, 2011). The interview process can help to deepen the participants' and my understanding of self-compassion as we explore how our experiences are similar or different. Also, exploring my own self-compassion through learning from other people's stories of self-compassion is befitting with the common humanity component of self-compassion that Neff (2003b) described.

Strong, Pyle, deVries, Johnston, & Foskett (2008) contend, "The researcher who positions him or herself as an autoethnographer . . . pays careful attention not only to the speaker's story, but to the background context or foundation from which the speaker's story is continually constructed" (p. 124). This is one of the reasons why autoethnography and the listening guide work well together. The listening guide is a qualitative method sensitive to the way in which individuals are embedded in and influenced by culture (Gilligan et al., 2006). It provides a means to systematically pay careful attention to the background context of the participants' stories, including noticing what remains unsaid (Gilligan & Brown, 1992).

The graphy: systematic research process. The "graphy" in autoethnography refers to how the research is conducted and put together, which includes the design of the study and the final written product. In this study, the listening guide is used to provide structure for the study. Combining autoethnography and the listening guide will reduce the ambiguity around the autoethnographic process, which was intimidating at first (other beginning autoethnographers have found this as well, e.g. Wall 2006, 2008). I have also chosen to present the information as a

storied account of my journey with the research project and self-compassion. This is consistent with evocative autoethnographies, which are intended to draw the reader into the experience being described (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Therefore, the tone is very personal and has more creative liberties in the use of language than a traditional thesis.

The interviews with the participants had a more personal, collaborative tone, as well. The listening guide was developed to dismantle the power difference between researcher and participants in order to enter into authentic conversations with the participants (Gilligan & Brown, 1992). Similarly, approaching autoethnography using what Ellis and colleagues (2011) referred to as interactive interviews, the interviews took on a more conversational tone that allowed both the participants and myself to work together to build a better understanding of the way in which our faith, and our journeys have contributed to our current state of self-compassion. This process also allowed me to more fully engage with what I am learning from the participants and to seek clarification or confirmation from them regarding my perceptions of their words. Further discussion of how I used the listening guide to analyze the data is provided in the analysis section.

Participants and Recruitment

In the present study, seven participants were interviewed, including myself. Purposeful sampling, and a nomination process were used to recruit participants. Emails (Appendix A) were sent to professional contacts that included missionaries, pastors, and individuals serving in local church or para-church ministries, requesting that they nominate and forward the information to anyone they thought fit the criteria and might be interested in participating. Inclusion criteria for this study included the following: (a) participants self-identified as a Christian, (b) nominators identified the participants as someone whose personal faith is evident in their everyday life, and

(c) participants scored moderate or higher on the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003a).

Eleven individuals were nominated and screened using an online version of the long-version SCS (Appendix B) and a brief telephone screening (Appendix C). During the telephone screening, participants were asked to talk about their faith background and their understanding of self-compassion, to confirm that they met the inclusion criteria. Following the telephone screening, one individual self-determined that they did not fit the inclusion criteria, while three others chose not to participate due to scheduling conflicts. The remaining six participants completed the online survey that included the SCS, and demographic questions (Appendix D). Scores on the SCS range from 1-5 with scores of 3 or higher indicating moderate to high levels of self-compassion (Neff, 2003a). All six participants met the cut-off score of 3 on the SCS.

Seven participants, including myself, took part in the study; there were 2 males and 5 females ranging from 25 to over 65 years of age, all of who came from a European or European-Canadian background. Participants self-identified as having been a Christian anywhere from 12-60 years, with a mean of 34.9 years ($SD = 16.5$). Denominational affiliations included Christian and Missionary Alliance, Anglican, and Brethren. At the initial point of contact, the participants mean score on the self-compassion scale was 4.15 ($SD = 0.5$). Table 1 provides information on the characteristics of each participant.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym ³	Age Range	Denominational Affiliation	Years as a Christian	SCS Score
Caitlyn	25-34	Alliance	20	4.18
Cara	65+	Mennonite Brethren	50	4.22
Genevieve	25-34	Anglican	12	3
Jeanette	35-49	Mennonite Brethren	38	4.37
Josh	35-49	Brethren	34	4.38
Paige	35-49	Christian Brethren	30	4.34
Zach	65+	Mennonite Brethren	60	4.53

Data Collection

In order to capture the participants' experiences and subjective meaning, semi-structured interviews, following the listening guide protocol were used to gather data. Interviews ranged from 60-180 minutes in length and took place in the participant's home or in a private office on the campus of Trinity Western University. The first 10-15 minutes of the interview was spent building rapport, reviewing informed consent and confidentiality (Appendix E), and inviting the participant to ask any remaining questions about the process. To obtain a common understanding and language about the main topic of the study, self-compassion, participants were first ask to share what self-compassion means to them, including words and images that they use to refer to self-compassion. Next, participants were invited to share the story of their journey with self-compassion. The relational nature of the listening guide allowed for flexibility in the

³ With the exception of my data, pseudonyms were used to identify the participants and maintain confidentiality. Participants were given the opportunity to choose their pseudonym or have the co-researchers choose one for them.

interview process and this was used to elicit more depth and richness in the data. Throughout the interview, prompts were used as necessary to encourage further clarification and information about the individual's experiences, particularly in response to abstract concepts such as their felt experiences of faith and self-compassion (see Appendix F for a list of common prompts). Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed by the principal investigator, with the exception of one interview that was transcribed by a research assistant.

A member check interview was conducted following analysis of the initial interview. The purpose of this interview was to seek feedback regarding the accuracy of the analysis summaries and to debrief the overall experience of participating in the study. Prior to the member check interviews, participants were emailed a summary of their interview to review. The member check interviews ranged from 30 – 60 minutes in length, and with the exception of two telephone follow-ups, the interviews occurred in the participant's home. Participants were invited to reflect on how accurately the researcher's interpretations and summaries had captured their stories. Feedback on both the felt resonance of the summary with the participant's sense of identity, as well as feedback regarding the language used to represent the participants' stories was provided and integrated into their summaries. Participants were also asked if there was additional information they would like to add to the initial interview. Finally, participants discussed the experience of participating in the study. At the end of the interview, participants were given a \$20 gift card as a token of appreciation.

Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using the four steps outlined by the listening guide (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008; Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan et al., 2006). Each step of the listening guide requires reading through transcripts and attuning to a particular voice or aspect of

the story; Gilligan and colleagues refer to this process as “listening” (Brown & Gilligan, 1991; Brown, Tappan, Gilligan, Miller, & Argyris, 1989; Gilligan et al., 2006). By listening for each voice, the researcher is also listening for the ways in which culture and relationships are influencing the individual’s story. In addition, each interview was analysed by at least two separate listeners.

Six graduate student co-researchers were recruited to assist with the analysis and the research team consisted of both male and female co-researchers. Each co-researcher signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix G) and was assigned a separate interview and completed all four steps of the listening guide for that interview. As the principal investigator, I analyzed all seven interviews. Each listener brought their unique resonances and interpretations to the analysis process, and working in collaboration with another listener helped us develop a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences (Gilligan et al., 2006). With the exception of two interviews, each interview was analyzed by a different co-researcher and myself. This occurred due to the time constraints of each co-researcher but in the end it was helpful for refining the voices. Each co-researcher approached the analysis with new insights and perspectives on the voices identified in previous interviews. As a result, voices were redefined and/or expanded into multiple voices until they most accurately reflected the experiences of each participant. The process we used to implement the listening guide method of analysis is described below.

Step 1: Listening for the plot. In step one, the listener is asking, “What is happening here?” (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008, p. 405). To begin comprehending the participant’s story, each listener focused on the plot of the story – the who, what, when, where, and why. Other important aspects of the story such as recurring words, images and metaphors, dominant themes, contradictions, edits to the story, and shifts in the narrative position (i.e. shifting between first

person, second person, and third person narrative voice) were also noted. In the first listening we began to get a sense of some of the important voices in the story. Each listener also paid attention to his or her cognitive and emotional responses to the participant's story. Finally, a written response to the participant's story was provided by each listener, which included our thoughts, feelings, points of resonance, and points of disconnection.

Step 2: I-poems. Step two focuses on how the participants speak about themselves; this was done by isolating all the first person pronouns in the transcript and constructing an I-poem. Each listener read through the transcript searching for and underlining all the first person pronouns, the accompanying verb, and any accompanying words that seemed important. Next, an I-poem was created by placing each selected passage a separate line, following the order that they appeared in the transcript (see Appendix H for an example). Arranging the "I" statements in this way allowed the listeners to attune to shifts in meaning or changes in voice (Gilligan et al., 2006). Like a poetic stanza, the I-poem statements often had a natural flow that indicated shifts in voices. Of particular interest for this study was listening to how the participants' speak about themselves and if there are different voices that emerge in the way they relate to themselves. The I-poem allowed us to capture parts of the story that were not directly spoken, but were still central to the meaning of the participant's story.

Step 3: Listening for contrapuntal voices. Step three shifts the focus to listening for how the participant's narrative relates to the research question. At this stage, we began listening for voices that reveal the participant's experience of self-compassion and how their faith influences their experience of self-compassion. In order to tease through the multiple layers of each participant's experience, multiple listenings occurred at this stage, using the following process:

Identifying and defining contrapuntal voices. The first task was to identify and specify the different voices that may speak to the research question. This was done in dyads with the principal investigator and a co-researcher. Together we reviewed our reflections from step 1 and step 2, and discussed potential voices that related to the research question. We considered tone quality, themes, theoretical frameworks, and intuitive resonances in order to identify and define the voices that we would code for. After a potential voice was identified, we briefly described the voice and the characteristics that would be used to identify the voice within the transcript.

Listening for each contrapuntal voice. After a voice was defined, the co-researchers read through the transcript together listening for that particular voice. For each interview, the transcript was read through a separate time for every voice that was identified. In each reading, the listeners paid attention to just one particular voice and highlighted all the instances where that voice appeared in the narrative. A different colour was used to highlight each voice, and in some instances the same text was representative of more than one voice.

Assessing the contrapuntal voices for relevance and breadth. Once the listeners had highlighted the voices they defined, the voices were reviewed to ensure that each voice was accurately described and represented a meaningful construct from the narrative. The entire set of voices was also reviewed to ensure that all the meaningful aspects of the participant's story were represented. This was an iterative process that required us to return to the text and listen for new voices. At times, changes were made to the descriptions or new voices were added. When new voices emerged in subsequent interviews, I returned to the previous interviews to listen for the new voices with the co-researcher who had analysed the previous interviews.

Identifying relationships between all the voices. The final stage explored how the contrapuntal voices and the first person "I" voice relate together to answer the research question.

As with most qualitative research, this is a highly interpretive process and a number of interrelationships appeared. For example, some voices appeared to be harmonious, while others seemed to be in opposition to one another or to contradict another voice. The different colours used to identify the voices provided a visual representation to help in this process.

Step 4: Composing an analysis. The final step of the listening guide was to create a summary of each participant's interview, describing what was learnt about the research question from his or her story. At this stage, all the voices were considered together to create a holistic understanding of the individual in relation to the research question. The main goal of this step of the listening guide was to bring the voices together into a holistic summary.

Quality and Trustworthiness

The constructivist and transformative assumptions of this study mean that I am more concerned with constructing meaning from mine and the participants' experiences and producing change in myself (and hopefully each participant and reader), than I am with producing a study that represents a generalized objective truth that can be reproduced. That being said, I also take pride in being diligent and careful in my work and do not want to taint what I have to say by doing it haphazardly. A number of steps were taken to ensure that the autoethnographic and listening guide process was systematic (as much as an ambiguous, transformative process can be), transparent, and authentic. Ellis and colleagues (2011) suggest that "the questions most important to autoethnographers are: who reads our work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going?" (p. 284). These are difficult criteria to evaluate, but I hope that by borrowing from traditional qualitative criteria for rigour, I have produced a thesis that people will want to read because it impacts them in such a way that they cannot help but talk about what they have learned. Richardson (2000) describes five criteria that she uses to evaluate

creative analytic practices, in which she includes autoethnography. In addition to some of the criteria covered by Richardson, Morrow (2005) discusses ways to evaluate adequacy of data and adequacy of interpretation as criteria for trustworthiness across research paradigms. Below I describe how I endeavoured to ensure rigour throughout the research process.

Substantive contribution. According to Richardson (2000), a well-written research project contributes something to the broader field in which it was written. Working from a constructivist paradigm, the goal is not to ensure that the study has discovered some absolute truth about the topic but rather that it contributes to our *understanding* of the construct being studied. The text should also be grounded in a social scientific perspective, with consideration being given to how this perspective influenced the construction of the text.

My hope is that this research will add to our knowledge of self-compassion and spirituality. It is grounded in the psychological literature on self-compassion and only time and critique will tell if it added something substantive to the field.

Aesthetic merit. Unique to creative works, Richardson (2000) adds the criterion of aesthetic merit for judging evocative works. As Richardson puts it, “is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?” (p. 937). This criterion is both exciting and scary to me. I have never considered myself creative but as I learn to be kinder to myself, I have come to embrace more of my creative and expressive side. Still, aesthetic merit is to some extent a personal preference. By using a narrative approach to presenting my research, the hope is to create a novel and captivating piece of writing which is pleasing for you to read, but I can make no promises.

Reflexivity. Richardson (2000) suggests a number of questions that relate to reflexivity, including: “How did the author come to write this text? How was the information gathered? . . .

Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgements about the point of view?" (p. 937).

I have done my best to be transparent and authentic throughout the process and I admit that I do not approach this topic neutrally. Like many researchers, I was attracted to self-compassion by my personal experience with the topic. Trying to remove my personal emotions from the research topic seemed impossible and only fed my self-criticism at first. Ellis and colleagues (2011) highlight that most researchers recognize that it is impossible to approach research from a purely neutral, impersonal, and objective stance. One way to protect against researcher bias is to acknowledge it. I have chosen to illuminate my biases and personal perspectives to help you, as the reader, accurately critique my work.

I could have chosen a different method. I could have simply used the listening guide and put less of myself into the formal presentation of the material, but in doing so I would also have kept my story secret, and I believe that it is in secrecy that manipulation can occur. I chose autoethnography because it "is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist." (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). In my transparency I am essentially hoping that you will act as a compassionate safeguard against pushing my own agenda. At the same time, I hope that you can see the wealth of learning that is reflected through the participants' experiences and mine. I am just as much a part of this process as any person I could interview and together I hope that the participants and I will help you better understand what the process of developing self-compassion looks like from our Christian perspectives.

Impact. Impact refers to how the text affects the reader. It should stir the reader in some way, whether it is by generating new questions, encouraging conversation, or moving them to

action. McIlveen (2008) suggests that a well-written autoethnography should move the reader to take away lessons for their own life. Ellis and colleagues contend that an autoethnography should be considered valid if “it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true” (Ellis, 2011, p. 282). Like aesthetic merit, the impact can only be judged by the reader. Each reader will have a different experience as they read the stories described here but hopefully it will move you toward a deeper appreciation for the way the Christian faith can intersect with self-compassion.

Expression of a reality. The final criterion that Richardson (2000) suggests is ensuring that the text communicates the lived experiences of the participants. Not only does the text need to communicate the lived experiences, but it should do so in a way that embodies the experience and helps the reader sense that experience. It should also appear to be a credible account of a culture or individual. To confirm the accuracy of our analysis to the lived experiences of the participants, I conducted a second interview that served as a member check of the trustworthiness of the analysis. Member checks involve returning to participants, sharing with them the themes developed from the analysis, and requesting feedback as to whether or not our interpretations are an accurate representation of their experience (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). A week prior to the member check interviews, participants were emailed the written summary from step 4 of the listening guide analysis to review. During the interview, the participants were invited to reflect on whether the summary “sounded” like them and how accurate the summary was to the lived experience. They were also invited to add, clarify, or elaborate on anything they felt was left out of the summary.

Adequacy of data. Morrow (2005) argues that the sampling procedures and the quality, length, and depth of interview data is more important in qualitative research than the number of participants. In the present study, purposeful sampling was used to select participants who were exemplars when it came to displaying self-compassion within the context of the Christian faith. By interviewing exemplars who were able to reflect on how their faith had influenced their development of self-compassion, the data collected contained multiple insights, and rich descriptions of participants experiences with self-compassion. In order to elicit information-rich descriptions, the listening guide provided a flexible framework that allowed me to clarify and check my own interpretations throughout the interview. Morrow also suggests that fewer, open-ended questions are more likely to elicit deeper meaning from participants. This was accomplished by using a semi-structured interview format with two main questions: (a) what does self-compassion mean to you and (b) what has your journey with self-compassion looked like? From those two questions prompts were used as needed to elicit information, but participants tended to be self-directed in telling their story of self-compassion. Overall, data was collected from seven participants, who were nominated by Christian leaders as demonstrating a mature Christian faith, and who scored high on the self-compassion scale. The data reached a point of saturation, with no new voices emerging after analysing the fifth interview.

Adequacy of interpretation. According to Morrow (2005) adequacy of interpretation begins during data gathering and transcriptions, and continues through the analysis process. Morrow explains, “Repeated forays into the data ultimately lead the investigator to a deep understanding of all that comprises the data corpus (body of data) and how its parts interrelate” (p. 256). With the exception of one transcription, I personally conducted and transcribed each interview, which began my immersion in the data. The listening guide method also requires a

deep immersion through multiple readings of the transcript. For each participant interview, the transcript was read at least 11 times: once to get a general sense of the story, once to create the I-poem, and once for each of the nine voices.

Another strength of using the listening guide is that it provides a clear framework for analysis, which Morrow (2005) also identifies as a key criterion for adequacy of interpretation. As I described in the analysis section, the listening guide outlines four clear steps in the analysis process, which was used to interpret the data. Another strength was that each interview was fully coded by myself and a second co-researcher. Thomas and Magilvy (2011) suggest that peer debriefing and peer examination are important to establish quality and trustworthiness in the analysis of qualitative data. This is one of the benefits of the listening guide because the analysis process requires two researchers working together to collaboratively identify the multiple voices in the participant's story. During this process both peer debriefing and peer examination were frequently used to confirm or refine our interpretation of the data.

CHAPTER 4: STORIES ALONG THE WAY

In the following chapter, I have the privilege to share with you the participants' stories and the voices that emerged within each story. After over 200 hours of interviews, transcriptions, and analysis, I have come to greatly respect the lessons that each participant has taught me. The focus of this study is to explore how self-compassion is lived out within the context of the Christian faith and each participant had a unique experience to share. In order to effectively communicate what was learned in a usable and efficient way, I have had to distil the hours of interviews into just a few major findings that incorporate the foundational elements of each story. To do so, I first present the voices that emerged throughout all the interviews. These voices highlight the commonalities found in each participant's story. Following the descriptions of each voice, I present each individual story, highlighting how each voice is uniquely represented in the participant's story. At the end of this chapter, I hope that you will have a new perspective on what it may look like for Christians to experience and develop self-compassion within the context of their Christian worldview.

Participant Voices

The listening guide is used to identify the harmonies and dissonances between different voices (Gilligan, 2015). In our analysis, we noticed an overlapping set of voices that gradually transformed from voices of shame and criticism toward more loving and accepting voices of self-compassion. Upon closer analysis, there appeared to be three distinct categories of voices: (1) voices of shame and criticism, which held qualities that opposed self-compassion; (2) voices of resistance, which moved toward a more compassionate stance, but included elements of critical and compassionate voices; and (3) voices of love and acceptance which embodied the qualities and characteristics of compassion. Figure 2 presents a simplified continuum of the voices.

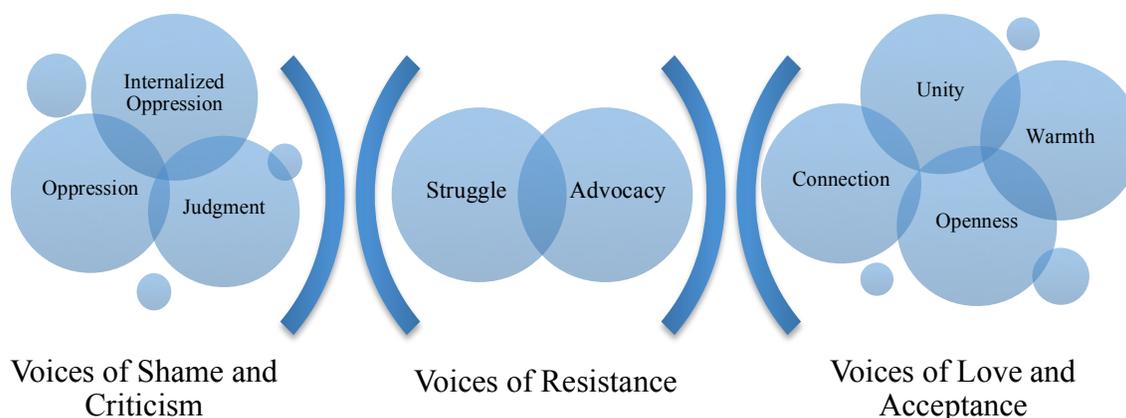


Figure 2. Continuum of voices

Voices of Shame and Criticism

The voices of shame and criticism included the voice of oppression, the voice of internalized oppression, and the voice of judgment. Each of these voices directly opposed the qualities of self-compassion described earlier. In contrast to self-kindness and mindfulness, the voices of oppression and internalized oppression were criticizing voices that led to feelings of shame and inadequacy. In addition, the voice of judgment undermined common humanity by placing the speaker in a place of superiority over those they are judging. Together, these voices described situations and beliefs that made self-compassion difficult.

Voice of oppression. The voice of oppression emerged as the participants described ways that their relationships and cultural contexts had hindered their development of self-compassion. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, oppression refers to (a) “an uncomfortable or distressing sense of physical or mental constriction” or (b) “prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or exercise of authority, control, or power” (OED Online). Drawing from this definition, the key elements of the voice of oppression included a sense of being burdened or weighted down in body or mind by the expectations or actions of something outside of the participant. To identify the voice of oppression we listened for a tone of incongruence and

submission, which was frequently marked by anger or sadness over what the participant had to give up. We also listened for statements that indicated critical messages coming from other people's appraisals of the participant or cultural messages and experiences. The voice of oppression included examples of the participants being marginalized because their actions, thoughts, or feelings were not understood and/or accepted by their cultural context. Within the voice of oppression, we heard three unique themes that emerged as areas of oppression: rules and expectations, isolation, and spiritual oppression.

Rules and expectations. In each interview, the participants spoke about burdensome rules and expectations that they perceived in their environment. A common message was the burden to “measure up” to a high standard of moralism set by Christian communities the participants were exposed to. As Jeanette explained:

I think the intentions have been wonderful in the Christianity that many of us have known, but the fruit in my life and in many lives that I work with today is a feeling of having to please God; and a feeling of striving, and a feeling of heaviness that I can't measure up. . . . anything that's kind of different or outside our Christianity, I was taught to, in a sense, be judgmental.

Zach shared how this impacted his ability to be an active member in the Christian community, saying, “I didn't measure up to the Christian standards. . . . I was living in that world trying to hide a lot of who I was, or what I had lived, or the decisions I had made.” Furthermore, the boundaries set by church communities caused participants to question their own instincts toward self-compassion. Zach described how his movement toward a more loving way of life came with a big risk:

I'll never forget when I finally accepted this unconditional love of God, and I realized the way I'd grown up, in the evangelical fundamentalist church, didn't believe this, that wasn't their core. They had shifted that core to moralism and behaviour rather than acceptance and love. And so I thought, "Okay if I give myself the way I do, train to live in my faith, I may just go to hell."

These experiences suggest that the messages communicated through Christian communities can have constraining effects that make it difficult for participants to justify moving away from a lifestyle of judgment and striving and toward a life style of self-compassion.

Another area in which participants experienced a sense of oppression or silencing was in acknowledging their pain and suffering. As previously discussed, a key element in self-compassion is recognizing our pain and suffering, in order to take compassionate steps to comfort that pain. However, this may be discouraged in some Christian communities. Jeanette spoke of this saying, "I think as a Christian, sometimes it's hard to acknowledge I'm suffering because we've been told to have it together." Jeanette also spoke about how the expectations of her parents and her church meant that she had to silence her emotions:

I'd been taught to be a good girl all my life, you know as a pastor's daughter. And so there was a lot of hidden anger that I wasn't even aware that I had and feelings of betrayal by God that I wasn't really allowed to be honest with God, because good girls don't make things uncomfortable, good girls make everybody feel nice. . . . So I can't even tell God the truth because I might hurt God's feelings, you know, we gotta make God feel safe. So how could we really tell the truth?

When participants spoke in the voice of oppression, there was a sense of being held back from living authentically. This was fully evident in Jeanette's story of how she had to deny her own

feelings of anger and betrayal towards God, because questioning God was not acceptable in her Christian community. Whether these expectations are spoken directly or inadvertently perceived, it seems that some Christians may learn that negative emotions are unacceptable; making it difficult to accept and comfort these feelings when they inevitably arise.

Moving away from participants' general sense of Christian culture, expectations were frequently communicated through the actions of friends and family. Jeanette shared a potent example where she was questioned and judged for what she considered not only a necessary act of self-kindness but also a step directed by God:

When I moved back some people expected me to take on similar roles that I had in the past, and I [didn't want to] . . . And that was really confusing to my friends, "Well, why are you hiding? Why aren't you being involved? What's wrong with you?"

As Cara's explained, parents were also important models of what was expected of a "good" Christian:

My dad's faith is that unless you're vigilant every moment over yourself, you are in danger of burning in hell. . . . It's a lot of pressure. I mean, he was a committed sincere believer in Jesus, but he didn't hear Jesus saying, "That's what I came for. See these nails? See that empty tomb? It's done. It's not about saving yourself anymore. That's done!" You know, "I don't care about these sins, even if they're big ones. I care about the condition of your heart. That is, when it's not right, that's where the little sins come from, and I've taken care of it." . . . [My parents] just got the wrong end of the stick, and they passed it on to us kids, too; that somehow we were responsible and that it was dire.

The ways in which participants experienced oppression was often subtle and well-meaning, but it appears that some church experiences may give the impression that one must meet a certain

standard to please God and be accepted in the Christian community.

Participants also spoke about how their faith sometimes conflicted with the mainstream culture. One of the more subtle examples of this came from Caitlyn. As we began the interview, Caitlyn began to talk about how she views self-compassion, and then quickly paused mid-sentence, as if to censor what she was about to say. In listening to this section of the interview, I recognized a familiar process of carefully choosing words that will not be mocked or dismissed, when speaking about spiritual processes. Fortunately, in Caitlyn's case, she was able to continue with more freedom realizing, "Yeah, you're- it's a Christian study." This is one example of how my insider status as a researcher was advantageous for this study, as it allowed Caitlyn to express herself with more freedom than she might have felt with someone who did not share her faith background. Other cultural messages that participants spoke about included a sense that there is a continuum in our culture that ranks people as more or less valuable. Though participants described these views of earned value and success as contrary to God's values, and thus the values the participants strove to live by, there was a tension heard in their voices as they spoke about these. Knowing what one valued was different than feeling at peace with opposing cultural norms. As Zach communicates, "It seems to me that our society pushes us toward performance or accomplishments or, um, deep growth. And if we're not doing that then we can easily be judged and judge ourselves." Cara also spoke of this tension with the way she sees people responding around her, "[The] problem is most of us actually have a continuum of highly valuable to not very valuable. You read it again and again, even in the local paper about homelessness." It appears that both church culture, and the wider cultural influences in peoples' lives may promote conditions where people feel they are risking rejection by choosing to develop self-compassion.

Isolation. Connected to the sub-voice of rules and expectations is the sub-voice of isolation. We heard this nuance as participants spoke about experiences of rejection and isolation. Caitlyn shared how feeling isolated perpetuated her self-critical voice that told her she was not beautiful or talented enough to be valued. As Caitlyn explains:

Often times that was why I didn't feel like I had a lot of friends or didn't feel like why I had the popular crew or whatever, because I would go talk to the kid nobody else was talking to. And so, other people don't really like that because it makes them uncomfortable.

In my own story, I shared how other people's actions affected my own willingness to practice self-compassion:

I felt like I was alone in my understanding of compassion in community. So I'd kind of gave up on it, a little bit, and became really cynical. . . . I knew their heart was for [compassion] but it just makes it a scary environment to have needs or to display weakness when it's almost like neutrality that you're faced with or misunderstanding.

I went on to share how this feeling of isolation was perpetuated by an unfortunate miscommunication of Christian theology. In my story, I describe how a friend responded after I shared openly about some personal struggles and how I had been hurt in the relationship:

Her response to all of it was like, "Gen, I can't do anything about that. Those attitudes that you have are sin and you need to repent. Will you pray with me right now to repent against that?" . . . It was almost like, "I want to help you and to help you, you need to see that this is who you are and you're just sinful." And like for me, that doesn't fit with my worldview. Doesn't fit with my understanding of God. Like I don't see him saying, like, "Just follow the rules."

Rather than feeling comforted in that moment, I felt like there was no space for me to feel disappointed or to question God. Furthermore, I explain how that experience affected my willingness to engage in what was once an important supportive relationship:

I've distanced myself from her because it makes it really hard for me to accept myself; I feel really wrong in her presence- or not accepted by her maybe is the better way to put it. Because anything I say, if it seems too kind for myself I worry she'll say, "Well you know . . . we really . . ." like, "Is that really true? We need to work out our salvation."

Despite the well-meaning intentions of people within the Christian community, there is great possibility for miscommunication and hurt. When these misunderstandings occur, it may leave the recipient feeling ashamed, self-critical, and doubting their own inner knowledge of what they need to do for themselves, in order to exercise self-compassion.

Spiritual oppression. The final sub-voice spoke about spiritual oppression and only appeared in two of the seven interviews. For example, Caitlyn clearly attributed some of her struggles with shame and negative beliefs about herself to an outside spiritual force:

I'm not one of those people who thinks Satan is everywhere, but I think part of it is definitely a bit a spiritual attack, for sure. . . . I think Satan definitely twisted [the lies I told myself] more than they actually were.

Similarly, Cara commented, "I think we don't take seriously enough the forces that are against us." Cara also talked about feeling held back by an outside force, "I felt that I had been stopped. That is, an agent had stopped me. And a lot of the things that I was comfortable and competent and, you know, responsible about, I just could barely keep up my end." In both these examples, Cara and Caitlyn described struggling with self-criticism and shame that was stimulated by thoughts or circumstances that they attributed to being brought to them rather than coming from

their own minds. There is also an acknowledgement of spiritual forces that want to harm them, and one of the ways that happens is through making them feel inadequate, worthless, and undeserving of compassion. Though this study has focused on the loving and compassionate qualities of a Christian God, this sub-voice brings attention to the Christian beliefs about demonic spiritual forces and how they may influence self-compassion.

Voice of internalized oppression. In contrast to the voice of oppression, the voice of internalized oppression emerged as participants spoke about the ways that they oppress *themselves* and thus fail to live their self-compassion. The voice of internalized oppression can be identified by its harsh, criticizing tone that undermines the participant's value and dignity as a human being. To identify the voice of internalized oppression we listened for statements that spoke blatant lies about the individual's character and statements that projected harsh and demanding expectations onto oneself. When the voice of internalized oppression occurred, it was common to hear the participants speak shaming, degrading and negative messages about their selves.

Listening to the voice of internalized oppression, we heard reminiscences of the oppressive voices. Though the messages were similar, the voice of internalized oppression represented the way that participants applied these standards to themselves. Zach communicated this internalization process most simply when he said, "I grew up in a fundamentalist evangelical home which was not kind to me and therefore I wasn't kind to myself." It appears that participants learned how to treat themselves and learned what expectations to aspire to by watching the people around them. Cara shared how she learned the rules for being "acceptable" partly by observing her mom's interactions with her brother: "So I think I picked up, like, 'Oh, I see, if you don't do right you're not acceptable.'" However, Caitlyn's voice of internalized

oppression took on a different quality; she recognized that her expectations of herself went beyond what others accepted of her: “And so, for some reason– I don’t think other people put these expectations on me, but I put them on myself– that I had to be perfect, and I had to not have any problems or have any issues.”

The most obvious form of internalized oppression emerged when participants spoke negatively about themselves. For instance, Caitlyn shared, “I am often my biggest enemy with lies I speak. . . . I spoke lies to myself left, right, and center about everything.” She goes on to share the shaming messages that were the substance of these lies, “I just felt very ugly and gross and unloveable, and that was when I was not very kind to myself. . . . I’m an awful person!” Looking back, through eyes of compassion, Caitlyn recognized the falsehood of these messages that she spoke to herself, but in the moment they felt powerfully true.

The criticizing voice of internalized oppression was not confined to experiences that participants had before they developed self-compassion. Cara shared how she continues to struggle with the voice of internalized oppression:

It’s when I’m caught in that rut, and I haven’t waken up yet to the fact that I’ve got caught in the old pattern, that’s when I am hard on myself and I am judgmental and I am aware of my failures and I’m beating myself up for my failures. . . . “This place is such a mess. Cara, when are you gonna get that closet cleaned out? What’s the matter with you?” . . . Why those happen, I don’t know.

These moments of self-criticism even emerged subtly within the interviews as participants judged what they were saying about themselves. For instance, in response to not being able to come up with the scripture reference for what she was talking about, Paige’s voice of internalized oppression emerged as she berates herself for forgetting: “And of course I can’t

remember it exactly, [my husband] is so much better at that than I am.” When voiced in the form of self-criticism, the voice of internalized oppression sounded cruel and demeaning; demonstrating characteristics that are in direct opposition to self-compassion.

The voice of internalized oppression also included evidence of the detrimental impact of perfectionist expectations. Many of the participants shared how adjusting expectations was important for their development of self-compassion, which typically meant adjusting their expectations to be in line with what God expects of them and what God values. In contrast to the more balanced and self-compassionate values that participants described as being in line with God’s expectations, the voice of internalized oppression was rigid and imposed extreme standards that were often impossible to meet. Cara spoke about how her impossible expectations became oppressive:

How could I possibly let up on myself when there’s all this suffering? . . . How could I ever become compassionate towards myself when the whole world wasn’t saved yet? . . . It’s all or nothing and it never was all. So, you know, perfection or the ideal is never reachable and so . . . everything else is just partial, even if you make some steps it’s never there. And so it’s always unsatisfying, always frustrating and so on.

Cara illustrates how a good thing (e.g. a passion to see justice and healing in the world) can become burdensome. In her experience, she made achieving a goal a pre-requisite for self-compassion. The problem was that her goal was something that could never be obtained. Zach also spoke about this:

I think the majority of people, I’m included here, we live with expectations of what we think reality is, and what we think is good and what we think isn’t good, what we think is acceptable and what we think isn’t acceptable. So we live with these expectations or we

live with these ideals, and if we don't measure up to what our expectations or our ideals are then we're not happy with ourselves. . . . Because how can you be compassionate with yourself if you're not living up to your expectations?

These are just two, of numerous examples that each participants shared about how their own expectations hindered their ability to be self-compassionate. In fact, all of the participants commented on the negative effect of extreme expectations.

A final oppressive quality was connected to the participants' understanding of the theology of sin. Six of the seven participants talked about how a misunderstanding of original sin can create fear and judgement that decrease people's willingness to foster self-compassion. For instance, Jeanette shared, "When you believe that [you are bad] at a really core level, it's really hard to be spontaneous and just being alive, because you don't trust yourself. 'Well maybe that's a bad thought,' and, 'maybe that's a bad desire.'" In contrast, Cara gave us a great example of how she sees sin in a way that is not oppressive:

The Quaker idea, they use the phrase, "That of God in every person," really makes sense to me because there has to be God in me to be able to recognize this is holy, this is God. I mean, if I were only a broken human, a sinful human, I wouldn't be able to see that. It is His work in me.

Like Cara, many of the participants described the difference between an oppressive view of sin, that defines them as bad, and a view of sin that focuses on their sin being forgiven and their identity as beloved children of God, worthy of His, and their own, compassion.

Voice of judgment. The voice of judgment appeared when participants spoke about their views as being wiser or more correct than other people's views. At times the voice of judgment was identified by its critical statements of others, but the voice of judgment was not always a

negative and critical voice. The word judgment is used to define this voice because markers for the voice of judgment included a firm, confident tone and statements about what is “right” and what should be done or believed by all people.

The participants sometimes used the voice of judgment when they spoke about beliefs in the wider church community that they do not agree with. For instance, Caitlyn used the voice of judgment to emphasize that her comments about spiritual oppression were carefully spoken, by saying, “I’m not one of those people who thinks Satan is everywhere.” In her brief statement she differentiated herself from Christians who frequently attribute negative circumstance to spiritual attacks. It is important to realize that there is not a unified experience of what it is like to be a Christian. Many of the participants explicitly noted ways that they are different from other Christians they have met.

The voice of judgment also included evidence of condescension when participants spoke about how others did not meet their standards. For example, this was heard when Paige described a conflict over a church project:

It was *very* clear to me that that was not going to work . . . It was *completely* obvious to me that this was not going to work. . . . Like, could we possibly say that in a way that, carefully, that wouldn’t kill them? Like. . . . Whereas for her, like the relationship was so important that she was willing to have that part of the event bomb.

Paige went on to acknowledge that her own standards of perfection can be a stumbling block to allowing others and her self room to make mistakes.

Cara’s story contained a different quality of judgment that materialized when she described her relationship with justice, particularly her relationship with justice early in her life. As she spoke, there was an emotional passion that came through in her words. This passion felt

imposing at times and Cara herself acknowledged that at times she struggles to refrain herself:

I had discerned, with the help of others, that the call was to a life of prayer for the world, instead of Cara on her white horse with her sword and her banners saying, “Onward folks! We gotta bring justice! . . . And, “You! You’re not doing enough, you could do— can do— how about you did *that!* And why aren’t you doing that?” . . . I’m really good at telling other people what they should do.

In this example, the voice of judgment is defined by the imposing quality that insists that Cara is right and that others should follow her lead. This is not to say that Cara’s desire for justice is wrong, however, Cara herself acknowledged that her heart has the tendency to judge people who do not see things her way, which contradicts her desire to be non-judgmental and accepting of other people.

Finally, Jeanette shared how judgment has been damaging in her life. She spoke in the voice of judgment as she described the outcome of her early faith beliefs:

So what is my natural reaction? Is to judge him. . . . So that was the lens through which I saw my situation, from the Christianity I had known. Is to judge and to be critical and then to self-hate. And also then to hate. And so the fruit of my faith was actually very devastating. . . . There’s not just self-hate, hate for others, there is also hate for God.” . . .

“I’m judging me, I’m judging others, I’m judging God.”

Here Jeanette outlines the way that judgment can infiltrate into other areas of life, such as how she treats her self and her relationship with God.

In all these examples, the voice of judgment is used to put distance between the speaker and those they are speaking about. In doing so, the speakers implied that there are certain standards that one must meet in order to avoid judgment. These qualities are in stark contrast to

the common humanity element of self-compassion, which brings people together with a sense of connection, grace, and understanding for the fact that we all make mistakes.

Voices of Resistance

The voices of resistance include the voice of struggle and the voice of advocacy. These voices acted like mediators between the voices of shame and criticism and the voices of love and acceptance. Moving from shame and criticism toward self-compassion, the voices of resistance introduced the idea that self-compassion is desirable but difficult to embody.

Voice of struggle. The voice of struggle emerged when participants spoke about becoming aware of self-compassion and their early movements towards self-compassion. The voice of struggle was differentiated from the voice of advocacy by its hesitant tone, which carried stronger overtones of oppression. Statements about self-compassion being difficult and counterintuitive were common with the voice of struggle. The voice of struggle was clearest when participants described how they continued to be self-critical despite wanting to shift to a more compassionate self-stance. For example, Zach shared:

Self-compassion to me is not a natural thing; it's not the first response that I would have. . . . but it's something that's very important because either we need to keep condemning ourselves or being judgmental of ourselves, it doesn't help, it doesn't improve our situation, it doesn't help us grow, it just bogs us down in more darkness and more discouragement.

In Zach's words we hear the struggle in the tension between what is natural for him, to respond critically and judgmentally toward himself, and what how he wants to respond toward himself, with compassion. Further along in his story, Zach describes how in his journey towards developing greater self-compassion he reached a point where being self-critical no longer seemed to make

any sense, and yet he struggled to treat himself differently. This struggle is heard in the following description:

If God can love me, then why can't I love myself? And what's keeping me from being kind to myself? What's keeping me from taking care of myself? Why am I just letting myself be sold, or given away, in places I didn't want to go or to situations I didn't want to belong to?

I asked Zach how he had managed to overcome this internal resistance, hoping that his answers would offer some tangible ideas. But, I was humbled when he simply responded with, "I think it's a daily struggle." It seems that even among these participants, who were chosen for demonstrating high levels of self-compassion, self-compassion was something that they daily have to work to embody.

When participants spoke in the voice of struggle we heard examples of them actively resisting receiving love and compassion. You can hear the playfulness mixed with hesitation as Caitlyn described her own struggle to believe positive comments about herself that were made by her boyfriend: "My hair was all greasy because we were on the plane and he was like, 'You're just so stunning.' And I was like, 'What?! No!'" Caitlyn has a similar reaction to God's tender words: "God pointed out, 'You shouldn't strive anymore.' And I was like, 'No, no, we're supposed to strive! Like, strive for the prize! It's in the Bible, we're supposed to do this.' And he's like, 'No, not like that.'" Despite her reluctant reactions in each of these situations, Caitlyn also recognized the truth of what her boyfriend and God were saying to her; and this became a seed of self-compassion that grew over time, as she began to believe it more and more.

Listening to Cara's voice of struggle, the tone is more reproachful as she responds to God's kind words by thinking, "Who me? You must mean everybody else, because that's how I look at

everybody else. But you know, I'm just aware of my own failings." Cara cognitively acknowledged the truth of the kind words God spoke, but fully accepting them in an embodied way is much more difficult for her. It seems that compassion is not an easy experience to embrace, but it is one that these participants described as desirable and right.

The voice of struggle also included evidence of God's intervention being influential in overcoming resistance to compassion and self-compassion. Listen to Jeanette as she described her struggle to accept compassion from God:

Sometimes it actually takes the form of a refusal of God, or a certain refusal of God's love . . . "You mean like, you really love me? . . . I can hardly take it in. I mostly can't." . . . I remember one particular day, . . . I was mad. And as I'm driving, the presence of Love is there, "Jeanette, can you trust us now?" And I said, "No! No I don't. I don't trust you. I'm mad, I don't like this situation." But there had been so much conversation between us that I could feel this teasing smile, and this energy, like this kind of playful grin, like, "Do you trust us now, Jeanette?" And I was like, "Damn! Damn, you got me good! No, I don't trust you, but, damn it, I'll try!"

Ultimately, Jeanette's heart softened, her resistance was overcome, and she was able to let go of her expectations and accept the comfort being offered to her. Many participants described similar experiences where feeling convicted by God or feeling directed to be more self-compassionate, was how they overcame their own internal resistance. For example, Cara explained, "Really it's a miracle, and by miracle I mean it actually pretty literally. . . It just seems like it's just not really possible unless God does some major re-orienting." Throughout her story, Cara emphasized the ways that she resists self-compassion. Yet, she continued to move toward self-compassion because she felt convicted by the Spirit of God that she needed to be kinder and

more compassionate toward her self.

Finally, the voice of struggle was used when participants spoke about self-compassion being an on-going process. For instance, Cara shared, “Self-compassion has been a journey that is continuing.” Jeanette painted a picture of a journey that takes time and patience:

I would say I’m a pilgrim on this journey and I haven’t mastered it and I would say since, kind of I began 16 years ago, there’s been epiphany after epiphany; so I’d say it’s getting deeper and more beautiful in my life. So I would say it hasn’t happened quickly, but it’s happened *really*, really gradually. And what it’s looked like in reality is it’s always coming out of crisis, or an event where I’m struggling with depression or self-hate or, um, a situation will come up where I’m just angry or distressed or in a place of judgment towards someone else.

Ironically, Jeanette communicated a journey with self-compassion that has developed through times of self-hate and judgment. Rather than holding her back, Jeanette described her struggles as instrumental in her development of self-compassion. Similarly, I appreciated Caitlyn’s hopeful and simple response to her own struggles with self-compassion, as she said: “I’m working on this, and it is getting *way* better”. Self-compassion is not an all or none experience; there are times when it is easier and times when it is harder, but it possible for it to grow.

Voice of advocacy. In contrast to the voice of struggle, the voice of advocacy was a strong and active form of resistance. The tone of this voice was confident and firm, and participants spoke in a rational manner when they used this voice. A key marker for this voice was when there appeared to be a contradiction between what the participant was saying and how they felt. Some of the participants talked about the difference between “head knowledge”, which is rational and often emotionally detached, and “heart knowledge” that represents an embodied

sense of conviction that aligns cognitions and emotions. Listening for the voice of advocacy we noticed two distinct themes. First, this voice appeared when the participants spoke fostering self-compassion even when they do not feel self-compassionate. Secondly, it arose when participants spoke about their beliefs about God in an impersonal manner. Therefore, we labelled these two themes: standing up for self-compassion and holding on to God's truth.

Standing up for self-compassion. The voice of advocacy represented the ways that participants cognitively supported self-compassion. However, listening to the tone of this voice, we wondered if the values being expressed were consistently lived out and experienced. For example, using the voice of advocacy Caitlyn talked about battling self-critical thoughts saying, "I can look back and be like, 'Okay, what am I thinking?' Take that thought captive if it's not true." Here Caitlyn described a method of rationally approaching her thought processes, but within her story she described experiences where she could not see the truth and was swept away by self-criticism. Also, her cognitive processes sounded devoid of empathy or understanding for her suffering. Still, the participants used the voice of advocacy to communicate their cognitive assent toward self-compassion. This was apparent when I shared about choosing to live by my values, even when I felt incompetent and my critical voice was telling me to quit. As I shared:

Even though I felt like, "Ahh! I want to cut my losses and run," choosing to stay in that.

The more I did that and the more I said, "Okay, here's [all] I can do," and being okay with that, the more my ability to have compassion for myself increased.

The voice of advocacy was heard in the way that participants chose to "act self-compassion" even when their lived experience was still one of self-hate and judgment.

Holding onto God's truth. Frequently, participants spoke about their rationale for self-compassion in connection with their Christian theology. Listening to the way that participants

spoke about God, we noticed that two participants could say the same words but communicate something completely different. Theological assertions, such as Jesus is the model and source for self-compassion, God helps us in our suffering, and God does not measure our successes and failures were sometimes stated as transformational truths and other times they sounded like merely cognitive assent without any experiential depth. It was the different tones of voices that helped us to recognize the difference between spoken faith beliefs and the voice of unity, which communicated deeper spiritual convictions. Cara gave an example of how knowing about God was very different from embodying that knowledge:

God says, “I’m a God of justice and mercy and love. Would you join me, and do the part I ask you in this moment to do, and nothing else? I’m not asking you to save the world, I’ve got that covered.” But I didn’t pick that up. I heard it from- I was baptized when I was eight days old. And I went to church every Sunday of my life and was an ardent follower of Jesus, you know, but I didn’t quite hear that I don’t have to be perfect, or I don’t have to be responsible is a better word for the justice. That God says, “It’s okay if you don’t pull it off, it’s my job.”

The voice of advocacy emerged when the participants communicated their beliefs about God as facts independent from their lived experience, and used these to rationalize self-compassion.

Participants tended to speak candidly and somewhat superficially when they shared their understanding of what God says to be true, through the voice of advocacy. For instance, listen as Paige explained why she believes we do not need to beat ourselves up for our mistakes:

God knows that we are frail and weak. . . *he* extends great compassion and kindness to me in knowing me intimately and loving me despite that. So I can show compassion to myself and I can have his eyes.

Simply reading Paige's words it seems like a freeing way to live, but in this example she only shared general truths without personal experiences that supported how these truths were lived out. The words spoken are true to Paige, but it is still in the process of becoming an embodied and stable way of living. When we heard participants speak in this way, we felt the tension between what they believe and the internal resistance that they experience towards those truths.

One spiritual conviction that was discussed and resisted by all the participants is the message that God unconditionally loves them. This is a belief that all the participants held, but they did not always feel loved and valued. Often, the voice of advocacy was used to represent this struggle; participants would speak about being loved and reminding themselves of this, especially when they were feeling shameful and worthless. Jeanette shared that she has to remind herself that "with God it's never about deserving", when she finds herself resisting self-compassion. All the participants reported that their movement towards self-compassion started with a growing belief that they are valuable and loved by God. More often than not, participants stated that they knew they were valuable before they felt that way. For example, listen to the rational and passionate way that Cara described her process of moving towards self-compassion, while still experiencing resistance:

If God says that you're worthwhile, you have no business in arguing with him. If God has compassion on you, you have no business saying, "Well, actually, there's all these reasons why I shouldn't have compassion on myself." If you say, "This is the God of the universe, and this is a God who is only love, and this is a God who is only compassion, and this is a God who is really smart, and this is a God who's really perfect, essentially, and who's big, like, really, really, really big." Like, are you going to argue with God? The one who made you, right at the beginning and said, "This is good"? Are you going

to argue with that and say, “No, thank you very much, my self-esteem is going to be based on my own human construct of what esteem is built out of. I’m a good person or I’m a strong person.” Well, the day will come when you find out actually that you’re not any one of those things. Sorry! And that’s not why you’re loveable and of value. You’re loveable and of value because God said. Period!

Cara provided a vivid image of her determination to hold on to God’s truth, despite her own resistance. At first Cara described being kind to herself out of simple obedience, but as her story progressed, these choices became a more stable and welcomed characteristic of self-compassion. When it came to God’s truths, participants spoke about the importance of self-compassion more than they described showing it to themselves. The voice of advocacy seemed to plant seeds of self-compassion that grew from actions into an embodied sense of self-compassion that included both compassionate thoughts and compassionate feelings.

Voices of Love and Acceptance

The voices of love and acceptance include the voice of unity, the voice of connection, the voice of openness and the voice of self-compassion. These voices are grouped together because the underlying tone of each of these voices includes qualities of love and acceptance such as warmth, gentleness, understanding, and care. The voices of connection and unity represent participants’ experiences of compassion from outside sources, while the voices of openness and self-compassion represent the compassionate and accepting ways that participants treated themselves. Essentially, the voices of love and acceptance support the development of self-compassion and support participants in living compassionately on a regular basis.

Voice of connection. The voice of connection was heard as participants spoke about being part of something bigger than just themselves, which made them feel needed and valued by

others. This voice carried a tone of gratefulness, equality, and purpose. Common themes that were discussed using the voice of connection included how experiencing compassion from others fostered greater self-compassion, how one's own self-compassion led to a stronger desire to reach out to others, and recognizing that everyone fails and suffers at times in their lives.

Therefore, the voice of connection contains three main themes: connection in receiving care from others; connection in supporting others; and connection through recognizing shared sufferings.

Receiving care. Within the voice of connection, there is evidence that receiving care and support from other people plays a key role in the development of self-compassion. Cara spoke about the importance of having her own story heard and respected by others:

I need someone to hear my story, as much as I need to hear other people's stories. And when we are able to have our stories received, that is, *just* received, welcomed, and respected and prized, that means I get to respect my own journey.

Being accepted and received by others validated Cara's experiences and opened herself up to respecting and valuing her story. For Zach, being in a supportive and accepting community allowed him to explore his spirituality and life from a place of authenticity. Zach shared how his current church fosters this kind of environment:

Our church that we go to is a very open church that accepts people where they are and lets them live how God has- they trust us, that God is caring for us and leading us, and we don't have to be- they don't have to control us with boundaries or rules.

When participants experienced this welcoming and respect of their stories, it moved them toward greater acceptance, understanding, and compassion for themselves.

At times, being connected within a community served a valuable function of supporting participants when they are struggling to care for themselves. Zach described how community is

important when he gets stuck in a self-critical mindset:

If I'm trying to live in a judgmental way about myself and my own life, in a condemning way about myself, community can give me a better picture. Because if they are accepting me, if they are looking at me kindly, they can help me open that door [to self-compassion].

Cara also emphasized the importance of community in reminding one another of the promises of God or the truth about our value: "That's what community is for. It's because when we forget, somebody else happens to be in a time of remembering and then when they forget, we remind them." In times when our thinking becomes stuck in negative patterns of rumination, self-criticism, and loss of hope, community can act as a source of compassion.

Giving care. Through the voice of connection participants shared how developing self-compassion made it easier for them to care for others. Caitlyn shared how self-compassion frees her to connect more deeply with others:

When you love yourself you can love your neighbour more fully. So when I've had more compassion on myself, I've been able to really help people more. Or like maybe not even help tangibly or whatever, but just in my mind and heart be more focused on their best interest, rather than thinking about what they're thinking about me or whatever.

It seems that self-compassion allowed participants to focus on empathizing with others, rather than worry about how others might view them. Jeanette described how this allows more of her energy to be put towards caring for people: "It shifts the energy so now I can pull that energy into *adoring you*, instead of trying to figure you out, or even help you or save you, I just get to adore you." As participants developed self-compassion they were better able to support others because their needs were being met through their ability to self-nurture and reach out for support,

when needed.

Connection also brought a sense of meaning to one's suffering. Participants often spoke about their suffering can be to help others who may struggle with similar issues. For instance, talking about how he endured through some of his own difficulties, Josh said, "I also think that we go through things so that we can help others, who are in a similar spot." For Caitlyn, her mom used an experience of bullying to teach her empathy, and that lesson has become a large part of who Caitlyn is today. Listen to Caitlyn's story:

One time in kindergarten, when I was being left out, my mom said, "Caitlyn remember this feeling." And I was like, "How can I forget this feeling?" And then she said, "Don't let other people feel this." . . . And that's still hugely impacting for me, when I see someone sitting there and isn't talking to anyone, I have to go over and talk to them.

Through experiences of suffering, struggles, and limitations, participants were faced with their own humanity. As they worked through these struggles, participants described gaining insight and wisdom that made them more compassionate and empathetic toward others.

Common humanity. The voice of connection also had a sense of equality in it, where participants spoke about their experiences as being relatable and connected to other people's experiences. Most commonly, participants spoke about finding hope and comfort in realizing that others have endured similar experiences that they are struggling with. For instance, Josh explained that he can find hope in any situation because, "There's nothing new under the sun, I'm not the first person that this has happened to and they got through it." For Caitlyn, it was powerful to recognize that people across all age groups and life stages can experience some of the same struggles. She shared how knowing that others struggle with similar issues as she does helps her to connect better with them:

And having my struggle with self-compassion and being able to, I guess, use that because everyone struggles with that! Everyone struggles with seeing themselves negatively or anything. So I feel like I have a very relatable way to talk to people, because I get it and they get it, then they know where I'm coming from. And so being able to have that, to help, I don't know, impact the kingdom of God, is really cool.

In addition to the encouragement and meaning found through the recognition of common humanity, Jeanette also described how the realization of an overarching human brokenness becomes the starting place for understanding and forgiveness when others hurt her. Jeanette shared story about being hurt and said, "I also saw the fragility of this other human being, they weren't the enemy, they were also suffering." The narrative of sin and brokenness runs throughout the Christian faith. Through acknowledging that brokenness and suffering is inherent in the human life, participants were moved toward forgiveness and compassion when suffering and failure inevitably occurred.

Aside from recognition of common suffering, participants also described a sense of connection through their awareness of an inherent human dignity. Cara spoke of this saying, "There's that of God in every person, and so you respect every person. . . . Everybody has a place, everybody should be welcomed, no matter what they're like." Caitlyn also talked about the influence community has in being able to call out the goodness and god-like-ness in one another, she explained:

God puts us together with people who can see things in us. And like, but I can see stuff in you or I can see stuff in anyone . . . and to be able to call that out is a big deal.

Throughout her story, Caitlyn referred to the positive impact that occurred through the way that people pointed out her talents and skills, and in turn Caitlyn understands this to be a mutual

process where she can point out and call out these positive aspects in those around her.

Finally, the voice of connection was used to speak about the positive, encouraging, and intimate was that participants experienced being in community. Though connection and community was highly valued by each participant, as the voice of oppression brings to awareness, there is also the potential for oppression and hurt when one is in community. Paige gave us a perspective that balanced both the pain and the beauty of being in community:

Because the reality is that for someone to minister to you deeply, you have to enter into intimacy, and we're not always going to bat 100. . . . And because of that I think that the church will always be the source of deepest joy and deepest hurt.

The participants in this study were careful about who they chose to connect most deeply with, but ultimately they saw connection as pivotal to their ability to foster love, acceptance, and compassion in their own lives.

Voice of unity. The voice of unity emerged as participants spoke about having an intimate and personal relationship with God. Key markers for the voice of unity included descriptions of experiencing a felt sense of God's love, and feeling connected to God through suffering. The tone of the voice of unity varied from soft to bold, but it consistently held a confident tone that gave an impression that the speaker felt safe and secure. In essence, the voice of unity was used when participants spoke about having an embodied sense of being in relationship with God. This sense of unity went further than just the cognitive beliefs about who God was, and included an emotional experience of connection and trust in God. For some individuals, this was described as a more literal voice that they perceived as coming directly from God, angels, or the Holy Spirit. For other people, the voice of unity described a general sense of understanding God's character through scripture and community, which led to an

experiential sense of God's love and compassion. Two main themes emerged within the voice of unity: experiencing a sense of being connected and unified with Christ through shared experiences, and experiencing a sense of care and nurturing coming from God.

Unity with God. The voice of unity was used when participants spoke about experiencing God as noticeably present in their lives. Participants described God as something outside themselves that spoke to them, comforted them, and guided them toward greater self-compassion. For example, Zach said of God, "He can communicate with me as well as he can communicate with someone else." For Zach, having a personal relationship with God protects him from experiencing manipulation or control from others who would judge him and tell him what to do. Instead, Zach goes to God through practices of prayer, silence, and reflection when he is looking for spiritual understanding. This is not to underplay the importance of community, but participants described their connection with God as a dependable source of truth and comfort whereas community has both positive and negative implications in people's lives. For Cara, a significant aspect of being in relationship with God was that He invited her to join him in his work of demonstrating justice, mercy, and love to people. A significant nuance in understanding God's invitation is that God invited Cara into a relationship where she was able to experience connection and purpose as her values unified with God's values for the world. God was not demanding an outcome or product from which He would judge her. Rather, Cara described the invitation in this way:

God says, "I'm a God of justice and mercy and love. Would you join me and do the part I ask you, in this moment, to do, and nothing else? I'm not asking you to save the world, I've got that covered. . . . God says it's okay if you don't pull it off, "It's my job."

This example represents just one of the ways that participants described finding purpose and

direction in their lives, without the burden of being defined by their successes or failures.

Within the voice of unity there was evidence that knowing that God understands our experiences of suffering is a source of comfort, similar to the concept of common humanity described earlier. The participants spoke about the humanity of Jesus and how even though he was God, he allowed himself to become human and experienced what it is like to suffer.

Jeanette talked about experiencing a greater sense of connection with Jesus knowing that He has also suffered and not only does He understand and empathize with her pain, He can be with her in the midst of her sadness and suffering. Jeanette described a process where she is never alone in her suffering because God is with her:

I think that is a wonderful aspect of our Christianity that I felt; to come back into the suffering of Christ . . . We focus so much on His divinity but in fact He's also fully human and He had a body and He suffered. So to say, "you are brother and you understand, you're human with my longings and my suffering. . . . The reality of Christ suffering *with* me, and the brokenness *with me*, it changes it into a very integrated experience . . . God's lying on the ground with you and breathing with you until you're healed and you can walk together.

This way of feeling connected with God through suffering is something that seemed to develop in participants' life as they became more open to their own suffering. For Jeanette, she says "I rediscovered the God who is present and not outside our suffering but within our suffering." Experiencing God's presence within their suffering, appeared to give participants a greater ability to accept and find meaning within their own suffering.

Care from God. All of the participants felt strongly that God's compassionate presence in their life was the most important factor in helping them move toward self-compassion.

Describing her development of self-compassion, Caitlyn said, “God did a *ton* of heart surgery, of dissecting my identity [so it is] not being what I look like.” Caitlyn was not alone in believing that the emotional and cognitive shifts that fostered self-compassion were the outcome of God’s presence and work in her life. In my own story, I described how I sensed God speaking words of comfort and compassion to me long before I believed them:

I feel like its God who has been my voice of self-compassion, and that constant voice of, “You are enough. You deserve to be taken care of. You deserve to have a break.” Like, “You deserve to be valued.” And for me I think that’s a big hindrance towards acting self-compassionate towards myself, is a sense that I don’t deserve it.

Every participant clearly stated that God is the source of his or her self-compassion. For many of us, it feels unlikely that our thoughts, beliefs and emotions could have changed from such strong self-criticism toward a loving and compassionate way of treating our selves, without the work of God in our lives. This is why Cara referred to her development of self-compassion as a miracle.

The participants used the voice of unity to share how God is present in their lives and active in comforting them. Jeanette talked about such an experience:

And then in that moment was this mystical experience of these arms embracing me. And holding me, and patting me, and saying, “There, there. There, there, I’ve got you girl. There, there.” And this is become the message of grace and the essence of self-compassion, because I’ve known compassion.

In times of distress, participants described sensing something transcendent that provided comfort. This place of comfort also became a refuge for them, as each participant described a sense of knowing that what ever happens in their lives, including their own limitations and mistakes, they can turn to God who can comfort them in their weakness. Again, Jeanette

explained how this presence of Love becomes a source of comfort that accepts every part of her:

Everything that's within you is safe. Every aspect of your humanity and your story and your anger and your emotions, these arms are big enough to handle that. Even if your perceptions are skewed like, "*Come.*" And then there's this, "There, there. I've got you." That experience profoundly changed me because it became a container for my humanity.

The lack of condemnation found in the presence of God allowed participants to acknowledge their own failings and integrate that into their perceptions of themselves. Modelling the compassion that God showed them, participants learnt to accept their own limitations and live with greater compassion. Jeanette described it as, "if I can receive that love, even just in a small way, it helps me to love myself."

Participants shared that God brought their attention to changes that needed to be made to foster a more compassionate way of living. For instance, Caitlyn described how God convicted her through scripture that she needed to love and care for her self:

But like when I read, "Love your neighbour as yourself." And then God said, "How do you feel about yourself?" I was like, "Ahh NO! Like I love people! I don't love myself but I love people tons" And He was like, "You can't fully love people and engage with people until you are okay with who you are; until you love yourself."

In this example, Caitlyn talked about feeling convicted in that moment; she thought she loved well but she realized that she had missed an important part – loving herself. Words were often inadequate to represent the internal shift that occurred with the spiritual conviction that participants frequently alluded to. Cara was describing this experience when she said: "But of course, when you really hear that gong of truth reverberating in your self, you know, if you had

any brains at all . . . I mean, it was pretty indisputable.” God was a constant presence in participants’ journey with self-compassion, and when they seemed to be struggling or travelling in the wrong direction, He stepped in and led them back to the correct path.

Voice of openness. The voice of openness was defined by its qualities of curiosity, acceptance, and trust. As participants spoke in this voice, there was a noticeable humility present as they were willing to acknowledge and remain open to all aspects of their experiences, including pain and regret. This voice is similar to the voice of warmth but as we listened more intently to these voices together, the voice of openness differentiated itself as a more passive and accepting voice, while the voice of warmth was more nurturing. Within the voice of openness there was also evidence that participants were able to tolerate ambivalence and ambiguity in their life because they trusted God’s sovereignty. Overall, there were two main themes within this voice: acceptance and trust.

Acceptance. As participants spoke about their journey with self-compassion, it was evident that at times having self-compassion meant allowing ambiguity and suffering to exist in their life. Within the voice of openness, there was evidence that acknowledging and accepting one’s suffering made the suffering more endurable. For instance, Zach shared, “But somehow going through those difficult struggles and challenges has been easier because I realize, this is the moment, this is what is right now and I’m still okay; I’m still here.” Rather than fighting against his challenges and trying to change things beyond his control, Zach found peace in simply acknowledging the struggle and allowing it to exist. Jeanette shared how acknowledging and accepting her suffering actually helped move her through it:

And sometimes I fall apart and I'm not doing well. . . . To allow myself to be weak and say, "I'm human, I have this longing and I have this need that's not being met and I'm suffering because of it." . . . To give myself permission to say, "I'm suffering." But when I *do*, then I can, it's almost like it becomes a gateway for me to be present in my own suffering, to receive comforting in the suffering. And *then* I'm able to move out of the suffering. I don't remain in the suffering.

When Jeanette opened herself up to her experience of suffering, she experienced a greater awareness and capacity to comfort her self within that suffering. Furthermore, in allowing suffering to be part of their human experience, participants described connecting to themselves in a more authentic and deeper spiritual sense. Cara shared about her experience:

For almost a year tears just poured down my face. I had no idea what it was about. . . . I talked to the rector there, I said, "I'm not sure about these tears, but I'm okay with them, and uh, how are you?" And he said, "Oh, they're holy tears." You know, holy tears. He understood that there was something important going on that he didn't understand and I didn't understand, maybe we'd never understand, but it was okay.

Despite her uncertainty of what was going on to cause the tears, Cara was comfortable with them because she sensed a deeper spiritual meaning that she trusted was worth the pain of the current experience. By embracing negative experiences with an attitude of understanding, participants experienced an increased capacity to endure, comfort themselves, and grow from negative experiences.

There was also a willingness to accept limitations and imperfections evident within the voice of openness. One of the things that Cara reflected on was her journey in coming to realize that there are some goals that she will never be able to meet. She shared the humbling reality of

realizing, “Oh, maybe I’m never going to be able to work hard enough or be smart enough or convince enough people in order to be able to bring justice to the world.” This realization meant that she had to find a new relationship with her limits. Like the other participants, Cara found acceptance of her limits within the knowledge that God loved her, even with her limitations. As she explained:

The experience of learning self-compassion is to let my own grief, my own limits, the experience of meeting my own limitations of any kind, not just in bringing about justice, is to be able to sort of live with them, as sort of welcome guests, I guess. And that cannot happen, or it is only to the extent that I can take in the fact that I really am loved by God just as I am that it is then possible for me to also say “yes” to myself.

Once again, the participants’ understanding of God’s love seemed to infuse them with an internal sense of warmth and understanding that promoted openness.

The voice of openness also had a quality of curiosity and understanding that led participants toward greater empathy and understanding of suffering. Caitlyn experienced openness as an integral part of self-compassion, as she described:

And I think for me that’s the biggest part in the self-compassion thing, is being able to take a step back from the situation, see yourself in it but be able to be like, “What’s going on?” Rather than focusing on just like what am I experiencing, being like, “No, what’s actually going on? In the bigger picture.”

Getting a sense of the “bigger picture” prevented participants from being swept away by negative emotions and increased their understanding of the situation. In addition, participants described seeking out God’s wisdom to better understand the situation. For example, Jeanette shared:

So I will try to gaze upon the presence of Love or become silent, and I will ask questions, “How do you see this situation? How do you see me? How can I become aware?” *Then* when I listen to the presence of Love, the presence of love is constantly giving me messages of Grace.

Jeanette’s openness is heard both in her desire to better understand the circumstances and to accept God’s comfort and compassion in the midst of her pain and limited understanding.

Jeanette later shared, that through this process she “rediscover the God who is present and not outside of our suffering but within our suffering.” Through their willingness to engage with painful emotions and circumstances, participants experienced widened perspectives of their situations that led to feelings of comfort and warmth in the midst of their trials.

In addition to an openness and acceptance toward suffering, participants also demonstrated openness to ambiguity. Many of the participants described how their expectations led to judgment that subverted self-compassion. In contrast, learning to let go of rigid expectations and remain open to whatever life circumstances occurred was an element that promoted self-compassion. When asked about what makes self-compassion easier, Zach responded by saying, “Learning to let go of my expectations, learning to be more open-handed with my ideals, and living in the moment, not in what I think is going to happen or what I think should happen . . . accepting the moment.” The ability to remain open-minded and accept what was happening in the moment, allowed Zach to be more mindful of his experience and fostered greater self-compassion. Zach also talked about the importance of maintaining an open-mind in terms of understanding who God is: “So, moving to a more open faith, where I didn’t see things in tight boxes or even, I began to see things without boundaries and that was much more freeing to me.” This openness toward faith was exactly the opposite of what Zach experienced in the

church community he grew up in, however, most of the participants expressed similar sentiments. As Zach wisely put it, “How can I possibly have all the answers? It’s impossible.”

Trust. Another nuance of the voice of openness was heard when participants talked about their openness and trust of God’s movement and direction in their life. One of the biggest areas of trust was trusting that God was at work in their lives, making them into more compassionate and loving people. Each participant expressed a desire to make a difference in other people’s lives and to please God, however, they recognized that striving to be ‘good’ only led them into a negative experience of judgment and shame. In response to this conundrum, participants described putting their trust in God to do the work of transforming them into the type of person he desired them to be. Rather than pushing themselves beyond their capacities, participants trusted that God would provide a way for them to succeed in the areas that he asked them to be a part of. These areas included a wide variety of experiences including job success, supporting other people, and even participant’s abilities to develop self-compassion. In Cara’s story, her resistance to self-compassion was something that she had to trust God to overcome:

That’s often what my prayers around self-compassion, is that, “God, you’ve got to find a way around *all* of my defenses against your love; your transforming love. You’ll have to deal with *all* the wounds . . . You are the only one who knows, for me, how to get around all the little sort of mechanisms that . . . we [use to] defend ourselves against God’s love.”

Cara recognized that she needed to trust that God would lead her to a place of greater self-compassion because on her own she felt incapable of overcoming her own internal resistance toward self-compassion.

The voice of unity and the voice of openness were strongly connected when it came to God’s work in participants’ lives. While participants described God as doing the work of

transforming them into more compassionate beings, the voice of openness described a process where participants took steps to hear from God and respond to his promptings. For instance, Jeanette talked about needing to learn to be open and receive from God, saying, “To know self-compassion one must learn how to receive [from God].” Zach also built onto this idea when he said, “And I believe God leads us through our experience of Him, not just our knowledge of him.” In these words, Zach illuminated an important part of each participant’s experience. As participants described the way their lived out faith has impacted their journey with self-compassion, it was the experiential components of their faith that changed their lives. At times, participants described coming to a deeper understanding of biblical truths that went from being nice words to changing the way they felt about themselves, others, and God. Rather than being a cognitive stance, the voice of openness seemed to communicate an internal position of openness to experience spiritual transformation. Zach described this process in depth saying:

I’ve come to believe that faith is really a posture of receptivity. And that allows me to be self-compassionate. It takes the responsibility of my behaviour off of me. It takes expectations away, it allows me to just live in a posture of more openness, so it’s not a restrictive posture it’s an exceptive posture. It allows me to observe. . . . Because I’m allowing myself to be placed in a relationship with God that takes all the pressure off me. And what happens in my life is up to Him. And I can receive that and I might fight that sometimes, but at least I’m not responsible for my Christian life. I can’t really do anything to make him accept me, but I can do something to be receptive to what he has to offer me. Because I really believe that love, his love, is always giving. So if he’s always outwardly giving his love, then my posture should, damn well better be receptive. . . . Because of the lack of pressure, it is self-caring, it’s self-compassion.

In many ways, Zach explained the intimate weaving of the voice of unity and the voice of openness. Participants ultimately demonstrated their trust for God through their willingness to follow his lead, even when they did not fully understand where it might take them. Where they ended up was in a place of greater self-compassion.

Voice of warmth. The voice of warmth was a nurturing voice that set healthy boundaries, and comforted and protected the participants. In many ways, the voice of warmth was the closest voice to a voice of self-compassion, as it represented the ways that the participants showed themselves kindness and compassion. Speaking in the voice of warmth, participants talked about the ways that they lovingly accept, value and comfort themselves. In addition, there was a strong emotional tone to this voice and we were able to identify it by the soft, gentle, and warm tone.

The warm, inviting and accepting tone of the voice of warmth was heard as participants spoke about learning to recognize and accept limitations. Listen to the acceptance in Cara's voice as she discussed the ways in which human beings hurt one another:

I think I'm very much in a period right now, along with growing compassion towards myself, there's a growing awareness of the damage— but it's not self-blame, it's just a sober awareness that, boy, us human beings, as broken people who are in need of saving and healing, we do a lot of hurt to each other, so innocently; in the sense of I had no idea the damage that I was doing and not just to my kids, but all kinds of people.

Instead of focusing on their limitations, the participants reminded themselves that they are completely accepted by God, even though he knows better than anyone that they are imperfect. For instance, Cara explained, “Yeah, sure I'm weak and I am fail; I mean, I make mistakes and I'm a failure and I'm slovenly and self-indulgent, but those imperfections, first of all, is not what

God sees.” Even though the words may seem critical, Cara’s tone was gentle and understanding, rather than harsh and attacking. Similarly, listen to the acceptance in Zach’s voice as he shared:

I can even bring my dark side into that, because that’s part of who I am. I don’t only live with the good side of me but I live with the dark side of me and I don’t have to hide that either. That can also come out and I can be free to, not necessarily flaunt that but just let it be part of who I am.

Zach described how knowing that he is completely accepted and loved by God, allows him to in turn acknowledge and accept every part of his being, including the dark and less desirable parts.

By acknowledging and accepting their limitations, the participants were then able to comfort themselves in their distress. The voice of warmth emerged in a variety of ways, but one of the simplest forms was when participants described comforting themselves. For instance, we heard the voice of warmth when Jeanette shared, “So yeah, when I find myself in self-judgment now, I simply take my right hand and I place it on my chest and I will say, ‘There, there. I’ve got you girl.’” Cara shared a similar experience:

That’s kind of the core of [self-compassion], is the kind of non-judgment in the “Oh, oh” like, “Oh, that’s, oh that’s . . . that’s hard.” It’s just the open listening without any kind of evaluation. And secondly, tell, “I want to hear your story, tell me your story. Tell me, tell me. Tell me how it feels, tell me what happened. Just tell me.” . . . the importance of the story, as it is perceived by the person who’s suffering.

The gentle and patient tone of the voice or warmth was used by the participants to reassure and comfort themselves when they were beginning to feel judgmental, impatient, or distressed.

The voice of warmth also emerged when participants described taking steps to prevent events or circumstances that they knew were typically distressing. In Zach’s story, this meant

avoiding people who he finds controlling or judgmental. As Zach described, “[Part of] loving and protecting myself and caring for myself is to move out of restrictive places of demands for me, and to live into freedom.” For Paige, preventing distress meant anticipating where stressors may emerge, and taking steps to limit any unnecessary stressors. As she explained:

I think that now we realize that we need that margin and if we choose to not have it we know that there will be a consequence to that. And so when those consequences happen, I think we’re not as taken aback and flustered by that.

Similarly, participants spoke about recognizing when they slipped back into unhealthy patterns and taking steps to respond differently. For instance, Cara talked about leaning on God to help her when she recognizes the self-critical pattern that she has difficulty breaking:

Because of God’s work in me, I’m a little more aware, more often, and sooner. So I can catch it and say, “Oh yeah, this is the pattern.” And pray. You know it’s usually just, “Come to my aid,” or something really short, “Jesus,” or something like that.

Rather than getting caught up in a cycle of self-criticism and unkindness, self-compassion allowed the participants to make changes that stopped these cycles and allowed them to move forward in a more gentle and kinder manner.

The participants also used the voice of warmth when speaking about the positive characteristics and skills that God created them with. For the most part, participants seemed to have an easier time dealing with hardships and failures when they reflected on their strengths. For example, Caitlyn shared some practical examples of how she fostered self-compassion in her life, by reminding herself of her positive qualities, “I would go through and just like write down everything that was cool about myself. Sounds silly, but it helps! Just write down like what I was good at or like what was cool about me.” The way that participants reflected on their

positive qualities, through the voice of warmth, was different than arrogance. Instead, the tone they used conveyed a sense of equality and respect in realizing that they no better, but also no worse, than other people.

As one might suspect in a study on self-compassion, the voice of warmth emerged in numerous examples throughout the interview. All the voices of love and acceptance had a positive impact on self-compassion, but the voice of warmth spoke about the active ways that participants demonstrated self-compassion. Frequently reflecting back to the model that Jesus gives of compassion, the participants described treating themselves with understanding and acceptance, protecting themselves from harm, and acknowledging the pain when it comes.

Participants' Stories

Just as two people can say the same phrase and yet be distinguished by their vocal tone, each voice that we identified had unique nuances in every individual story. Similarly, talking about how the Christian faith has influenced self-compassion, the participants reflected that it was in the nuances of how they interpreted and lived out their faith that made the biggest difference; common messages heard in the church had the potential to be oppressive or freeing, depending on how each person internalized the message. In the remainder of this chapter, I have the privilege to briefly share each participant's story. As you will hear, there is not a formula or linear experience of how faith and spirituality impacts self-compassion. Yet, each participant described feeling loved and honoured as God directed them toward self-compassion in ways that were individualized to their personality and circumstances.

Jeanette. Jeanette's voices told the story of her journey of transition from living within the bounds of an "us- them"/"good- bad" Christianity to meeting the God who loves her so much she can never be outside of his grace. Growing up she learned from her church and her parents

to judge people. But, in the midst of her own judgment, Jeanette experienced God's love bringing understanding and grace to her situation and this taught Jeanette how to begin to direct understanding and grace toward herself. For Jeanette, self-compassion is only possible after one has received it first. She described an inseparable connection between being loved and loving one's self, and loving one's self and having the capacity to love another; one cannot occur without the other.

The following summary is meant to provide a clearer picture of how each voice was represented in Jeanette's story. In order to get an overall sense of the voices, Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the voices that make up her story. The occurrence of each voice is based solely on the number of words spoken in that voice, and does not represent the strength of the voice. Instead, the graph provides another way for you to understand the complexity of the voices and their relationship with one another. A similar figure is presented for each participant.

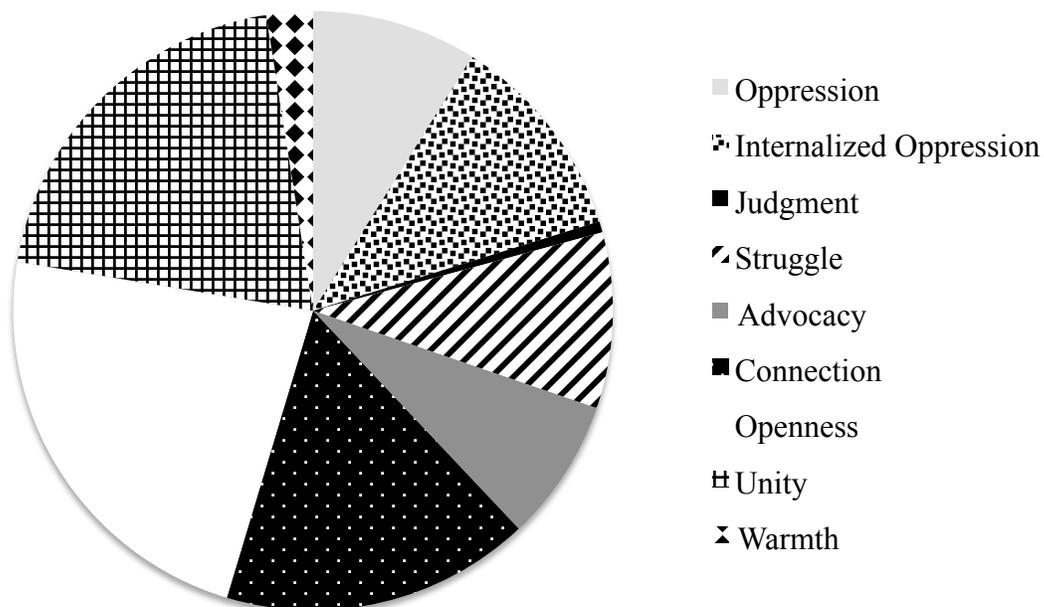


Figure 3. Occurrence of voices in Jeanette's story presented by percentage of coded data.

Jeanette's primary voice was the voice of openness, which made up 23% of the coded voices. Almost equal with the voice of openness, the voice of unity represented 19.9% of the coded voices, while the voices of connection and self-compassion made up 16.7% and 2.5% of the coded voices, respectively. Overall, the voices of love and acceptance occurred in 62.1% of the coded voices in Jeanette's story.

Jeanette's story began with the voice of oppression and a lack of compassion. This voice was not malicious but it communicated a set of standards that she must meet to be valued and cared for. Jeanette described how she had to put her own feelings aside to be a "good girl" and "good girls don't make things uncomfortable." Along with the voice of oppression came the voice of judgment. Taken from her parent's concern over whether or not her friends were Christian, Jeanette learned that you are either "in" or "out" of the Christian circle. Jeanette so strongly internalized this message within the voices of oppression, judgment, and internalized oppression that she did not even question them until she was pushed "outside" of the circle, when her husband chose to walk away from their shared Christian faith. Based on Jeanette's experiences of life, her natural reaction was to judge her husband's choices, which also led to her judging her self for being married to him. As she spoke about judgment Jeanette said, "not only am I critical of me, then I become incredibly critical of you," but later on she also described how the opposite is also true: "When I can receive the adoration, then what happens is not only magical for me but for you, because then I know that you're adored too."

In Jeanette's story, the voice of internalized oppression was much harsher than the voices of oppression and judgment. When the voice of internalized oppression emerged Jeanette spoke shaming messages about how stupid and inadequate she is; thoughts such as everyone else has it together and that she is the only one who cannot be perfect, were common for this voice. Listen

to her I-poem as she evidences the voice of internalized oppression:

I'm judging
I'm too much
I'm not enough
I'm...
I don't fit in
I'm this...
I'm that...

Jeanette felt she needed to hide her inadequacy from others, and this created shame and disconnection. But her story began to shift when she shared about how her desperation, after her husband left, opened her to experience God in a new way.

The voices of openness and unity were apparent when Jeanette spoke about encountering God through her practice of contemplative prayer. At first Jeanette was uncomfortable with the practice, but she remained open and as a result God presented himself to her in a way that did not make sense within her current understanding of him. This tweaked her curiosity and opened her heart to seek God in a new way, without the boxes of the faith of her childhood. Throughout the entire interview the voice of openness continued to be a predominate voice and was often closely tied to the voice of unity. In times of confusion and struggle Jeanette now runs to God with an open heart and expectantly waits for him to comfort and guide her. Drawing on the unconditional acceptance she receives from God, Jeanette talked about learning to notice and accept everything about her life, the positive emotions, the dark emotions, and the sinful behaviours. The voice of openness reflected Jeanette's willingness to receive compassion from God and reorient her own way of treating herself to one that is in line with what God says about her. Multiple times throughout the interview Jeanette described how sensing that God adores her helps her to let go

of her fears and insecurities, and trust God to take care of her. Jeanette described being able to dwell in God's compassion, comfort, and love, and sense God's presence with her in every part of her life. Jeanette also spoke about how Jesus' life and death affirm to her that suffering is universal to everyone. She finds hope knowing that Christ, having lived as a man and experienced suffering, fully understands her suffering. According to Jeanette, God is the foundation of her self-compassion.

In contrast to the judgment that Jeanette depicted prior to developing self-compassion, Jeanette described how understanding the love and compassion God has for her leads her to have more love and compassion for others. According to Jeanette, compassion for others is a by-product of loving her self. As Jeanette said:

When I really can love all of me, which is having compassion for me, . . . then it allows me to turn to you because there's nothing I need from you; I'm already loved; I'm already held; I'm already contained, and I know that you're not too much either.

Jeanette sees the act of being in community with others and having compassion for others as an act of giving back out what she receives from God.

Jeanette has been on a journey with self-compassion for the last 16 years but she admitted that there are still times when she struggles to show herself compassion. The voices of resistance represented the tension between the critical self and her desire to have grace for her self. The voice of advocacy was a strong and confident voice that intensified later in her story as Jeanette began to live more compassionately toward herself. In Jeanette's story, this voice was most frequently identified when Jeanette spoke about knowing that she is adored, and completely accepted and contained within God's love. These truths were used to defend her self-compassionate stance when internal or external circumstances attempted to undermine her

confidence in the importance of treating herself kindly.

Jeanette's story is an engaging narrative of a woman who was drastically transformed when a personal crisis challenged what she thought it meant to be a "good" Christian. In the face of perceived failure and shame, Jeanette became open to new ways of seeing the world and in this place she met God in a new and surprising way. For Jeanette the separation between self-compassion, receiving from God, and giving compassion to others is artificial because in her experience they are all connected. Speaking of the impact of self-compassion Jeanette described:

Learning to embody self-compassion has brought me into the wellsprings of Love. And to be connected to the wellsprings of Love is to be connected to a never-ending source of ever flowing love. So I would say that the love that I'm experiencing through self-compassion, through receiving grace, is creating an exponential growth of love in my life; in all my relationships and in my work.

Self-compassion is inextricably connected to the love she experiences from God and her instinctive response is to invite others into the experience of God's love and compassion.

Zach. As Zach told his story, it was clear that his journey with self-compassion was intricately linked to his experiences in relationship with others. Accordingly, Zach's voice of connection was his dominant voice, making up 25% of his coded voices. The voices of love and acceptance represented 56.6% of his coded voices, with the voices of openness, unity and self-compassion having an occurrence of 14.8%, 10.4%, and 6.6%, respectively. Figure 4 depicts the overall occurrence of each voice.

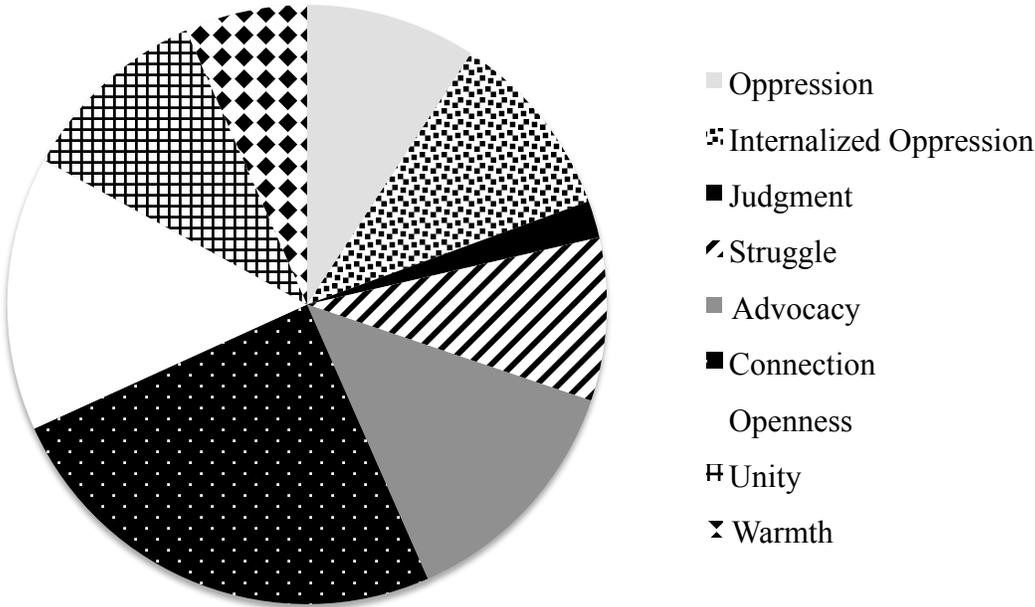


Figure 4. Occurrence of voices in Zach's story presented by percentage of coded data.

In describing the earliest parts of his life and journey with self-compassion, Zach spoke predominately with the critical and unforgiving voices of shame and criticism. Growing up Zach felt that he was always being compared to the high standards of moralism and performance held by his family and their church. He described feeling limited and restrained by the constant drive for perfection. This oppression held Zach back and he felt like he had to hide himself to avoid the disapproval of his community, which left him feeling cold and distanced from others. Furthermore, the standards that Zach learned from his church fuelled his voice of internalized oppression. As Zach explained, “I grew up in a fundamentalist evangelical home which was not kind to me, and therefore I wasn’t kind to myself.” As a result, Zach felt he needed to hide the “dark” aspects of his life and this fuelled his own feelings of shame and inadequacy. Zach was always judging himself as bad because he did not measure up to the Christian standards that he had learned.

As Zach began speaking about self-compassion, the voices of love and acceptance

became more frequent and more confident. Each of these voices was interconnected and they nurtured what Zach emphasized as the foundation for self-compassion: feeling loved. Feeling loved was an embodied experience for Zach that motivated and changed his emotions, thoughts, and behaviours in all areas of his life. The voice of connection was used when Zach spoke about feeling loved and accepted by his current community, while the voice of unity was used when he spoke about the love and acceptance he experiences in relationship with God, through Jesus.

Zach described multiple stories of feeling accepted, valued, supported, encouraged and challenged by significant people in his life, including his spiritual director, his wife, his current church community, and ultimately God. It was through these relationships that he was opened to the idea of being unconditionally loved by God and as he began to experience love, support, and acceptance of all parts of himself – even the darkest parts – he began to feel like he could also like himself too. In Zach’s story, there was a reciprocal relationship between his experiences of connection with others, God’s love, and practicing self-compassion. When self-compassion is difficult for Zach, he leans on his community to help him have an accurate and compassionate view of himself. Zach also described community as an extension of God’s love. Speaking in the voice of unity, Zach described: “I experience God’s love in other people but I know that overall God’s love holds it all; and that’s where I live, that’s where I move, that’s where I have my whole being – within that atmosphere of being loved.” Zach made it clear that nothing is outside of God’s love and presence and this has become the foundation of his life and self-compassion.

Zach’s journey with self-compassion was not a miraculous transformation, even in his present journey he spoke about self-compassion as a position that is not his natural inclination. For Zach, the voice of struggle emerged as he described how his internal feelings of inadequacy and shame were based on self-critical beliefs that were not the way God views things. However,

as Zach expressed, recognizing his value did not erase all the feelings of guilt, shame and inadequacy and so it became a daily struggle to live in the confidence and peace that comes from knowing he is loved. Zach desires to live out of a place of knowing he is loved, accepted and forgiven by God, but this is not a steady state of being and he noticed that he can easily slip back into feeling that he is not good enough. The voice of advocacy supported Zach's efforts to believe he is enough and allow himself to live authentically. Zach's I-poem demonstrates how his movement between struggle and advocacy support his ability to be self-compassionate:

I wonder
Shouldn't I be doing more?
Am I losing it?
Am I?
Am I not caring?
Have I lost interest?
I don't know

I think
I realize
I'm still okay
I'm still here
I really have

Do I have anything to fret about?
I mean
I live open
I get open

I know

I think

I don't know

I've said

I think

If I wasn't

I didn't know

I was loved

I couldn't be

I see

I'm open

I can be compassionate

The voice of advocacy helped Zach embrace all aspects of his personality and character.

Speaking in the voice of advocacy Zach shared: "I grew up in an institution where I had to keep the rules, so my normal response to keeping rules is to disobey them, and find my own way.

Cause I wanted the independence, to be who I was." Zach's self-confidence was further supported by his certainty that God can speak directly to him, disputing the need for a third party to tell him how to live.

Throughout Zach's description of his journey with self-compassion the voice of openness appeared when he spoke about accepting care from others, from God, and even his openness to self-compassion. This voice often came before or after the voice of advocacy or the voice of unity with God. Zach spoke about letting go of the standards he had grown up with and allowing himself to have a more open faith journey; one where he was free to question and live outside of the strict rules that had been set upon him by his early faith community.

Finally, the voice of warmth was a voice that seemed to come from an internalization of the other voices of love and acceptance (i.e. unity, connection, and openness). When Zach spoke with the voice of warmth, he spoke about being kind to himself and protecting himself, taking care of himself, and having the freedom to make choices. This voice was completely accepting, creating space and grace for all the “good” and the “bad” within him. The word freedom appeared often when Zach was using the voice of warmth and he juxtaposed his experience of self-compassion with his early experiences of feeling restricted and needing to hide. Zach spoke about how self-compassion gives him the freedom to make his own choices and to express his unique interests without comparing himself to others or other people’s expectations of what it means to be a “good” Christian or a “man”. Though caring for himself included freedom and acceptance, Zach also talked about pushing himself when necessary, for example when he was re-learning to walk after he was told he would not be able to walk again. This was another side of his voice of warmth; pushing beyond what was comfortable in the moment, to work toward a greater good in the future. Ultimately in Zach’s story, the voice of warmth was the voice that Zach used to describe how he has learned to accept all parts of himself and by embracing that, he is better able to live authentically and use his unique gifts.

Cara. Cara’s voices told a story about a journey that is still in progress. Cara spoke about being driven by over-performance and refusing to rest until the whole world experienced justice. It was an oppressive way of being, one where she was never good enough to meet her goal and never able to rest. The problem with fighting for justice is that the job is never done and it took the intervention of God’s truth in her life to show Cara the value of self-compassion. As Cara continues to journey on the path toward self-compassion she spoke about the difference it makes to live a surrendered life that allows space to care for her self.

The voices heard most frequently in Cara's story were the voices of unity and openness, which made up 17.2% and 16.5%, respectively, of her coded voices. Overall, the voices of love and acceptance occurred in 52.8% of the coded voices in Jeanette's story. The voices of shame and criticism occurred in 25.8% of the coded voices, and the voices of resistance had an occurrence of 21.4%. Figure 5 depicts the overall occurrence of each voice.

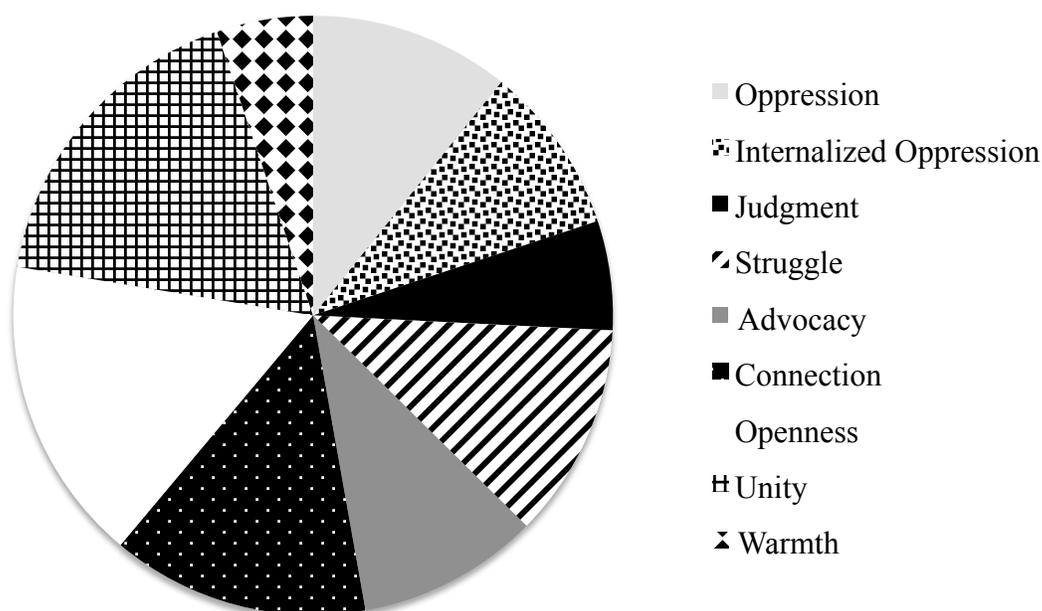


Figure 5. Occurrence of voices in Cara's story presented by percentage of coded data.

Cara's story began with the voice of oppression. Growing up in a Christian home Cara was taught the importance of compassion and doing right. These values are still a core part of who she is today, but the atmosphere in which they were articulated created enormous pressure that attached Cara's value to her actions. Within in the church, Cara observed a fear that unless we strive to be good we will become "very bad", and with this message came the warning to Cara to fear her own internal stirrings and motivations. It was an insidious oppression that was not meant to be oppressive, but as Cara explained, "it added up to a culture, at least as I perceived it, of one of high standards and striving, and sort of deep intention to do good." We

hear another example of this in Cara's I-poem:

I was raised
I perceived
I guess
I think

I... I...
I struggled
I just couldn't
I don't think I ever got
I never felt it as pressure
I... I don't think I ever heard
I think
I didn't feel
I didn't have

I feel like I got
I just
I just got addicted
I saw
I think
I picked up
I see

These voices of oppression contributed to an atmosphere where the fear of not measuring up prevented Cara from showing herself grace and kindness. Even as a young child, Cara internalized the belief that “if you don't do right you're not acceptable.” Having experienced the reward of encouragement and praise for working hard and doing good, Cara valued these actions

and became driven to work harder and not give up until the job was done. Cara shared many examples of her ability to show compassion to others but described how difficult it can be to transfer this compassion toward her self. For many years her self-compassion was tied to whether she had earned it by completing her mission for justice, as Cara argued, “How could I possibly let up on myself when there’s all this suffering.” This literal voice of internalized oppression was repeated with various phrasings throughout the interview, and Cara later described how she had to alter this belief in order to develop self-compassion.

In addition to Cara’s high standards for herself there were also times where the voice of judgment emerged as she applied those same high standards onto others. For instance, Cara described how she would become critical of people who she did not think were doing enough to fight for justice. The voice of judgment was not an inherently negative; Cara described herself as a reformer and often it was her passionate desire to see positive changes occur that emerged as the voice of judgment. This even went as far as judging God for failing to bring peace to all parts of the world. Cara reflected on how her desires can be good but she sometimes needs to let go of her agenda and accept that God is in control and that he has a plan that is better and more powerful than any plan or effort that she could give.

At the heart of Cara’s story was the unity she experiences with God. The voice of unity was a powerful voice that spoke into every experience and every other voice in Cara’s life. In Cara’s story the voice of unity took on three different tones which included (a) God’s nurturing comfort and love, which modeled to Cara how she should treat herself, (b) a sense of oneness and shared experience with God, which provided comfort to Cara in her suffering, and (c) a transcendent experience that experientially shifted her perspective. Together these nuances of the voice of unity became the foundation for Cara’s self-compassion. A pivotal shift occurred in

a tangible experience of God. Cara shared about a specific day and time when God spoke to her and told her to “give up justice”. In those words each of the tones of unity were apparent and clear. First, God’s care rings through; he was not asking Cara to give up justice because it was unimportant, but He needed her to recognize that he was not placing the responsibility and burden for justice onto her shoulders, he was only asking her to join and participate in his mission for justice. Second, Cara described sensing a call to give up striving for justice, but not give up working toward justice. The significance of this nuance is that it reoriented her from focusing on justice to focusing on the heart of God, which includes fighting for justice. It also introduced the importance of allowing herself to experience compassion from God, others, and ultimately from herself. Finally, this call to give up justice demonstrated the transcendent quality of her experience of unity. Despite her reluctance to give up striving toward justice, Cara recognized the divine existence in that moment of conviction. In the moment that God spoke those words to her, Cara experienced an internal resonance that was so undeniable it shifted her entire way of living and she knew that she needed to give up justice. This was a profound switch in perception of what her purpose is in life. Cara described this experience as a miracle, because without divine intervention she cannot imagine such a drastic shift. Cara acknowledged her need for God to help her foster care for herself:

God does the bringing and God does the, sort of, internal recognition. God is the one who makes it possible to have it kind of sink in more deeply over time, bit by bit, it’s always bit by bit. It’s all his work.

In Cara’s dialogue with the voice of unity, the voices of resistance emerged. There appeared to be an internal struggle between her embodied sense of knowing that God wanted her to accept his tender compassion, and her internal resistance to accepting it. Cara talked about her

self-compassion as a miracle because she intimately knows the strength of her critical voice, which suggests that her value is based on what she achieves. The tension between these two extremes represented the voice of struggle in Cara's story. Similarly, the voice of advocacy was a rational voice that brought understanding and confidence to the experiences of unity that she described, yet still resisted. Cara's voice of advocacy frequently came back to the message of God's love for humanity. Cara spoke about learning that God is in control, not her, and reminding herself of this truth allows her to let go of the burden and find peace in just being.

Cara also modeled curiosity and a willingness to embrace new information and experiences, which defined the voice of openness. This included a willingness to look for God in every experience and not restrict herself to purely Christian friends, stories and readings. With this openness Cara described powerful lessons that she learned about God's character and love through sources such as a Persian legend and watching a Sikh grandmother with her granddaughter. A deep trust for God was at the center of Cara's openness and she trusted that she could be open to new ideas and experiences because she believed that (a) God is at work in every person and (b) God can work through all circumstances, including our failures. It was because of her trust in God that Cara was willing to become more aware of her own suffering. She attributed her ability to acknowledge the pain without judgment to her confidence that God knows her weaknesses and imperfections and is "madly in love" with her anyway. The confidence that she has in God's unconditional love provides an atmosphere where she can feel safe to acknowledge her imperfections and failures.

The voice of connection appeared in Cara's story as she emphasized the importance of sharing her life in community. In Cara's experience, connection represented many of the qualities that are included in self-compassion: a willingness to share each other's hurts without

trying to fix it, providing support in response to areas of weakness, and acceptance of all parts of the other – including their imperfections and weaknesses. This was most powerfully experienced during a dark time in Cara’s life when she needed to lean on her community to take on some of her responsibilities. During this time her community continued to support her and even pay her for work she did not complete. Even though this is still a struggle for Cara to fully understand, the love and acceptance of her community fostered a deeper sense of the transformational quality of compassion, and validated the importance of self-compassion. Cara shared that being loved by people in her weakness reminds her of God’s perfect love and helps her to feel safe in the world. Furthermore, Cara reflected on the ways that community can remind us about God’s good character, which is especially powerful when we begin struggle and lose hope. Accepting care from others is something that Cara continues to struggle with, but she emphasized that the generous and abundant care she receives from her community develops within her a greater willingness to compassionately care for her self.

Each of the other voices provided the context for the voice of warmth. This voice was kind and understanding and spoke without judgment or measurement of any kind. Cara acknowledged that she is on a continual journey of growing in self-compassion and at times her voice of warmth is stronger than other times. Similar to the acceptance she receives from God, Cara’s voice of warmth is demonstrated in her willingness to accept her limitations. Cara shared about being able to find humour in her imperfections, knowing that all of humanity is imperfect and that is why we need God. Another part of Cara’s self-compassion was in her willingness to recognize her own pain, sit in it without judgment, and allow herself to acknowledge the importance of that pain. For years this was a struggle for Cara because she put the needs of the world ahead of her own needs, but as the voice of warmth grows so does Cara’s ability to see

that her needs are important too. By being more mindful of when she is losing patience and compassion for herself, Cara is able to care for herself by refuting and calming the critical voice, often by refocusing on what God has to say about her.

Cara's story of self-compassion is intricately linked to her relationship with God and Cara calls it a miracle that she has developed self-compassion. The voices of internalized oppression and judgment reflect the strength of Cara's idealism, and it does seem like a miracle that she would choose to stop aiming for perfection and embrace a life of prayer, openness, and trust in God's plan and timing for healing in the world. This story is a powerful example of the relational aspects of self-compassion. For Cara, self-compassion was not about learning new skills and speaking the truth to herself. Instead, Cara's journey with self-compassion was about saying yes to God and obediently (and sometimes reluctantly) following the example he set.

Caitlyn. For Caitlyn, self-compassion starts with knowing her worth to God and she views self-compassion as a reflection of God's character being developed within her. Caitlyn's voices told the story of her struggle to quiet the critical oppressive voices and how God has helped her find victory as she overcomes those voices to develop the gentler voices of self-compassion. The overall tone of her story was one of confidence, joy, authority, and victory. Caitlyn knows that she is treasured and unconditionally loved by God, which means that in every circumstance she can be confident that she is worthy of grace and compassion.

The dominant voice in Caitlyn's story was the voice of advocacy, which made up 25.8% of the coded voices. Many of Caitlyn's beliefs were supported by her experiences in community, and the voice of connection was the second most common voice, representing 23.4% of the coded voices. Overall, the voices of resistance, and love and acceptance represented 37.9% and 45.2% of the total voices, respectively, while the voices of shame and criticism only accounted

for 16.9% of the coded data. Figure 6 depicts the overall occurrence of each voice.

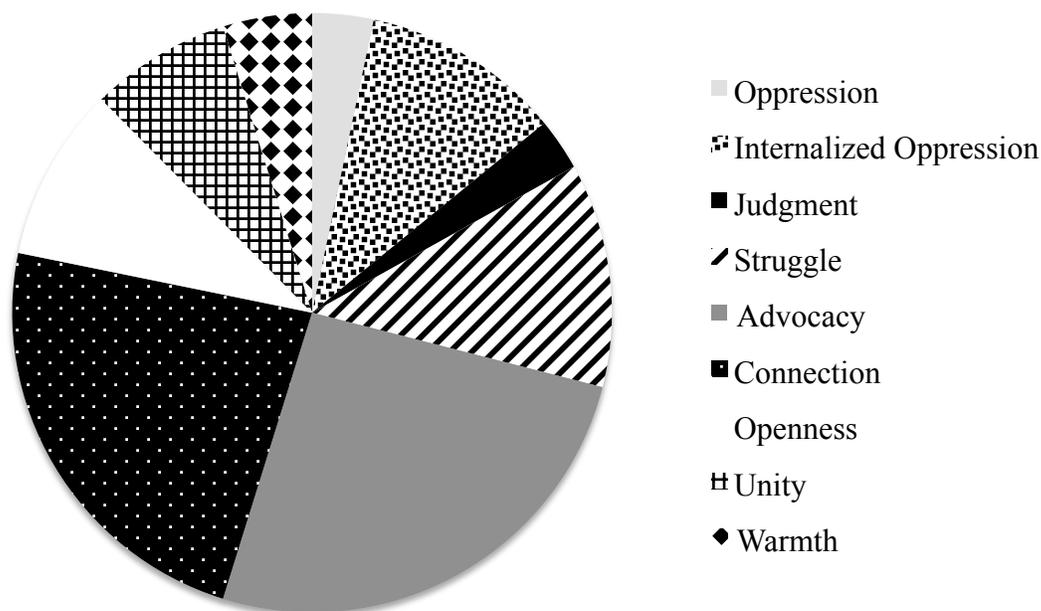


Figure 6. Occurrence of voices in Caitlyn's story presented by percentage of coded data.

Caitlyn described the beginning of her journey with self-compassion as “rocky”. She grew up in a nurturing and loving Christian home where she knew she was valued, but despite how others treated her, she struggled to appreciate herself. As she spoke about her childhood, the voices of struggle and internalized oppression emerged simultaneously. Caitlyn described feeling ugly and unlovable, while also having a part of herself that recognized that there were people in her life that loved and cherished her. The voice of struggle attempted to navigate the tension between what she feels and what she thinks is true. Caitlyn acknowledged that the intensity of her emotions fuels the voice of internalized oppression and makes it difficult for her to choose self-compassion over self-criticism. The voice of internalized oppression often spoke global attributions about Caitlyn’s character and abilities, like she is not good at her job, and she is untalented, ugly, gross, and unlovable. Listen to the example in Caitlyn’s I-poem:

I'm awful
I never eat healthy
I blaa, blaa, blaa
I...
I never exercise
I'm very
I'm pretty extreme
I'm usually at one extreme

Still, Caitlyn distinguished her identity from the critical and harsh things she says to herself. When Caitlyn reflected on the messages spoken by the voice of internalized oppression, she referred to all of them as lies and she believes that how she feels toward herself is not the truth about how others perceive her.

In contrast to the voice of internalized oppression, there were few examples of the voices of oppression and judgment in Caitlyn's story. Caitlyn acknowledged that her expectations for herself are higher than what others expect of her. However, Caitlyn shared that witnessing how oppression hinders self-compassion in others, made her more committed to developing self-compassion in her own life.

Through the voice of advocacy, Caitlyn confidently stated that the proper way to view herself is the way that God views her— as someone special, valuable, unique, and loveable. This voice spoke about taking her thoughts captive and reminding herself what scripture and her own experience with God has taught her about her value and the value of self-compassion. It was this voice that “replaced the lies” that told her she is unworthy of self-compassion. Ultimately, the voice of advocacy spoke about what Caitlyn believes to be true and held unwaveringly to these truths, especially when her emotions were incongruent. Caitlyn shared her conviction that compassion and self-compassion are best demonstrated by God's love, by saying:

God is love- and because he demonstrated the biggest love when he sent Jesus to die on the cross for us. . . . In order to have compassion on myself, I need to understand the sacrifice that someone took so I could have some compassion on myself and so I can be able to have compassion on others even, because we can't really have compassion on others until we understand that sacrifice.

By grounding herself in these convictions, Caitlyn found the confidence and authority to defend her self-compassionate actions.

The voice of connection was woven throughout Caitlyn's story. Caitlyn shared that it was through other people recognizing and encouraging her leadership abilities that she began to see her uniqueness and embrace her skills and calling as a Christian leader. By recognizing the different roles she plays and the value that she brings to relationships, Caitlyn was able to grow in appreciation for who she is. Caitlyn also shared that she is driven by the desire to inspire others and she finds great meaning in caring for other people. This became a motivation for self-compassion because working through her own struggles and learning to love herself allows her to be more present and compassionate to others.

One of the ways that Caitlyn responds to her suffering is by taking a step back from her emotions and focusing on the bigger picture of what God is doing in the world. This openness and trust in the character and authority of God, helps Caitlyn find peace in the midst of overwhelming situations. We noticed that the voices of openness and unity were closely associated in her story. Caitlyn spoke about how God continually affirms her and has shown her that her identity goes beyond how she looks or what she accomplishes. According to Caitlyn, knowing her true identity, as God defines it, is the starting point of self-compassion. She also spoke about receiving comfort and guidance from God, who warns her to slow down when she is

striving in unhealthy ways and encourages her that the best way to love others is to learn to love herself. Even when Caitlyn feels convicted by God, it occurs in a way that makes her feel protected and nurtured, in contrast to feeling torn down or ashamed. It is through the tenderness and wisdom she hears from God that Caitlyn has learned what self-compassion looks like.

Finally, Caitlyn's voice of warmth was heard in the kind, accepting, and understanding messages she spoke. Caitlyn described shifting her perspective from focusing on what she was doing wrong to focusing on her strengths and what makes her special. The image of self-compassion that Caitlyn shared was an image of water rolling off of a ducks back. For Caitlyn, this represents letting suffering and failure touch her life, but not letting it stick to her and change who she is as a person. By grounding herself in her core identity as a loved and valuable child of God, Caitlyn shows herself compassion and remembers the qualities that make her special.

Paige. As Paige told her story she spoke with boldness about her journey of faith and self-compassion. Paige's voice of warmth was communicated with confidence, but underneath her words a tenuous impression was left, as if she is still fighting to hold on to the new perspectives and embodied compassion that she is growing in. This tension was demonstrated through the frequency of her voices of advocacy, struggle, and the voice of judgment, which made up 21%, 6.4%, and 9.1% of the coded voices, respectively. Together, these voices seemed to be forms of resistance and self-protection in her story. For example, strong outwardly directed statements of advocacy or judgment often followed the critical voice of internalized oppression, as a way to defend her stance of self-compassion. This is not surprising given the tenacity and strength that Paige conveyed. Her tenacity has been both helpful and harmful in her story; helpful because she is willing to fight for what is right, but harmful because it is instinctive for Paige to hold tight to her own high expectations for her life. However, Paige's self-compassion

has developed through situations that brought her to her limits and forced her to place margin and space into her life. Together, her voices paint a picture of a journey with self-compassion that is still growing and changing as she navigates through the grief processes of losing her father, moving away from her established faith community, and navigating the waters of infertility and adoption. Figure 7 depicts the overall occurrence of each voice.

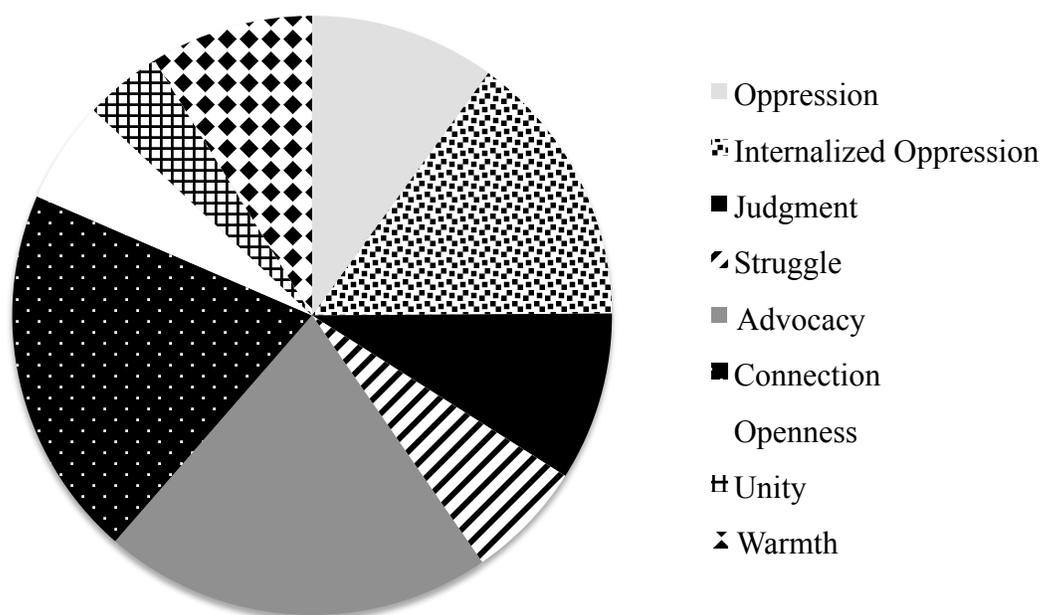


Figure 7. Occurrence of voices in Paige's story presented by percentage of coded data.

Paige admitted that she can have very high expectations for herself, and these expectations formed the core of her voices of internalized oppression and judgment. For Paige, these expectations for herself were in response to a number of ethos, such as society (i.e. measuring up to cultural views of "success"), her faith (i.e. standards for a good Christian), her community (i.e. a desire to make everyone happy), and her own emotional reactions (i.e. the desire to do everything and not miss out on anything). The voice of internalized oppression was most obvious when Paige shared that her standards and expectations are often in direct conflict with giving herself space and allowing herself to make mistakes. At times she also applied these

standards to others. For example, the voice of judgment emerged when Paige described a conflict that arose when she helped plan a church outreach. In this situation, Paige found it difficult to understand why others could not see the situation from her perspective and approach it with her standards. As Paige said, “It was *very* clear to me that that was not going to work . . . Like, surely we can talk about this and make some tweaks . . . I’m not suggesting we tell them they’re complete idiots.” Another area where the voice of internalized oppression and judgment appeared together was when Paige talked about having a “correct” view of God; this was sometimes relieving for her but it also implied a pressure or standard that people need to live up to. Overall, the voice of internalized oppression sounded rational and it drove Paige toward success, but it also burdened Paige with guilt when she failed to meet her demanding standards.

One voice that was not frequent in Paige’s story was the voice of oppression. The few times that this voice did emerge it was in connection to people’s reactions to Paige and her husband’s infertility and in her relationship with her family. In both these situations others had strong expectations of how Paige should behave. However, Paige quickly responded to these experiences with advocacy or judgment. In contrast, the voice of connection was frequently heard in Paige’s story. Paige often spoke about the wisdom that others have shared with her. Many of the changes that Paige described as key to her self-compassion started with lessons or ideas that she learned from others and that she later internalized as helpful for her own life. This was true of the idea of margin, which was frequently encouraged by her pastor and represented Paige’s main source of self-compassion. It was surprising to hear how strongly Paige valued community because she also shared many ways that she has been hurt by her church community. However, the voice of connection was often followed by her voice of openness and a willingness to forgive. Paige reflected on this and pointed out that every person is imperfect, so we are

likely, at some point, going to experience hurt in relationship. However, for Paige, the hurt is worth it in light of the benefits of being in community.

Throughout the interview, Paige frequently referred back to theological beliefs that seemed to focused on absolute right and wrong, and as result the voice of advocacy was often heard while the voice openness was less frequent in her story. However, there were brief moments when the voice of openness emerged and demonstrated Paige's willingness to consider new ways of thinking and to ask hard questions. One of the clearest examples was when she spoke about wrestling with the issue of homosexuality. Being forced to face this issue, Paige explored the Bible and Christian books on the topic, and eventually realized that though she believes homosexuality is a sin, it is not any different from other sins such as lying or gossip. Through this experience she found an even deeper understanding of her own sin and the power of God's grace. Furthermore, she shared how this influenced her to become more understanding of her faults. At the centre of her ability to forgive herself and others, is her understanding of what it meant for Jesus to die on the cross; because it was through that action that God forgives her. The rational voice of advocacy often provided cognitive explanations for the steps Paige took to act kindly toward herself. For example, the voice of advocacy was used to rationalize her choice not to share her vacation plans with certain friends. As she speaks with the voice of advocacy, listen to her I-poem:

I think
I'm wanting
I'm realizing
I tell that I'm there
I will feel
I will want

I am contemplating
I can avoid feeling
I know, I know
I'm not gonna be very good
I can choose
I can achieve

In this example, Paige rationalized that it would be easier for her to avoid telling people about her visit, than it would be to let them down. At other times the voice of advocacy repeated statements that Paige heard from others. For instance, Paige emphasized the importance of margin, which was a lesson that she attributed to her mentor. The third way the voice of advocacy emerged was when Paige spoke about theology and her cognitive understanding of her faith in Christ. Through her professed faith beliefs, the elements of the voice of unity (i.e. an expression of a close relationship with God, which included a sense of knowing God on a personal level), were implied, but potential experiences of unity were often communicated as detached theology that could not be separated from the voice of advocacy. An example of an implied expression of the voice of unity was when Paige described having “whoosh-ah-hah” moments, which referred to transformational moments in her relationship with God. The voice of unity also emerged when Paige talked about suffering. Paige began to tear up as she described the comfort and unity she feels in God’s presence. This was most clear when she spoke about about Jesus’ suffering:

Like He entered into that experience, fully. So He *knows*, He *understands*. He *gets* how we’re feeling. Um, and, you know it’s amazing to me that in 33 years on earth, that Jesus is the- as a *man*, was able to, He’s able to identify with every aspect of the human

experience. That He, He really can walk with us through stuff.

It was obvious that Paige is committed to developing the character of Jesus in her life and growing in understanding, compassion, and forgiveness, toward others and toward herself.

One of the themes in Paige's story was navigating her own expectations. In many ways, Paige approaches self-compassion in a practical and rational way. Not surprisingly, Paige's voice of warmth was most evident when she spoke about planning ahead so that she could avoid as much stress as possible. By recognizing what has caused her strife in the past, she takes steps to avoid those situations in the future; this is Paige's way caring for herself. However, rather than speaking in the warm and gentle voice of warmth, Paige more frequently spoke about self-compassion with the more detached voice of advocacy. The beauty of Paige's story is that she appears to be in the middle of processing her own relationship with self-compassion. She is beginning to articulate what she knows is true, through the voice of advocacy, and this is developing into greater kindness toward herself and openness to both her imperfections and the imperfections of others.

Josh. Josh was most eager to share his story of overcoming challenges, and through this story he reflected on how trusting in God's protection allowed him to worry less and have more compassion for himself. In addition, much of what Josh had to say about self-compassion was related to the support he received from others; accordingly, Josh's primary voice was the voice of connection, which made up 22.7% of his coded voices. In contrast, the remainder of the voices of love and acceptance represented only 19% of his coded voices and the voices of shame and criticism made up 42.3%. Figure 8 depicts the overall occurrence of each voice.

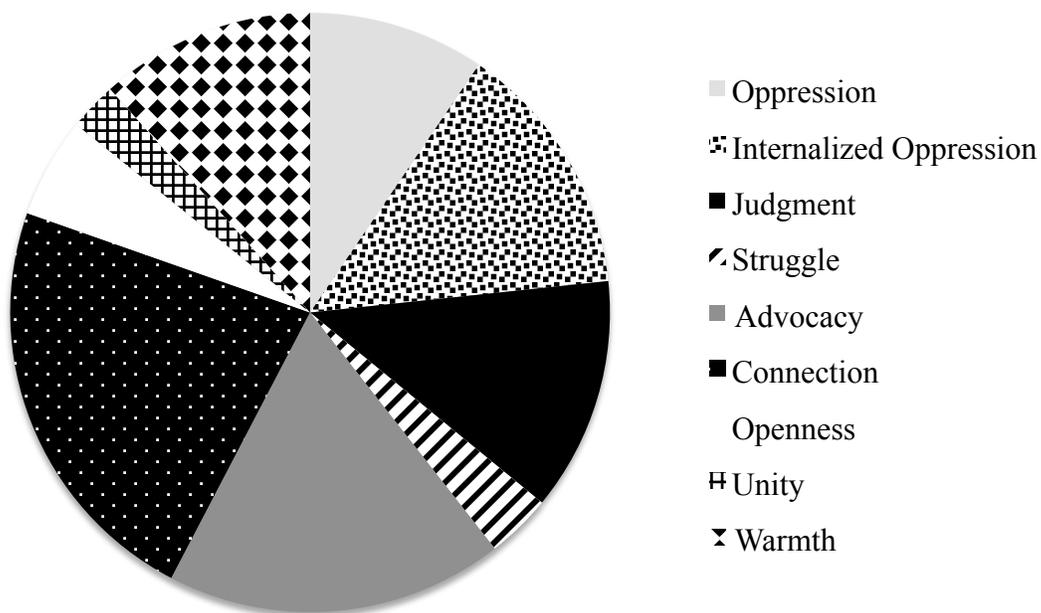


Figure 8. Occurrence of voices in Josh's story presented by percentage of coded data.

As Josh began his story, he reflected on his childhood, and though we heard the voice of oppression emerge as Josh shared about being bullied as a child, he did not seem to be bothered by the ways in which people pressured and marginalized him. Listen to how this dynamic presented in Josh's I-poem:

I don't know
 I never told
 I don't
 I never thought
 I...
 I never was
 I wouldn't do
 I mean
 I was

I just

I didn't feel

I just

I felt

I'm quite unique

I don't fit

I got

I don't know

I'm not

I mean

Josh shared that he had always felt proud of who he was, even when others mocked him. This was true throughout his story, and Josh partially attributed his self-compassion to his laid-back personality.

Rather than the messages of shame that were frequently heard from the voice of internalized oppression, Josh's voice of internalized oppression was often entangled with more compassionate voices such as the voice of connection and the voice of warmth. For example, Josh spoke about being comforted by the knowledge that suffering is a universal experience, yet in the same sentence he discounted the difficulty of his own suffering by stating that his suffering is nothing compared to what others go through. In examples like this, we wondered how Josh experiences self-compassion. In hearing Josh's story, we felt heavy and oppressed by the parameters he put around self-compassion, like allowing himself time to grieve while rationalizing that it was okay because it was only for a few weeks. These standards frequently emerged, and they were also heard through the voice of judgment.

As Josh told his story, the voices of judgment and advocacy supported each other. The

voice of advocacy tended to communicate Josh's faith beliefs in an absolute way, which focused on discovering the "right" way to live. Many of Josh's beliefs supported self-compassion, such as his trust that God is at work guiding his life, even when he does not see or understand it. This trust in God's providence provides comfort and freedom for Josh to simply do his best in life, rather than worrying and criticizing himself when things do not work out as he planned. As long as Josh felt he was doing his best and obeying God's will, he was able to see his suffering as something that is temporary and uncontrollable, rather than something that is overwhelming and his fault. However, Josh never addressed what self-compassion looks like in his life when he steps outside of God's will. The voice of judgment had a mocking tone that emerged to point out the beliefs or actions in others that Josh thinks are wrong. For example, Josh said:

I mean, it's the wisdom of the world. It's not, you know, a hundred years ago most things were based- pretty lined up with the bible, and now a lot of it is so called science, right, has discovered things that would seemingly contradict divine wisdom.

In saying these words, Josh wanted to show how his worldview differs from others, but the voice of judgment seemed to imply that he is also wiser, or more correct, than many others who are "in the world". Again, this made us question if Josh was talking about self-compassion in the same way that we understand it. There were no examples in his story about how God has informed his understanding of self-compassion in the context of Josh's own failure. Instead, Josh focused on the care he senses from God when he is suffering from circumstances outside of his control.

It was obvious, though, that community and identifying with others was significant in Josh's understanding of self-compassion. Josh described many ways that others have encouraged him and made him feel valued for who he is. When Josh was being bullied at school, it was partly because of the encouragement he received from his mom that he was able to

feel proud of his intelligence and thus minimize the impact that the bullies' words and actions had on him. Not only was compassion from others helpful, Josh viewed reaching out and asking for help as a form of self-compassion. Community also served as a source of validation and reinforcement for Josh's self-compassionate actions. For example, Josh shared that many of his choices to let go of his high expectations were motivated by others who suggested that he should have more manageable expectations. Josh also experienced a sense of connection when he reflected on the reality that he is not alone in his suffering. Knowing that others suffer and have survived extremely difficult situations gives Josh strength to endure suffering.

The voice of warmth has a tender nurturing tone to it and the way that this was most frequently represented in Josh's story was when Josh expressed his appreciation and acceptance of all aspects of his personality. It appeared that even as a young child, Josh was confident in his value as a unique individual and therefore, when he was being bullied, he was able to comfort and care for himself by reflecting on his strengths. Listen to how Josh described self-compassion, "I guess [it's] like being gracious with yourself, I guess like not saying it was my fault that this external thing happened." Again, what is interesting to note is that Josh focused on not blaming himself when something external had caused the problem. Given Josh's tendency to perfectionism and his focus on being in God's will, one might question what self-compassion looks like in his life when the suffering or failure has been caused by his own poor choices or negligent actions. Still, Josh described many ways that he takes care of himself in order to minimize his suffering, thus reflecting the aspect of self-compassion that seeks to comfort one's self. For Josh, asking for help when he needs outside comfort is one of the ways that he can care for himself. Josh also acknowledged that making physically and spiritually healthy choices on a daily basis is part of his self-kindness. This included creating space in his life to deal with

negative emotions or experiences. By creating this space in his life, Josh is able to have his needs met, reflecting the nurturing component of self-compassion.

Genevieve. The final story I want to share is my own. For a moment, I took off my researcher hat and became a participant myself, simply telling my story of my journey with self-compassion. The following summary is presented in the third person, not because I have distanced myself from the analysis, but because this summary represents a collaborative understanding of my story, constructed by the co-researcher and myself.

Genevieve told a story that started with a life characterized by critical standards and dark emotions, and slowly developed into a growing sense of being loved and taken care of by God. There was so much overlap between the voices that each voice was incomplete without the others. However, the essence of Genevieve's journey was that her self-compassion comes from experiencing love from a God who can hold her in her weakness and confusion.

Genevieve's primary voice was the voice of advocacy, which made up 22% of her coded voices. However, the voices of love and acceptance were also frequently heard and represented 46.3% of her voices, with the voice of warmth making up 17.1% of the voices. In contrast, the voices of shame and criticism only represented 19.2% of the coded voices. The occurrence of each voice represents her journey. Genevieve used the analogy of physically fighting the voices of shame and criticism, which illustrated her strong voice of advocacy. Though she continues to struggle to feel self-compassionate, the voices of love and acceptance were favoured, and fought for, in the story she told. Figure 9 depicts the overall occurrence of each voice.

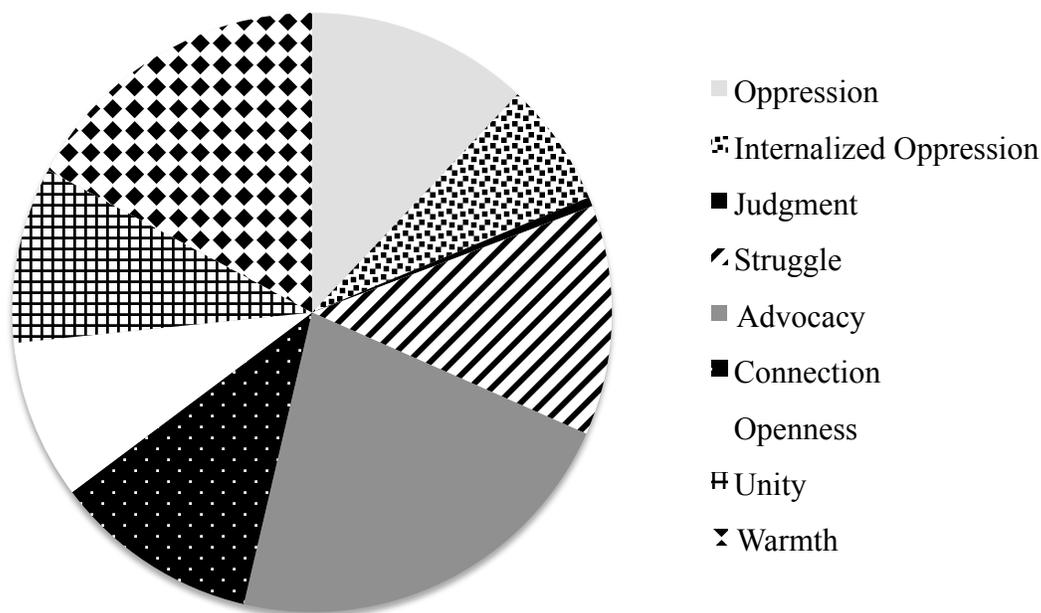


Figure 9. Occurrence of voices in Genevieve's story presented by percentage of coded data.

The voices in Genevieve's story seemed to create a path of development from the lies that dominated her early life toward the voice of warmth. Each voice grew in confidence as it moved toward self-compassion. As Genevieve described her life prior to encountering God, it was filled with experiences of isolation. Throughout her story, isolation was heard in the voice of oppression; Genevieve talked about never really feeling understood or fully cared for by others and this led to a strong voice of internalized oppression as she blamed herself for the broken and unfulfilling relationships around her. As Genevieve described her life prior to encountering God, she said, "There was a lot of hurt and I blamed it all on me, like if I was . . . a better person I could . . ." But the voice of internalized oppression was challenged when God spoke to her in a voice that was significantly different than the voices that she was used to. As she shared, that encounter "painted all [her] experiences after that."

As Genevieve spoke about her relationship with God, the voice of openness emerged. The voice of openness first appeared in Genevieve's story when she talked about her encounter

with God at a youth conference. During this encounter she described being curious and openly observing what was going on. In her curiosity she heard the voice of God speak to her, and thus introduced the voice of unity into her life. The voice of unity brought a new awareness and hope that things could be different, and the voices of unity and openness remained entwined throughout her story. The voice of openness appeared to represent Genevieve's willingness and ability to hear and follow God's compassionate voice and it introduced a new ability for Genevieve to tolerate the unknown and remain confident in the absence of answers or solutions to her problems.

Genevieve repeated three different times that she believes God has been her voice of self-compassion. Whereas the voice of warmth was often hesitant, the voice of unity was confident. Genevieve sometimes doubted her own goodness, and thus her ability to trust herself, but she attributed the caring thoughts she had as coming directly from God and thus she could trust them. She shared, "the relationship with the Trinity is what provides me the strength to continue to work to be more self-compassionate." For Genevieve, self-criticism had become so automatic and natural in her life that she could not comprehend challenging it without the inner emotional shift that she attributed to the transcendent work of God. The voice of unity had the power to dispel the strong voice of internalized oppression that she felt incapable of stopping. Over time however, she is slowly strengthening her voice of warmth by internalizing the comfort she receives from God.

In addition to creating the I-poem for Genevieve, we created a God-poem by isolating the times when Genevieve described what she felt God was speaking to her; these included "I" statements attributed to God and "You" statements spoken from God to Genevieve. By creating the God-poem, we were able to hear what the literal voice of unity sounds like to Genevieve.

The God-poem clearly shows what she meant by God being her voice of self-compassion:

Nope, this is where I want you to be

I will provide

You are okay

Keep doing what you're doing

[You] can do this

Have I ever let you down?

Have you failed yet?

When you fail, you can quit

But until you fail, you've gotta keep giving it your best.

Have I failed you yet?

When- if- or when that happens, we'll deal with it.

But for now, dream big, because it's happening

You're working too hard

I know you're hurting

I see that

You are enough

You deserve to be taken care of

You deserve to have a break

You deserve to be valued

Calm down

Don't be so hard on yourself

It's . . . who you are, is about glorifying me.

In Genevieve's story, the voice of God was always encouraging, protective, and adoring. It encouraged her to continue moving towards her goals, even when she thought it was impossible and wanted to give up. It was caring, nurturing and protective; reminding her to rest, and that God would provide. Finally, this voice of compassion that came from God delighted in her and reminded her that she is enough, just as she is.

Despite her growing awareness of the need for self-compassion, Genevieve continues to struggle with the lies she believes about herself. However, in her story the voice of internalized oppression was frequently interspersed with the voices of unity, advocacy, and warmth. These interactions exemplified the ongoing battle that Genevieve experiences in her journey to live with self-compassion. At first the voice of internalized oppression was connected to the voice of oppression, but after her first encounter with God, the voices of internalized oppression and oppression were also frequently surrounded by the voices of warmth or advocacy. In this way, it was obvious that despite Genevieve's continual struggle with feelings of shame and isolation, she now has the ability to see another reality, one where things are not her fault and she has a right to be recognized, valued, and taken care of.

This continuing tension between the voice of internalized oppression and the voices of unity and warmth developed into a unique voice of struggle that was characterized by a discrepancy between beliefs and actions. The voice of struggle talked about trying to believe the voice of unity and act accordingly. An interesting interaction that we noticed was that almost every time Genevieve spoke with the voice of struggle, it was followed by the voice of unity, which was often followed by the voice of warmth. There appeared to be an internalization of the

voice of unity into Genevieve's own voice of warmth. The voice of internalized oppression was initially so powerful that she had difficulty believing positive thoughts about herself, but after multiple experiences of wrestling to hear and believe the voice of unity, she was able to start to show this care toward herself. As the voice of struggle grew more self-compassionate, it seemed to develop into the voices of advocacy and warmth. Genevieve's voice of advocacy tended to be aggressive and protective while the voice of warmth carried more of the nurturing and soothing qualities that Gilbert (2010) describes as essential to self-compassion.

As we said at the beginning, each of the voices in Genevieve's story was intertwined with one another throughout the interview, but there was a movement toward the voice of warmth. The voices of shame and criticism were the furthest from the voice of warmth and were challenged by the voices of connection and unity as Genevieve experienced compassionate relationships with others and with God. These voices, along with her openness to consider these new experiences as potentially truer than her previous experiences, became important throughout Genevieve's development of self-compassion. Each compassionate experience built up her strength to fight the voices of shame and criticism. Though she is still in the process of fighting for her voice of warmth, each day it seems to get stronger.

Bringing it all Together

Listening to each story, my understanding of self-compassion and my own faith was significantly impacted through the nuances and differences in everyone's stories, but I was stunned to realize that there are three main messages that each person clearly communicated and emphasized in their story. First, each participant described self-compassion as an ongoing challenge. This was surprising since the participants were chosen because of their high capacity to show themselves compassion. Indeed, in every story it was clear that self-compassion is

something that they value and practice regularly, however, it is not something that comes easily.

Zach described his movement toward self-compassion as an intentional choice, saying:

Self-compassion to me is not a natural thing. It's not the first response that I would have. I think it's something that develops, and I think it's something that you need to be aware of and you need to make intentional moves toward that.

Zach later said, "I think it's a daily struggle." It was this constant struggle to act self-compassionately that caused Cara to describe self-compassion as a miracle. It seems that no one is immune to the voices of shame and criticism.

Secondly, each participant emphasized that his or her relationship with God was the foundation of self-compassion. At the end of each interview, I asked participants if there was anything left that they wanted to say. Each time I asked this question, participants reiterated the message that their self-compassion could not have developed without God being actively at work in their lives and in changing their hearts. The central message for each participant was, essentially: self-compassion is not our natural inclination and it takes the love and grace of God to break through our resistance and help us develop self-compassion. For Jeanette, this meant listening and recognizing the presence of God in her life. She shared:

There's not one way or path to do this. But, to find places where you can pause, and become receptive to something bigger than yourself. And kind of develop curiosity to listen to the presence of Love, and begin to ask questions and reflect. And then just put that tape over your mouth and listen.

There were some common messages that participants reported hearing from God that they discerned through prayer and studying the bible. For each person, the most important element of self-compassion was understanding and accepting the unconditional love that God feels toward

him or her. As Caitlyn explained:

I think that to have self-compassion you need to understand love, and I don't think you can fully understand love, without the Word. Because God is love and because He demonstrated the biggest love when He sent Jesus to die on the cross for us. Again, it always sounds so cliché, but it's the truth [but] it sounds so weird. Um, yeah, and so because, in order too have compassion on myself, I need to understand the sacrifice that someone took so I could have some compassion on myself, and so I can be able to have compassion on others even, because we can't really have compassion on others until we understand that sacrifice. And I think that people who don't know God can't have compassion on themselves. I just don't think they fully, they *fully* can.

Caitlyn went on to explain the nuance in the words she was saying. She is not saying that people cannot have any compassion without God, but she is expressing an inner experiential difference that she noticed between compassion that she has from her own thinking and the depth of love and compassion she feels when she reflects and experiences God's love and compassion. It is a difference that can only be truly communicated through experience, one that comes with an intense feeling of warmth, connection, and safety. When participants described God as the foundation for their self-compassion they talked about a transcendent experience that went beyond a cognitive belief in a benevolent God. Jeanette described feeling a physical presence of God:

And then in that moment [there] was this mystical experience of these arms embracing me. [Tearfully] And, and holding me, and patting me and saying, "There, there. There, there, I've got you girl. There, there." And this has become the message of Grace and the essence of self-compassion. Because I've known compassion.

Others described hearing God's voice in their inner experience, and also experiencing comfort as they read scripture and realized that it applies to them too. The unconditional love and compassion that participants described receiving from God supported their self-compassion, especially as it modeled that God continually loves them even in their failures and imperfections.

The participants also discussed a shift in their theological beliefs and internal understanding of scripture toward a realization that God's love means that they do not need to strive to earn a position of value, or to become deserving of compassion. Jeanette explained:

Well I think one of the key things, in this whole subject, is been the theology that many of us grew up with, of original sin. And that we're originally bad and that we're created bad. And so when you believe that at a really core level, it's really hard to, to be spontaneous and just being alive, because you don't trust yourself. "Well maybe that's a bad thought." And, "Maybe that's a bad desire." And, "Maybe I'm just bad." And so how can I really trust my deepest, intuition and knowing, because it's probably *bad*." And one of the things that's effected me a lot is realizing not all of Christianity has held that belief. The Russian Orthodox Church hasn't, and the Celtic Christianity Church hasn't and it's something that evolved at that time but there was also an understanding before of our original goodness. And that we were made originally good. And *yes* we've all been effected by, by sin and by darkness, but at our core, at our original selves, it's good. And when I tapped into that, then I could get excited about what was coming up inside of me. And so I think, when I can receive that adoration of God, I feel more playful, I feel a greater sense of childlike curiosity. Playfulness and childlike curiosity, and wonder. They re-enter, the game

Self-compassion requires a sense of valuing one's core self, and participants described this value

as coming from God. Rather than needing to fear their own laziness and ‘badness’, participants embraced all of their inner experiences because they believed that no matter what emotions and impulses come up, God is bigger and rather than punishing them God will gently and compassionately form them into the people they were created to be.

Finally, participants reflected on how recognizing that Jesus, the Son of God, suffered, provided them with more hope and openness to experience their own suffering. Neff (2003b) notes that self-compassion includes acknowledging that suffering is part of the human experience. Knowing that they were not alone, and that even the Son of God had suffered, provided participants with a sense of connection and understanding that provided an internal strength to endure their own suffering.

The third message that was emphasized by each participant is that community has been essential in their development of self-compassion. This was strongly connected to their faith beliefs that God created us to be in community. Community was at the center of Zach’s story of self-compassion and he reflected on the necessity of community:

I believe we need community, in order to be compassionate to ourselves. We can’t do it on our own . . . Because if they are accepting me, if they are looking at me kindly, um, they can help me open that door [to self-compassion]. . . . If they’re kind to me and, and acknowledging who I am and still being okay with me, um, that’s pretty [powerful] and I think if you try to do that on your own, you can’t trust yourself.

Across all the interviews, I heard numerous stories about how community supported individuals during times of weakness and struggle, and through that support participants described becoming more willing to show grace and compassion toward themselves.

I am not sure why I am so surprised by the clarity of these three messages, because these

ideas resonate with my own experiences and thoughts about what is at the core of self-compassion. Still, there is something very humbling to realize that others have similar experiences. I never thought that these interviews would have such clear similarities. Even though the participants were chosen because of their developed self-compassion, every person talked about self-compassion as an ongoing struggle and they emphasized the importance of a relationship with God and supportive community in overcoming one's internal resistance to self-compassion.

Similar Paths to Self-Compassion

Listening to the participant's journeys as stories, it was interesting to see a similar plot development, or in other words similar developmental trajectories for self-compassion. The way the voices overlapped and connected suggests insights into the processes that may have occurred in the participant's development of self-compassion. First of all, the strength of self-compassion fluctuated throughout the participants' stories, leaning either towards the voices of shame and criticism or the voices of love and acceptance. As participants described moving further along in their journey with self-compassion, the voices of shame and criticism became weaker and less frequent while the voices of love and acceptance became stronger and more frequently used. Upon a final review of the voices, we noticed that for each voice of shame and criticism there was an opposite voice of love and acceptance. For example, both the voices of oppression and connection developed from the participant's experiences in community. Similarly, the voice of internalized oppression was an inward directed voice that spoke critical and shaming messages, while the voice of warmth was an inward directed voice that spoke messages of acceptance, grace, and kindness. Finally, the voice of judgment was a rigid voice that tried to impose one's values onto others, whereas the opposing voice of openness allowed the participants to explore

challenging and novel viewpoints. The anomaly to the dichotomy between the voices of shame and criticism and the voices of love and acceptance was the voice of unity. The voice of unity was categorized as a voice of love and acceptance that represented God's personal presence in individual's lives. Participants noted that views of a judgmental and punishing God do not accurately represent who God really is. Though the listening guide method of analysis does not include quantifying each voice, we noticed that as the frequency of one voice increased, the frequency of the contrasting voice tended to decrease. For example, participants who frequently used the voice of judgment had few examples of openness in their interviews. There seemed to be a developmental progression with the voices of resistance mediating between the opposing voices of shame and criticism and voices of love and acceptance. Struggle came as the first movement toward self-compassion, whereas advocacy was a stronger more active resistance to the voices of shame and criticism. Figure 10 presents a simplified diagram to illustrate some of the interconnections between voices.

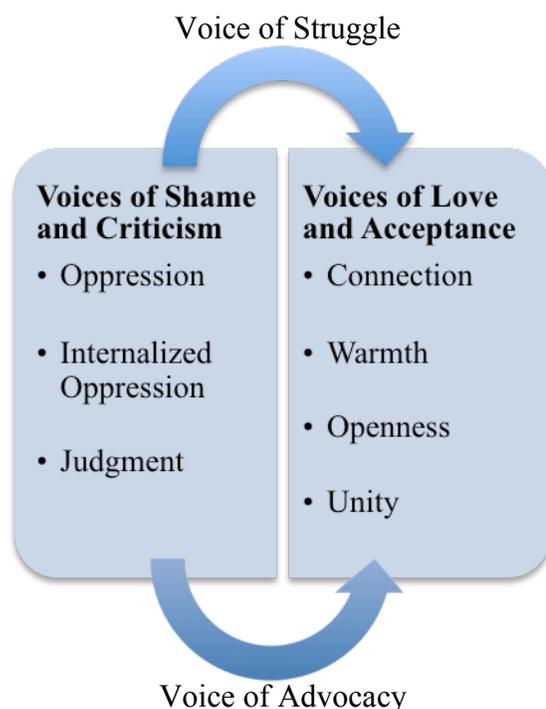


Figure 10. Interactions between voices.

Summary

Each story provides a slightly different perspective on how self-compassion has been fostered and developed as participants live out their Christian faith. Yet, the core messages that participants emphasized were similar. Every participant continues struggle with self-compassion at times. Most often, the voices of shame and criticism communicated rigid boundaries around what it means to be a ‘good’ person, and more importantly a ‘good’ Christian. Still, participants explicitly emphasized that God is the source of their self-compassion. As participants moved toward self-compassion, their understanding of faith seemed to deepen and broaden to include messages of God’s unconditional love, and God’s ability to change people and use them to do good, even in their brokenness and imperfection. In the moments when they have felt self-critical and ashamed, all the participants described feeling what they have come to know as the voice and presence of God gently speaking words of unconditional love and comfort. Drawing from God’s love, participants were able to strengthen their voice of warmth, which expressed the emotional, cognitive and behavioural actions of self-compassion. For these seven participants, self-compassion cannot be separated from their relationship with God.

CHAPTER 5: WHERE I ENDED UP

As I promised in the introduction, I want to be transparent about how my perspectives were brought into the research process and influenced the way I made sense of the participants' stories. My reflections represent my interpretation of the stories shared in this document, but I invite you to find your own place in our words. Autoethnographies are meant to move the reader to greater awareness and action (Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2006), and so in this chapter I focus on the ways my awareness was expanded and how I applied what I learned to my life. The following chapter provides a glimpse into the most influential ways that the participants impacted me, the findings that I was surprised about, and the ways that my self-compassion has developed over the course of this study.

An Evolving Understanding

Each of the stories I heard taught me something about self-compassion and faith. However, most of my learning can be described using the same words I have always used to explain self-compassion, but those words now hold more meaning to me. Though I can only attempt to communicate the embodied lessons I learned, I would still like to share with you how each participant touched my life.

Cara. My first interview was with Cara and entering our time together I was still hesitant about the value of my research question and design. I wondered if the study would produce any tangible or useful results, and I worried that the stories would be so diverse that there would be no similarities to report. I mentally prepared over and over again so that I would play the researcher role well, and ensure the best possibility for success. What I was not prepared for was how my encounters with participants would shift my emotions and encourage me on my own journey. Listening to Cara's story, over and over again I found myself getting

excited and thinking “You too! So I’m not crazy.” I left my meeting with Cara feeling completely validated by just one simple message: she, too, struggles to have self-compassion on a daily basis. It may seem silly and obvious, but this was important for me to hear. I know so much about self-compassion that I had felt like there was something fundamentally wrong with me because even though I could see the value of self-compassion, cognitively know that God loves me, and even make self-compassionate choices, I still struggled to feel warmth and love toward my self on a regular basis. My thinking had become that only broken people struggle with self-compassion, but what Cara reminded me of is that we are all broken people, but our brokenness should bring us together.

Jeanette. Jeanette is one of those people who in her presence you feel heard and valued. Sitting in her home I felt more at peace than I had in months and I believe there was something sacred about our time together. Every participant stated that the starting place for self-compassion is knowing that we are unconditionally loved by God, but Jeanette radiated the gentleness and patience of love in every word. She held so tight to her identity as God’s beloved that I began to question why I did not feel the same confidence and warmth that comes with knowing that God loves me. As I pondered this throughout the months following our interview, I wondered what it would be like to live from the presumption that I am a person of value who deserves to be seen and heard. The idea of being able to speak my thoughts and share my passions freely brought an invigorating energy. Unfortunately, fear and a sense of isolation continue to hold me back, but every once in a while I remember what Jeanette shared with me, and I find the courage to put down my filters and just be me for a moment; and those are wonderful moments full of meaning and joy.

Caitlyn. Oh Caitlyn. In one word, my time with her was refreshing. Caitlyn has a joy and passion that is contagious and it was exactly what I needed when we met. I remember dreading the interview because I was in a phase where I hated my thesis; I thought the topic was foolish, I did not want to do the work, and I worried I would never finish (fortunately, I had been warned this would happen at some point). However, it only took 10 minutes with Caitlyn to remember all the reason I chose to study self-compassion from a Christian perspective. What Caitlyn reminded me of is our belief that God desires for us to live with self-compassion, and when we struggle to love ourselves we miss out on the fullness of life that God wants to give us. In our shared bluntness, we essentially said, “God wants us to be self-compassionate, so you can’t help but be self-compassionate.” Both of our struggles with self-compassion would dispute the claim that you “can’t help it,” but we revelled together in our shared experiential understanding of what we meant. We discussed how God is experiential and that you just feel the difference in your entire being when God convicts you that something is true. For Caitlyn and I, the desire to see people value themselves and live in the authenticity of who God created them to be is at the core of what drives every aspect of our lives.

Caitlyn’s passion reminded me of my core values, and she reminded me that life is an adventure that is full of potential. Hearing her speak about how awesome it is to serve a God who continually challenges the way she thinks and brings her to new knowledge and awareness, reminded me that part of the adventure is trusting God to lead the way. Often in places of not knowing and ambiguity I begin to question myself, but self-compassion allows me to let go of the fears that I am too much and at the same time not enough. Instead, it allows me to embrace my intuition and passions so I can enjoy the journey of life. At times in this journey I will make mistakes and fail, but that is all part of the adventure. As with so many of the interviews, I left

my interview with Caitlyn reminded that God can be trusted; my job is to simply do my best with whatever circumstances and resource I am faced with.

Josh. I appreciated that Josh brought a practical, nonchalant perspective to self-compassion. I love to push limits, daydream about new adventures and innovations, and challenge everything. In contrast, Josh was just simply Josh. He was willing to question when needed but on a day-to-day basis he knew who he was and what he needed to do, and he did it without overthinking. When bad things happened, Josh acknowledged them and let himself grieve, but then moved forward; he did not let circumstance dictate how he viewed himself. Josh knows he is enough and lives his life accordingly. I am always a little bit jealous of people who are easy going, but when I listened to Josh's story I began to question if maybe I am also enough. Josh is human, he struggles, he makes mistakes, and he is still learning new things about the world. But he knows he does not need to be anything other than who he already is. I realize it would be so freeing to know in the deepest parts of my soul that I am enough. I could stop holding myself back and embrace life with the fullness of my curiosity, passion, and intensity, and maybe have a little more of the peace and confidence that Josh portrays.

Paige. Keeping up with Paige takes your entire presence because she moves full speed ahead. When Paige talked about her tendency to move at mach speed or not move at all, I found myself reflecting on my own work habits. Though I aspire to be the type of person who is slow and steady, my energy and fixation on completing a task usually pulls me along until my body and mind reach their limit and rebel. When I get excited and start moving quickly through life, my critical voice is continually in the background nagging and questioning what we are missing. My fear is that I will miss something important in life – that some crucial life lesson will pass me by or that I will miss a detail that leads to devastating consequences. But in Paige's story, I

heard multiple examples of how God or others had stopped her in her tracks when she needed to learn something. Her story reminded me that we do not live life in isolation. There are people around me that can point out my blind spots and help me when I get into trouble. Even more comforting is the reminder that God is all knowing, all powerful, and all loving. I fully believe that, but sometimes I need to remind myself. God knows where I need to be going, he knows how I need to grow and develop, and he wants to guide me through life pointing things out when I am ready and need to hear it. Trusting in God's nurturing love is hard because things do not always work out as I would like them too. But Paige reminded me that the most important things have a way of working themselves out. Even in her grief and loss, Paige was able to find hope and a new way of living that was still full of love and purpose. She inspires me to continue bringing my hopes and fears to God; when I trust him I am able to relax in the safety of his presence and live life more freely.

Zach. The final interview I conducted was with Zach, and by this time in the process I was able to relax more and just enjoy listening to his story. As with every individual, Zach brought unique insights, but I was most amazed by the similarities between his story and the ones I had already heard. During our follow-up interview, there were moments when I almost jumped out of my seat with excitement, wanting to say, "Me too!" It was difficult for me to slow down and ask him to explain ambiguous statements, because intuitively I resonated so strongly with what he was sharing. It was a special blessing to find connection within values and experiences that mean so much to both of us. The area where Zach influenced me the most was when he shared that his Christian faith is based on his intimate relationship with God and not primarily based on cognitive knowledge or theology. Do not get me wrong, Zach knows theology and has studied the Bible, but the real "meat" of his spiritual life develops when he

connects directly with God. We shared in the feeling of inadequacy that comes from living within a faith community that often values answers and quoting scripture over the personal lived experience of our faith. To be more accurate, Zach shared his journey of learning to value his experiential knowledge of God while I reflected on how I continue to discount my experiential knowledge because I doubt my own perceptions. Zach has a confidence in his connection with God that would be so freeing for me to have. I am always questioning my intuitive sense of “knowing” what God values and where he wants me to go. Without hearing my experiences validated by others, I tend to discount them. But in my life, self-compassion sometimes means having the courage to trust my intuitive sense of knowing. So much of my suffering comes from the isolation I feel when I hold back thoughts, ideas, or impulses because I do not have “solid” evidence to back me up. Listening to Zach embrace how God teaches him through experience provided me with hope that maybe my own intuition and wisdom is a gift from God to be used.

What I Found Surprising

Having read the literature on self-compassion, lived it in my daily life, and thought a lot about it, many of the results from this study seemed obvious and basic to me. One of the reasons I am passionate about self-compassion is because it makes perfect sense to me. At the same time, I always believe there is more to learn and I was curious about what more I could discover about self-compassion. After speaking to the participants and analyzing the data, there were some results that surprised me, either because I had never thought about it or because I did not expect it to be so clearly emphasized in the results. The following insights may or may not be surprising to you.

First, it seems paradoxical that self-compassion would take a subordinate role in a study on self-compassion. However, based on the word count for each of the voices, warmth, which

was most closely associated with self-compassion, was one of the least observed voices. Instead, the participants predominantly spoke about how their relationship with God and their positive relationships in community allowed them to feel more warmth and self-compassion. Prior to starting this study, I was hoping that participants would reflect on how their personal relationship with God and their relationships with others were pivotal in their experience of self-compassion. However, I was not prepared for the voices of unity and connection to be more prominent than the voice of warmth. Experiencing compassion from others appeared to release participants to feel compassion for their self. These results have me questioning the role of connection in self-compassion. Mainly, can self-compassion evolve without first receiving compassion? For example, if a person lacks social support and has very few experiences of being attuned to and cared for, is buying into the rationale for self-compassion and the care of a therapist enough to develop self-compassion? Depending on the answer, this may indicate the need for more systemic and community focused interventions for self-compassion.

Secondly, I was surprised that participants had little to say about the negative ways that their faith communities have impacted their self-compassion. Originally I had expected this result because my own journey with self-compassion has been facilitated by my relationship with God. However, as I started telling others about my research question I was shocked that people's first reaction was typically some version of, "That is an important topic because the church sucks at self-compassion." Using the listening guide and autoethnography to study this topic, I expected to come up with more of a critique on the overall Christian culture. There may be many reasons why the participants did not frequently refer to negative ways the Church has impacted self-compassion. First, and most simply, some participants had mostly positive experiences to draw on in regards to the way their Church community had helped foster self-

compassion. Second, when it came to participants' relationship with God, none of the participants experienced God as something other than loving and forgiving. Instead, when participants reflected on the negative ways that faith had impacted self-compassion, they described the underlying beliefs as "not the truth" or "misguided". Third, some participants reflected that they avoided communities where they felt that their efforts to develop self-compassion were discouraged or unsupported. Finally, I wonder if part of the reason there were few specific examples of how the Church has hindered the development of self-compassion is because the impact is insidious. Reflecting on my own experiences in various Christian communities, many of the individuals that I speak with value self-compassion and believe it is congruent with the Christian message. However, over the last few years I have begun to notice the subtle ways that we, including myself, create an environment that discourages self-compassion. For example, immediately after finishing my literature review for this thesis, I was acutely attuned to the types of conversations that occurred in my Christian community. Frequently, the conversations revolved around moral questions and passionate debates regarding which answers are the "real truth" for how to please God. Often, I hear people looking for the "right" way to serve God and lamenting about the ways they fail as a Christian. Very rarely do I hear these conversations counterbalanced with discussions about grace or reminders that God works through us, rather than us needing to succeed in our own strength.

Thirdly, though it makes perfect sense, I had not considered the connection between openness and spiritual experiences. The results showed that participants who were more open tended to share more experiences of unity with God. In hindsight, it makes sense that openness and experiences with an intangible God would be related. Part of the reason I think I missed this connection is because I do not sense a lot of freedom to question within my church experiences.

When I became a Christian, I thought that spiritual maturity looked like having all the answers. As I grew in faith, I noticed that when I asked questions people often seemed to treat me like I was naïve and young in my faith. For example, I have had people simply repeat the basics of the Christian faith in response to my deeper questions. At other times, I have experienced people questioning the authenticity of my faith when I express confusion or doubt. These experiences led me to believe that uncertainty is a sign of weak faith. In contrast, as I listened to the participants' stories and stories from other Christians who I crossed paths with during the thesis process, I noticed that the individuals who were most self-compassionate were also most willing to question the teachings of the Church. Those self-compassionate individuals had a firm confidence in their relationship with God and they trusted him above all else, even in their uncertainty. Meeting others who were open to asking spiritual questions and accepting ambiguity has affirmed my own curiosity and openness. In my journey I am beginning to meet more and more Christians who are frustrated by the Christian culture that seems to reject questions and fails to explore the complexities of our faith; I am extremely grateful for these individuals who validate my discontent and inspire me to advocate for change.

What I Applied On My Own Journey

Engaging reflectively in the research process encouraged me to immediately apply what I was learning to my own life. As I read articles and listened to people's stories, I reflected on how I could "try out" what they were teaching me. Now looking back on the last year of interviews and analysis, I am surprised by the way the research has changed me. I had expected to experience earth-shattering revelations and instead I have experienced a deepening of the things I already believed about self-compassion and my relationships with God. Earlier I

reflected on some of the ways that individual participants had impacted me, but now I want to move to the ways that this research has shifted my journey with self-compassion.

If I am truly honest with you, I started this thesis feeling defensive; I thought I had to prove to Christians that self-compassion is good, while at the same time prove to psychologists that Christianity has valuable insights for self-compassion. The discrepancies I thought might exist between the literature and a Christian perspective on self-compassion began to disappear as I started to organize information from the literature, the results, and my thoughts on how they connect. Though my journey with self-compassion has not been entirely moulded by what I have been taught through the church, God has always been at the center of it. As I read the literature on self-compassion, I asked myself how it applies to my Christian worldview and easily adapted interventions to fit my worldview. For example, I recognized how imagining a compassionate image in times of suffering closely resembles the practice of prayer and listening for the voice of God. At the same time, I felt hesitant coming up with my own ideas on how to adapt interventions. Listening to other people's stories made the similarities between current self-compassion interventions and Christian practices clearer. The transcripts I coded included multiple comments to highlight excerpts that sounded like mindfulness, common humanity, or compassionate imagery. Now, instead of feeling anxious about my understanding of self-compassion, I feel more confident that a Christian worldview can be integrated into the literature and interventions on self-compassion with sensitivity to language, culture and the basic purpose of each intervention.

The faith of the participants shattered my stereotypes of Christians and validated my own journey with God. Prior to starting this thesis I was questioning if I really was a Christian. I still desired to know God and I still trusted him to guide my life, but I was not doing all the things a

“good” Christian does (e.g. reading my Bible, serving joyfully at church, and at times even going to church). In my questions and fears about my faith, I sensed God compassionately affirming that he was with me, and even pleased by me. At the same time, I worried I was just making that up as an excuse for my behaviour. During the interview with Cara, I found myself reflecting on these questions. One of the points that Cara emphasized was that God is the one who transforms our lives. The application of this is that even when we feel weak or distant from God, he continues to work in us. Months later in my interview with Zach, he again affirmed this truth when he shared about his own experience of encountering the Holy Spirit even though he had stopped reading his Bible and seeking God through prayer. These stories, along with other stories of God’s faithfulness, slowly replaced the shame and fear I had around not doing enough to draw close to God and replaced it with a confidence that no matter how distant I feel, God will not reject me. For years I criticized myself for not fitting into the mould that I sensed within Christian culture and yet as I talked with the participants I realized that in many ways they did not fit into the mould I had perceived. Instead, they emphasized the importance of simply being authentic before God, warts and all. Now, I write this with confidence that God continues to work in and through my life, despite my questions and lack of spiritual “oomph”. Knowing this, I can let go of the burden of perfection and simply live freely in the knowledge that God will not abandon me in my struggles.

A final area of growth came out of the thesis process more than what I learned from the results. Throughout the entire process, and even now, I continue to have fears about how people will view my divergence from traditional academic writing. Feminist scholars who went before me have pushed the envelope to legitimize relational forms of scientific inquiry but I still doubt my choices at times. However, I am learning to trust my intuition more as what I read expands

my conceptualization of knowledge and helps me to form a rational basis for the choices I have made. As a result, the process of writing this thesis has been an act of courage, but also self-compassion. Rather than silencing my own creative energy, values, and ideas, which ends in my own suffering, I chose to honour them. By refusing to mould this thesis into a safe and traditional format, I created space for my voice to speak from where I currently am on my journey of development. This act of self-kindness has undone so much of the shame I have experienced through years of hiding. I have created space for myself in the world, which is accompanied by an internal shift toward believing that I have a right to take up space, to fail, to suffer, and to still be a respected human being.

Conclusion

As I near the end of the thesis process, I feel like my brain has exploded. I have been changed deeply by my interviews with the participants, through my own readings, and through the discussions I have had with friends and colleagues along the way. Yet, I know that only a small piece of what I have learned has been communicated through my writing. Mostly, that is because my learning was not as much in the area of new cognitive knowledge and constructs, as it was in clarifying and deepening my internal experiences of self-compassion. The image that comes to mind is of a painting. Throughout the thesis process I have been developing a picture of self-compassion within the context of the Christian faith. Each interview, article, and discussion has contributed to the current picture. As the participants spoke I added new details to the picture. Sometimes people pointed out where “something” needed to be added and the literature helped me decide what that something was. Other times, participants added layers of colour to each other’s story until the final product was more vibrant and intricate than I could have imagined. Each person – participants, co-researchers, supervisors, colleagues, and friends –

added layers and details to the painting. A picture is worth 1000 words, but I have given you more than that and it is still not enough. I wish I could invite you into my mind and experience to see the image I have before me. My hope is that through these words you have heard enough to visualize the scene for yourself and that your own experiences can help to fill in any gaps.

CHAPTER 6: REFLECTIONS ON THE JOURNEY

We began this journey with the goal of exploring how Christian's have experienced self-compassion within the context of their faith. As mentioned, self-compassion entered into western psychology from Buddhist spiritual practices of mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation, but our journey ventured into the arena of Christian spirituality, and we saw how Christian theology and practices also have much to offer to our understanding of self-compassion. Spirituality is a deeply personal construct and because of its transcendent nature it may be difficult to study. However, the listening guide allowed us to listen to the deeply personal lived experiences of each participant and learn about the ways that their faith has been instrumental in their development of self-compassion. This is the first study to explore the lived experience of self-compassion from a Christian perspective and there is much that can be gleaned from the stories we heard. In the remainder of this thesis, I highlight how the findings of this study fit within the current conceptualizations and research on self-compassion, as well as some of the unique insights that the participants added to our understanding of self-compassion. Both theoretical and practical implications are addressed, along with limitations of the study, and future directions for ongoing research. Most importantly, I invite you, the reader, to consider the impact that these stories have had on you and the ways that it might influence your own life and professional practice moving forward.

Connections with the Existing Literature and Novel Contributions

Three main categories of voices emerged in the participant's stories: voices of shame and criticism, voices of resistance, and voices of love and acceptance. The voices of shame and criticism were associated with negative emotions and experiences such as actual or feared rejection, condemnation, and shame. On the opposite end of spectrum were the voices of love

and acceptance that were connected with positive emotions of peace, belonging, and purpose. However, the transition from the negative voices to the development of the positive voices was far from simple or linear, as such a dichotomy might suggest. Listening to the participants' stories, it became clear that self-compassion was an ongoing and developing process in their lives, facilitated by the voices of resistance. The voices of resistance represented a blending of shame and criticism, and love and acceptance, which is consistent with Falconer, King, and Brewin's (2015) findings that self-compassion and self-criticism are related but independent constructs. In the self-compassion literature, self-compassion and self-criticism are often communicated as two opposite constructs, however, the results presented by Falconer et al. and the current study suggest that one can experience a blending of both self-compassion and self-criticism at any point in time. Similarly, Lawrence and Lee (2014) presented a model for the development of self-compassion, where self-compassion is conceptualized as managing self-criticism, rather than completely eliminating it. For the participants in the current study, recognizing self-criticism and judgment as an ongoing struggle, and acknowledging these struggles as part of the human condition, was important in preventing shame from developing as participants slipped back into old patterns of thinking.

The process of developing and living with self-compassion appears to be complex and holistic, including more than just how we relate to our selves. Four domains of influence appeared in the participants' stories: (1) experience in relationships (i.e. oppressive or connected), (2) relationship with one's self (i.e. internalized oppression or warmth), (3) reaction to others (i.e. judgment or openness), and relationship with the divine (i.e. unity). Each domain appeared to have a reciprocal relationship where new experiences in one domain effected how participants experienced themselves in every other domain. For example, experiencing care and

compassion within community may influence an individual to treat herself with more compassion, and to treat others with more openness. However, experiencing oppression and criticism appeared to increase internalized oppression and judgment, and make self-compassion more difficult. The connection between self-compassion and other social relationships has been conceptualized in the literature using the framework of attachment theory (Gilbert 2010; Gillath et al., 2005; Homan, 2014). According to Bowlby (1988), children internalize the attachment bonds they have with their caregiver to form an internal working model for relating with the world. In environments where caregivers are available, attuned to the child's needs, and responds appropriately to their needs, children learn that they are safe and valuable and that others are reliable and trustworthy (Homan, 2014). In contrast, when caregivers are inconsistent and rejecting an internal working model may develop where the world is viewed as unpredictable and dangerous, and the self is viewed as unsafe (Homan, 2014). Supporting research has demonstrated that difficulties with self-compassion are experienced more often by individuals with histories of abuse and neglect (Gilbert 2010; Irons et al., 2006; Tanaka, Wekerle, Schmuck, & Paglia-Boak, 2011). In contrast, the importance of the therapeutic relationship, which includes qualities of acceptance, non-judgment, feeling valued and understood, and feeling believed, has been well documented as an important factor in the therapeutic process and the development of self-compassion (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Lawrence & Lee, 2014; Norcross, 2010). The results of the current study support the importance of relational experiences of compassion and acceptance. Furthermore, it expands the purview of influence beyond therapeutic and social relationships to include spiritual relationships with God. God was a powerful source of comfort for participants because he was always present, caring, loving, and forgiving; as Homan (2014) described, God is the perfect nurturer.

The interactions between the voices also suggest a general developmental trajectory that has many similarities with Lawrence and Lee's (2014) developmental model of self-compassion, presented in chapter 2 (see Figure 1). Consistent with the results from the present study, Lawrence and Lee suggest that the process of moving away from dominating feelings of self-criticism begins with an emotional experience of compassion from outside one's self, followed by acceptance of self-compassion. After one accepts self-compassion, he is more likely to develop a more compassionate relationship to himself and experience positive affect from self-compassion, both of which help to manage self-criticism. This was consistent with the participants' experiences of developing self-compassion in response to experiences of compassion from God and others. However, there were significant differences between the two studies. For instance, Lawrence and Lee found that in early stages of development participants experienced self-compassion as terrifying, frightening, and dreaded. In contrast, participants in the present study described embracing feelings of compassion from God and embracing feelings of self-compassion as they developed. This was connected to the spiritual conviction that participants spoke about; when participants experienced love and compassion from God, they described a deep experiential knowledge that self-compassion is good and they experienced greater ease in nurturing those feelings for their self. Even though they continued to struggle to feel self-compassion, having experienced compassion in their spiritual relationship with God, the participants desired to grow in self-compassion and saw it as a positive trait. Another major difference between the two studies is that Lawrence and Lee presented the construct of self-compassion to participants, whereas participants in the current study had not heard of the concept of self-compassion prior to the study. It is possible that the participants from this study might have experienced some fears of self-compassion if they had been encouraged to develop self-

compassion by a therapist or some other outside source rather than it developing naturally through their relationship with God. However, even reflecting on their past experiences, the participants described self-compassion as something that reflected God's character and love, not something terrifying or dreaded.

It is interesting that the major fears of developing self-compassion, described in Lawrence and Lee's (2014) study, did not appear in the current study. Other scholars have noted similar obstacles to those found by Lawrence and Lee (Gilbert et al., 2011; Gilbert & Proctor, 2006), so the lack of these obstacles in this study is noteworthy. The voices of resistance represented the struggle experienced by participants in this study, but rather than fearing self-compassion, the struggle tended to be that participants did not feel the peace and compassion that they desired to have. Rather than striving to accept and produce self-compassion, the participants described self-compassion as a by-product of their spiritual life. In the absence of God, participants believed they would never have been able to let go of their self-critical tendencies. Lawrence and Lee (2014) concluded perseverance and practice is necessary to overcome resistance and fear of self-compassion. However, the results from the current study suggest that embracing a sense of connection with the divine and incorporating spirituality into the process of developing self-compassion may bypass or eliminate some of the common obstacles to self-compassion.

Accordingly, participants' relationship with God had a disproportionate influence on their development of self-compassion. They emphasized that God is the ultimate source of their willingness to embrace self-compassion and their overall capacity to love and have compassion. Rather than striving to feel loving and self-compassionate, participants described a process where God, like a gentle parent, lovingly, caringly, and compassionately journeyed with them

and guided them in the development of self-compassion. God's guidance sometimes came through active processes such as reading scripture, sharing in community, and prayer, but it also came when participants were not actively seeking it. Spiritual practices, such as these, were viewed as tools to allow participants to connect with God, but it was the experience of God's love, wisdom, and direction that participants considered the source of their self-compassion. Also, in relationship with God, the participants reported discovering wisdom that they had not always had. They shared examples where God helped them to see the root of their suffering, to find empathy and forgiveness, and to shift their perspective toward the hope of God's loving care. From the supernatural insight they received, they gained greater clarity and peace in their circumstances, which made self-compassion easier. It was in moments of unity with the divine that self-compassion flourished, and participants described this as an act of receiving self-compassion, rather than developing it on their own.

The peace, love, and acceptance that was experienced in God's presence seemed to allow participants to let go of their fears and insecurities and trust that they could overcome whatever trials entered into their lives. At times, being in relationship with God required participants to question their faith beliefs and embrace new spiritual experiences. As Anderson and Grice (2014) noted, spiritual experiences can challenge unhelpful religious beliefs. For many of the participants, their religious beliefs were changed as they encountered situations where their understanding of their faith contradicted their experience. For some people, this was experienced during times of suffering, as they wrestled with the idea of how a loving God could allow such deep pain. At other times, new experiential encounters of God brought a deeper understanding to their beliefs. It was the lived experience of faith that impacted the participants the most. When participants spoke in the voices of advocacy and unity they often used the same

words and spoke the same truths, however, the felt experience conveyed was significantly different. The voice of advocacy was predominantly a rational voice that spoke truths and values, but both cognitions and emotions were brought together in the transcendent experience of unity with God. Self-compassion appeared to develop faster and more potently as a result of experiences of unity with God.

Though participants experienced their personal faith as facilitating self-compassion, there were instances where the church community was experienced as oppressive and discouraging toward self-compassion. Half of the participants shared that their early church experiences taught them to judge and to strive for perfection, while the other half experienced church communities that demonstrated compassion and love. Overall, church communities that were focused on promoting openness and non-judgment were seen as more helpful than those that were viewed as judgmental and legalistic. Furthermore, experiences of oppression appeared to cultivate self-criticism and judgment, whereas experiences of unity and connection were described as fostering openness and self-compassion.

Looking at the differences between participants brought up some questions about the way that self-compassion was measured. The Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) was used to select participants who scored high in self-compassion. Prior to the interviews, the participants (excluding myself) appeared to have similar levels of self-compassion, with scores ranging from 4.18 – 4.53, with a mean score of 4.34 (SD = 0.13). Despite having very similar scores on the SCS, during the interviews it became clear that there were significant differences between participants in their embodied experiences of self-compassion. This was noted most obviously in the frequency that participants used the voice of advocacy versus the voices of warmth or unity (some participants described their experience of self-compassion mainly from a place of unity

with God). The voice of advocacy sounded like self-compassion but it was a rational and value based expression of self-compassion. In contrast, when participants used the voice of warmth they spoke with more gentleness, acceptance, openness, and security, in addition to their rational and value based expressions of self-compassion. One analogy that the co-researchers and I used to understand this difference is that the voice of advocacy seemed to be fighting for self-compassion, where as the voice of warmth seemed to indicate an experience of peace and comfort. By advocating for the individual's needs and motivating compassionate actions, the voice of advocacy played an important role in the developmental of self-compassion. However, the emotional results of peace, warmth and security were not apparent in the voice of advocacy, which led us to distinguish it as a separate voice, and potentially an earlier stage in the development of self-compassion.

Very little research has looked at the embodied experiences of self-compassion or the impact of spirituality on self-compassion. The results of this study begin to address the gaps in this area of research. In addition, it provides a better understanding about how one's Christian faith may positively and negatively impact their development of self-compassion. Hearing the participants' stories we can gather ideas of how Christian beliefs may nurture each of Neff's (2003b) three components of self-compassion. First, participants included asking their Christian community for support, and seeking God for wisdom, peace, and clarity as part of their practice of self-kindness. There was humility among the participants to realize that sometimes the kindest thing they could do for themselves was to recognize their limitations and allow others to assist them. In addition, knowing that they were loved and forgiven by God, they were able to let go of self-criticism and unhealthy striving. Secondly, mindfulness was strongly connected to the participants' personal relationship with God. They experienced God bringing to mind areas

of their lives that needed to be observed, given compassion, and/or forgiven. This is consistent with Keating's description of God as the 'Divine Therapist' (Frenette, 2005). Also participants experienced more freedom and less threat in exploring negative emotions and personal failures because they felt secure in their value as a human being. Lastly, common humanity was experienced in a profoundly meaningful way when the participants reflected on how through Jesus, even God shared in their humanity. To consider that even Jesus suffered seemed to make suffering more acceptable and endurable. Recognizing that everyone struggles and suffers allowed participants to have greater compassion for others, as well. Each participant described their own experience of being engaged in communities that exhibited Christian values of love, acceptance, and grace. In these communities they felt like their struggles were validated and normalized as they heard others share openly about their struggles and difficulties. This undoing of the aloneness people can feel in suffering is an important component in compassion-focused therapy (Gilbert, 2010). These are just a few of the ways that the Christian faith may be integrated into the development of self-compassion.

Implications for Theory and Research

The findings of this study begin to address areas that have been largely neglected in the research on self-compassion. Most of the research on self-compassion, to date, has focused on the many benefits of self-compassion and interventions for increasing self-compassion. Very few researchers, however, have explored the multifaceted ways that individuals experience and develop self-compassion. By extending the scope of research into the lived experience of self-compassion, the results from this study broaden our current understanding of the construct and suggest a number of implications for self-compassion theory and research.

Using the listening guide to identify the multiple voices involved in the participants'

stories of self-compassion revealed a continuum of interrelated voices. The overlap between voices, especially the voices of resistance that seemed to bridge the negative and positive voices, suggests that self-compassion may progress more gradually than the current definitions of self-compassion distinguish. Currently, self-compassion is most frequently defined and measured using Neff's (2003a; 2003b) three core traits (i.e. self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity). However, understanding self-compassion appears to be much more complex. As the participants described their journey with self-compassion, they spoke about growing in self-compassion, but they also spoke about the ways that they continue to struggle with self-compassion. Within in this context, the voices of resistance appeared to play an important role in negotiating between old patterns of shame and criticism and new patterns of self-compassion. At times, the voices of resistance endorsed aspects of self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity, but they lacked the warmth and care that Gilbert (2010) uses to distinguish the experience of self-compassion from disembodied cognitive-behavioural skills. In addition, in contrast to self-compassion interventions that focus on skill development (Gilbert, 2010; Neff & Germer, 2013), the participants described self-compassion as developing through life experiences of compassion and struggle. Often challenges caused emotional tension that resulted in participants being open to new ideas and to receive care and compassion from others. These finding suggest that more research is needed to expand our understanding of the development of self-compassion, particularly how it develops naturally. Prospective studies that explore how people naturally develop self-compassion in their daily lives may provide new ideas for how professionals can help foster self-compassion. In addition, researching the role that suffering plays in catalyzing self-compassion could offer valuable insight into the factors that promote the natural development of self-compassion.

More qualitative research would be helpful for expanding our understanding of self-compassion as a holistic construct. Communicating the embodied emotions and spiritual experiences associated with self-compassion was difficult for the participants and often they used analogies or paraverbal cues to communicate their experiences. Standardized measures may be inadequate to fully explore the nuances involved in the emotional experiences that signify self-compassion. For the present study, the SCS did not appear to fully distinguish participants who valued self-compassion from those who more fully embodied self-compassion. The majority of studies use the SCS to measure self-compassion, but the items tend to inquire more about cognitive responses than emotional responses to one's self. In a recent confirmatory factor analysis, the SCS failed to meet the liberal criteria for fit, bringing into question the psychometric value of this scale (Williams, Dalgleish, Karl, & Kuyken, 2014). Aside from the SCS, Falconer et al. (2015) developed the Self-Compassion and Self-Criticism Scales (SCCS) to measure situational self-compassion and self-criticism, which includes questions about one's emotional reaction to specific situations. However, the SCCS is designed to measure situational self-compassion as opposed to more consistent trait self-compassion. It may be helpful to create a measure of self-compassion that includes questions about emotional states and/or a semi-structured interview, in order to create a more sensitive measure of trait self-compassion.

One thing that made the participants in this study unique is that they had developed self-compassion naturally through their spiritual growth, rather than being taught in a professional therapeutic setting. Other studies have noted that spiritual experiences seem to play a role in self-compassion, but very little research has been conducted in this area (Birnie et al., 2010; Patershuk, 2013; Watson et al., 2011). Although compassion is talked about in many of the major world religions (Balslev & Evers, 2010), our current understanding of self-compassion as

a psychological construct comes mainly from Buddhism (Gilbert, 2010; Neff, 2003b). Though this study looked at how the Christian faith can influence self-compassion, this topic could also be studied in the context of different religions. Exploring the ways in which self-compassion is already integrated into the lives of various spiritual traditions might suggest new ways of fostering self-compassion. In addition, even though Buddhism has influenced self-compassion, self-compassion has essentially been separated from its spiritual roots and defined as a set of skills (Gilbert, 2010). Critiques of mindfulness suggest that distilling spiritual practices into secular interventions renders those practices less efficient (Brito, 2014; Stratton, 2015). Given these critiques, researchers may want to explore whether a spiritually-integrated self-compassion is more effective or easier to acquire than current interventions that focus on self-compassion as a skill.

Implications for Practice

Studying self-compassion from a Christian perspective provides insights for both clinical practice and spiritual growth. The present study focused on the experience of Christians who naturally demonstrated self-compassion in their daily lives. As a result, the suggestions from this study are made tentatively as they are not necessarily applicable to individuals who do not identify with the Christian faith. Also, the results are based on a small sample of individuals and may not be applicable to all Christians. Nonetheless, this study provides ideas that may inform clinical practice, Christian leadership, and individuals seeking personal and spiritual growth.

Clinical implications. Some of the clinical implications from this study may be relevant for all therapists regardless of how they incorporate spirituality into their practice. The results indicate that self-compassion is impacted by multiple factors, including individual, social, and spiritual experiences. This suggests that clients might benefit from holistic approaches to

counselling that include interventions to address their individual, social, and spiritual needs (cf. Pargament, 2007; Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Tarakeshwar, 2005). Each of these areas was entwined in the participants' journeys so that a shift in one area created change in the other two areas. When therapists encounter clients who seem to be stuck in their development of self-compassion, they might consider shifting the focus of intervention to another area of the client's life. For example, when a client fears that self-compassion will lead to laziness and failure, a therapist may focus on the client's capacity for non-judgment and kindness by focusing on their empathy toward others and mentalization. If appropriate, encouraging or helping a client to connect with their own spiritual process may produce internal changes that make them more open and non-judgmental toward themselves and others. For the participants in this study, rather than experiencing the common fears and obstacles to self-compassion, their experience of God as loving and compassionate led them to value and desire self-compassion. When incorporating a client's spirituality, therapist should explore what that means to the client to ensure that the intervention fits with the client's values.

In addition, a holistic approach to counselling should include both cognitive and experiential ways to engage with self-compassion. Many of the participants described how their experiences of compassion brought deeper meaning to their understanding of compassion, love, and their own value as a human being. In contrast, most of the self-compassion literature focuses on skill development through psychoeducation, with mindfulness and the therapeutic relationship as the main experiential components (Gilbert, 2009, 2010; Neff & Germer, 2013). A number of ideas for experiential learning can be seen in the participants' stories. For example, experiences of love and compassion in supportive communities were central to the participants' development and maintenance of self-compassion. Therapists may assist clients to maximize on opportunities

to engage in supportive and healing relationships. This could include helping clients distinguish between emotionally safe and unsafe relationships, working with clients to develop interpersonal skill, and encouraging clients to risk being appropriately vulnerable with safe others. Clients might also benefit from being part of a process group where the group therapist can facilitate healthy and safe disclosure and group support. In addition, spiritual practices such as prayer (e.g. centering prayer [Keating, 2005], and listening prayer [Goehring, 1995]), reflecting on religious texts, and participating in religious activities may facilitate experiential engagement with compassion and self-compassion.

In the process of telling their stories, the participants frequently compared their current self-compassion to the oppressive messages that encountered in their communities. These findings suggest that therapists may need to explore with clients the implicit beliefs and values that they have absorbed from their familial and cultural environments. For example, the participants discussed how their upbringing effected their beliefs about who God is and who they are in relation to God, what it means to be a good person and a good Christian, and how to manage emotions. Like the participants in this study, individuals may be shocked by the implicit beliefs that guide their choices in life and the way they relate to themselves and others. As individuals become more aware of the oppressive messages that continue to influence them, they may need help critically reflecting on these messages and coming with counter-arguments or different rationales in order to shift unhelpful beliefs. Though experiences are important in fostering self-compassion, the rational voices of resistance also played an important role in the participants' development and maintenance of self-compassion. Again, this suggests that self-compassion is a holistic and fluid process that requires both cognitive and emotional awareness and experiential learning.

Individuals are likely to struggle with self-compassion, even as the skills become easier (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Pauley & McPherson, 2010). Therapists may need to educate and remind clients that self-compassion does not mean that they will never struggle with feeling bad about themselves. When therapists normalize an individual's struggle with self-compassion, clients may be less likely to give up on the difficult process of developing self-compassion. Also, therapists may help clients explore ways to have compassion for persistent states of self-criticism; this may prevent clients from experiencing self-criticism for not being able to stop self-criticism. It may be easier for clients to focus on accepting self-criticism, while acknowledging that it is undesirable, rather than trying to force it to go away. The results from this study indicate that self-compassion develops more easily when individuals focus on being open, loving, and accepting, rather than trying to eliminate negative thoughts and emotions. Therefore, therapists may want to highlight the characteristics of openness, love, and acceptance as it applies to each intervention and each area of a person's life (i.e. personal, social, and spiritual).

Since this study focused particularly on how the Christian faith influences self-compassion, some of the implications are more specific to working with Christian clients. Particularly, when working with Christian clients, therapists may need to explore if they are comfortable with interventions that may have spiritual connotations. Many of the spiritual activities that the participants described are strikingly similar with the core elements of mindfulness, but it is possible that hearing the words mindfulness or meditation, or simply viewing an intervention as spiritual could cause resistance in some Christians clients. Exploring resistance early on may prevent damage to the therapeutic relationship, and give therapists the opportunity to explore ways to integrate mindfulness skills that are compatible with the client's religious beliefs. Additionally, it may be helpful to explore with Christian clients their

theological beliefs about God and how that influences the way they view themselves. Therapists may need to gently challenge individuals to think about their beliefs in a deeper way and not simply accept truths because a spiritual leader said it was true. Similarly, therapists should be aware of how their client's community might facilitate and hinder self-compassion. The results suggest that individuals are more likely to experience self-compassion when they are willing to question their religious beliefs, and when their religious beliefs are congruent with their spiritual experiences. As such, interventions may include identifying the ways that individuals feel most connected to God. By encouraging clients to incorporate their spiritual practices into the therapeutic process, therapists might be able to use the experiences the client has as material to build on in sessions; especially if, like the participants from this study, connecting with God frequently fosters feelings that promote self-compassion such as feeling comforted, accepted and loved (see Pargament, 2007 for a discussion on spiritually integrated psychotherapy).

Finally, clinicians who have their own spiritual backgrounds may want to consider ways that it has influenced their own experience and understanding of self-compassion. They may also want to consider how their spiritual beliefs can be integrated and facilitate their clinical practice. Taking into account diversity, ethical integration, and professional competency, professionals should educate themselves and have a clear understanding of their own spiritual beliefs before integrating spiritual practice into their work with clients (see Plante, 2007 for an overview of the relevant American Psychological Association ethics codes; Gonsioreck et al., 2009; Tan, 2003). Regardless of the therapist's spiritual background, it would be beneficial for therapists to educate themselves about different spiritual practices and assess client's spiritual resources upon intake. If a client's spirituality is an important part of their lives, it likely is also a significant resource for their personal healing.

Pastoral implications. Understanding the ways that an individual's Christian faith can impact self-compassion has implications for pastors and other Christian leaders who are instrumental in the spiritual development of others. As some of the participants experienced, church communities may inadvertently produce an environment that is critical and oppressive. Pastors may want to reflect on the culture that is being promoted in their church. A culture of openness and acceptance seems to promote more authentic spiritual growth, as well as an environment where it is safe to be honest about one's failures and suffering. As leaders, pastors and other people involved in leading church ministries have significant impact on the culture of their community. As a result, the way they teach and the way they interact with others can act as a model to the wider community. Teachings that focus on behaviour and a strict view of what is acceptable and unacceptable may come off as oppressive to some individuals (Beck, 2012; Elliott, 2012). Alternatively, pastors may benefit from acknowledging the tensions and struggles that occur as one tries to live out their Christian faith. As Cara pointed out, Churches often do not mean to be judgmental or communicate burdensome standards but that frequently happens when we do not reflect on the importance of Grace and remind one another that our compassion and love does not come from our own strength but rather from God's work in us and through us.

Personal implications. In addition to suggestions for clinicians and church leaders, the results suggest multiple ways that individuals may foster self-compassion in their own lives. One of the reasons the participants were able to value and embrace self-compassion was because they believed and felt that they were unconditionally loved and highly valued in God's eyes. Both Christians and non-Christians may benefit from reflecting on what makes a person valuable. From a Christian perspective, individuals have inherent value in God's eyes and as a result, no failure can separate them from the love of God (Mitchell, 2008). Depending on a

person's worldview, this may be different, but it is worth exploring what one's view is of humanity. Many people are willing to forgive and love others more easily than they forgive and love themselves, which may indicate incongruence between an individual's worldview and the way that he responds toward himself. Also, Christians who are struggling with believing they are loved and valued may want to reflect on how integrated their beliefs about God are with their experiences of God. In addition, they may want to integrate spiritual disciplines such as reading scripture, prayer, and reading books by a variety of biblical scholars in order to expand their understanding of the character of God.

Openness and authenticity also appear to be important characteristics for both spiritual development and self-compassion. Individuals might benefit from being open to hearing contrasting points of views. As the participants exemplified, being open to different perspectives and spiritual experiences is not the same as accepting everything as truth. In addition, individuals may benefit from being open and authentic in personal relationships, including social relationships and their relationship to the divine. Being open to new experiences and learning new things may foster greater empathy, as well as enhancing individual's cognitive and experiential knowledge of the world. For people with backgrounds in organized religion, they may want to consider how their communities and the spiritual teachings they have heard influence the way they live. Being self-reflective may promote a more personal and authentic spirituality that can bring about internal change. Authenticity and openness appear to be key factors in experiencing an internal shift toward self-compassion.

Limitations

This study, like all studies, has its limitations, which need to be taken into consideration when interpreting the results and applying them to a broader context. A common

misunderstanding of qualitative research is that the small sample size limits the transferability of the results. However, the credibility of qualitative research is better measured by the depth and breadth of the data collected (Morrow, 2005). Though the sample size was relatively small, the listening guide provided rich descriptions of the participants' inner experiences. The results from this study represent the experiences of seven different individuals and although there were significant differences in their understanding and journey with self-compassion, there were also many similarities. Blindly applying any research finding to an individual without consideration for his or her individuality can be harmful, but both the similarities and difference in participants' experiences may inform our conceptualization of self-compassion and the way we integrate interventions. The goal of this research is to inform professionals and expand our awareness of the multitude of factors that influence self-compassion. Therefore, the results of this study should be judiciously transferred to larger groups of people.

The design of this study incorporated the listening guide and evocative autoethnography to capture the embodied experiences of self-compassion, however, the subjective nature of understanding an individual's internal experience leaves room for different interpretations. It is impossible to separate my own life experiences and perspectives from my understanding of the participants' stories and so I chose to incorporate it using autoethnography. Autoethnography has been critiqued as self-indulgent, unscientific, and overly individualized (Granek, 2013; Holt, 2003), while others promote the method because of its ability to deepen our experiential understanding and empathy towards the experiences of people who are different from us (Ellis et al., 2011). Both of these arguments have merited. Poorly done autoethnographies can be self-indulgent and egocentric, but applied intentionally and reflectively, autoethnography can also be a powerful way to explore and communicate one's lived experience. Autoethnography allowed

me to draw on my own embodied knowledge to empathize and connect with the deeper experiential meaning behind the participants' words, and also give you a better understanding of the ways my own voice has influenced the way the participants' stories were reflected to you. Due to the subjective and interpretive nature of this study, the results reflect my perception of the participant's understanding of self-compassion in a specific moment in time. Even in the follow-up interviews, participants communicated new insights into what self-compassion is like for them. Though the results seem to indicate a developmental trajectory for the development of self-compassion, the retrospective nature of the research prevents us from making conclusions about developmental patterns. Prospective studies are needed to further explore the development of self-compassion.

Another limitation that should be considered before transferring these results into practice is the lack of diversity in participant characteristics. The current sample included only two men and five women. Though significant gender differences were not apparent, the interviews with the men tended to be shorter and focused more on events than their experience. As we noted in the results section, some of the voices were identified not by the words that were spoken but by the context and tone in which they were spoken; therefore, the way that participants told their stories influenced the way the voices were heard. Differences between genders may have gone undetected due to the small sample size. Similarly, the participants were relatively homogeneous in regards to their spiritual background. The majority of participants came from Brethren traditions, with limited representation of other Christian denominations, and this may have influenced how the participants understood and lived out their faith, and in turn how their faith influenced self-compassion.

The recruitment process also created some challenges. As noted in the literature review, religious beliefs and spirituality are not always equally integrated. For the current study, I sought out individuals who had an active spiritual life and identified with the Christian faith. Measuring the quality of an individual's spirituality poses many challenges and we relied on the subjective evaluation of Christian leaders to nominate individuals who they felt met the criteria of having a mature Christian faith that was evident in their daily lives. This created a twofold problem. First, Christian culture may have influenced the nominators opinions on what a mature Christian faith looks like. As a result, participants who would have qualified for this study but do not fit the traditional prototype of a "mature Christian" may have been excluded. Secondly, because participants were pursued based partially on their level of faith development, the implications may not carry over to individuals at different stages of faith development. A final concern is that only three individuals were involved in the nomination of the six participants. This may also limit the breadth of experiences that were explored in this study.

Future Directions

The results of this study begin to draw more attention to the impact of spiritual practice in the development of self-compassion, but there are still more questions than answers. Considering the participants in the current study felt that their faith was at the centre of their ability to be self-compassionate, this could be a valuable area for future research. Additional research into the connection between spirituality and self-compassion may want to include a systematic look at the ways that other spiritual traditions (e.g. Judaism, Islam, Wicca, etc.) address compassion and the construct of self-compassion. In addition, it may be valuable to incorporate interventions, aside from mindfulness, that can bring transcendent experiences into therapy. A variety of ideas for Christian spiritual integration emerged from this study, which

might serve as a starting point for developing self-compassion interventions specific to the Christian faith.

Though this study specifically explored Christian faith experiences in relation to self-compassion, not all of the results are specific to a Christian context. For instance, the results suggest that self-compassion grows and transforms over time with various stages of development. The research available has investigated the obstacles to self-compassion and the benefits of self-compassion, but there is very little said about participants experiences moving from self-criticism toward self-compassion. The voices of resistance that emerged from the current study indicate that there may be a difference between valuing and acting self-compassionately and feeling the warmth, comfort, and peace that Gilbert (2010) suggests marks the experience of self-compassion. The difference between cognitive and emotional expressions of self-compassion and how they differ across various stages of development is an area that needs further exploration. Finally, in order to explore the embodied experience of self-compassion new measures of self-compassion that includes ways to query the felt experience.

Conclusion

I set out on this journey to explore how the Christian faith can influence self-compassion. Along the way I have been inspired by the stories I heard of individuals steadily and imperfectly growing in self-compassion. In contrast to the expansive quantitative literature on the benefits of self-compassion, the participants taught me about the messiness, ambiguity, and trust that is involved in living with self-compassion. For those of us whose stories are represented here, self-compassion developed out of our relationship with God. We did not need to be taught about self-compassion as a construct, or practice therapeutic skills; our self-compassion evolved through the experience of God's love and compassion. The voices from our stories combined to

represent the holistic and individualized paths that lead to self-compassion. In our stories, spirituality was a valuable resource and these results suggest that other Christians may also benefit from reflecting on how self-compassion is informed by their Christian theology. Our stories also begin to illuminate the lived experience of self-compassion. None of us has perfected self-compassion, but we have learned how to recognize when we are struggling and fight for self-compassion by being mindful of our needs and reaching out to God and others for support. As you reflect on how your own lives are similar or different from our stories, I hope that you are able to develop a greater understanding of the different ways that individuals experience self-compassion. We each have our own story of self-compassion and as we grow and embrace it we can contribute to an atmosphere of openness and compassion that allows people to feel seen, accepted, and valuable.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Hi (insert name),

My name is Genevieve Kalnins and I am a Counselling Psychology student at Trinity Western University. I am conducting a research study exploring how the Christian faith influences the way people treat themselves in the face of challenges. As part of the study, I am interested in interviewing Christians who show compassion and kindness toward themselves in the midst of experiences of inadequacy, failure, and suffering. In the research literature, this attitude toward oneself has been termed self-compassion. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding about how faith experiences, within a Christian context, impact the development of self-compassion.

I am writing to you today to see if you know anyone who might be interested in participating in this study. Specifically, I am looking for individuals with the following characteristics:

- Individuals who identify themselves as a Christian and have a personal faith that is evident in their everyday life
- Individuals who demonstrate the ability to be kind and compassionate toward themselves in the face of suffering, failure, and areas of inadequacy.

If you or someone you know has these qualities and might be interested in participating in this research study, please pass along the information and have them contact me, either by phone at or email at

Thank you,

Genevieve Kalnins

Appendix B: Self-Compassion Scale

To Whom it May Concern:

Please feel free to use the Self-Compassion Scale in your research. Masters and dissertation students also have my permission to use and publish the Self-Compassion Scale in their theses. The appropriate reference is listed below.

Best,

Kristin Neff, Ph. D.

Associate Professor Educational Psychology Dept. University of Texas at Austin

Reference:

Neff, K. D. (2003). Development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2, 223-250.

Coding Key:

Self-Kindness Items: 5, 12, 19, 23, 26 Self-Judgment Items: 1, 8, 11, 16, 21 Common Humanity Items: 3, 7, 10, 15 Isolation Items: 4, 13, 18, 25 Mindfulness Items: 9, 14, 17, 22 Over-identified Items: 2, 6, 20, 24

Subscale scores are computed by calculating the mean of subscale item responses. To compute a total self-compassion score, reverse score the negative subscale items before calculating subscale means - self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification (i.e., 1 = 5, 2 = 4, 3 = 3, 4 = 2, 5 = 1) - then compute a grand mean of all six subscale means. Researchers can choose to analyze their data either by using individual sub-scale scores or by using a total score.

(This method of calculating the total score is slightly different than that used in the article referenced above, in which each subscale was added together. However, I find it is easier to interpret the total score if a mean is used.)

HOW I TYPICALLY ACT TOWARDS MYSELF IN DIFFICULT TIMES

Please read each statement carefully before answering. To the left of each item, indicate how often you behave in the stated manner, using the following scale:

**Almost
never**

1

2

3

4

**Almost
always**

5

- _____ 1. I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.
- _____ 2. When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.
- _____ 3. When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through.
- _____ 4. When I think about my inadequacies, it tends to make me feel more separate and cut off from the rest of the world.
- _____ 5. I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain.
- _____ 6. When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.
- _____ 7. When I'm down and out, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like I am.
- _____ 8. When times are really difficult, I tend to be tough on myself.
- _____ 9. When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance.
- _____ 10. When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people.
- _____ 11. I'm intolerant and impatient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.
- _____ 12. When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.
- _____ 13. When I'm feeling down, I tend to feel like most other people are probably happier than I am.
- _____ 14. When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation.
- _____ 15. I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.
- _____ 16. When I see aspects of myself that I don't like, I get down on myself.
- _____ 17. When I fail at something important to me I try to keep things in perspective.
- _____ 18. When I'm really struggling, I tend to feel like other people must be having an easier time of it.
- _____ 19. I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
- _____ 20. When something upsets me I get carried away with my feelings.
- _____ 21. I can be a bit cold-hearted towards myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
- _____ 22. When I'm feeling down I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness.
- _____ 23. I'm tolerant of my own flaws and inadequacies.
- _____ 24. When something painful happens I tend to blow the incident out of proportion.
- _____ 25. When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.
- _____ 26. I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.

Appendix C: Telephone Screening Script Telephone Recruitment and Screening Script

Hello, this is Genevieve Kalnins. I am a student of Counselling Psychology, and the principle researcher of the study on self-compassion in the lives of Christians. Thank you for expressing interest in participating in my thesis project.

My research explores how Christian faith experiences influence how people treat themselves in the face of challenges. As part of the study, I am interested in interviewing Christians who show compassion and kindness toward themselves in the midst of experiences of inadequacy, failure, and suffering. In the research literature, this attitude toward oneself has been termed self-compassion. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding about how faith experiences, within a Christian context, impact the development of self-compassion.

If you choose to participate, in addition to an online screening survey, you will be asked to take part in two interviews where you will be asked to share about how your Christian faith has influenced the way you respond towards yourself when you are having a difficult time. The time commitment for both interviews is approximately 2.5 hours and the online survey will take approximately 15 minutes. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without penalty.

There are certain criteria you have to meet in order to be eligible for this research. I will go over that now. First, for this particular study we are interested in talking with people who have a mature Christian faith that influences their day-to-day life. Second, we are looking for Christians who respond to themselves with kindness and compassion when they are having a difficult time. If this applies to you, and you would like to participate, I will provide you with a link for the online screening survey. As part of the online survey, you will complete the Self-Compassion Scale, which is designed to measure self-compassion. Your score on the Self-Compassion Scale will help in determining if you are eligible for this research. We will only contact you further if you are eligible for the study. However, do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

If you are eligible to continue in the study, we will call you back to see if you would like to set up a time for the first interview. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Your anonymity is assured and all identifying information will remain confidential unless required by law. Before the interview, I will ask you to read and sign a consent form. The consent form covers such things as the nature of the project, confidentiality, risks and benefits, etc. I will go over that now (See attached Consent Form). Then we will proceed with the interview. Following our first interview together, I will send you a summary of the first interview for you to review and we will set up a time for the second interview. At the end of the second interview, there will be a short debriefing during which you can ask me any questions

you may have or voice any concerns. If you are interested in the results of the research once it is finished, just let me know and I will send them to you.

Do you have questions at this time? If you want to participate, I will give you the link for the online survey now. Once you have completed the survey I will contact you to set up an interview time, if you are eligible for the study. Please let me know if you have any difficulty with the online survey or would prefer to have the survey mailed to you.

Thank you for your time. I'll leave you my contact information again in case you need it.

Appendix D: Demographic Information**Participant Information****1) Name***

2) Gender Male Female**3) Age** 18-24 25-34 35-49 50-64 65+**4) Ethnic Background** European/European-Canadian French-Canadian Aboriginal Metis African/African-Canadian Asian/Asian-Canadian South Asian/South Asian Canadian Caribbean/Caribbean Canadian Middle Eastern/Middle Eastern Canadian Latin American/Latin American Canadian Other: _____**5) Highest level of education completed** Some High School Completed High School Some University or Post-Secondary

- Completed Diploma or Trade Certificate
- Completed Bachelors Degree
- Some Graduate School
- Completed Graduate Degree
- Other: _____

6) Occupation

7) Number of years you have been a Christian

8) What type of Christian community or denomination are you a part of?

9) What is your current involvement in this community?

10) Name*

11) Gender

- Male
- Female

12) Age

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-49
- 50-64
- 65+

13) Ethnic Background

- European/European-Canadian
- French-Canadian
- Aboriginal
- Metis
- African/African-Canadian
- Asian/Asian-Canadian
- South Asian/South Asian Canadian
- Caribbean/Caribbean Canadian
- Middle Eastern/Middle Eastern Canadian
- Latin American/Latin American Canadian
- Other: _____

14) Highest level of education completed

- Some High School
- Completed High School
- Some University or Post-Secondary
- Completed Diploma or Trade Certificate
- Completed Bachelors Degree
- Some Graduate School
- Completed Graduate Degree
- Other: _____

15) Occupation

16) Number of years you have been a Christian

17) What type of Christian community or denomination are you a part of?

18) What is your current involvement in this community?

Appendix E: Letter of Consent



Self-Compassion in the Lives of Christians

Principal Investigator: Genevieve Kalnins, MA Counselling Psychology Student
Department of Counselling Psychology

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Derrick Klaassen
Department of Counselling Psychology

Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study exploring how Christian faith experiences influence how people treat themselves in the face of challenges. You were invited to participate because your peers have identified you as a Christian who demonstrates compassion and kindness toward themselves in the midst of experiences of inadequacy, failure, and suffering. In the research literature, this attitude toward oneself has been termed self-compassion. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding about how faith experiences, within a Christian context, impact the development of self-compassion.

Study Procedures: As a participant, you will be asked to participate in two interviews. The first interview will take approximately 90 minutes to complete, during which you will be asked to share how your Christian faith has influenced how you respond to yourself in times of suffering, failure, and inadequacy. Afterward, a summary of the first interview will be sent to you to review and the second interview will be scheduled at this time. The second interview will take approximately 30-60 minutes to complete. You will be given the opportunity to discuss the summary and share any additional thoughts or comments.

Both interviews will be audio recorded and stored as a password protected file. Interview transcripts will exclude any identifying information. Upon your verbal or written request, a copy of the final study results and/or your score on the Self-Compassion Scale will be provided to you.

Potential Risks and Discomforts: Risks associated with this research are minimal but may include discomfort from discussing personal beliefs, values, and experiences with an unfamiliar person. If you become uncomfortable or distressed the interview will be stopped and you will be given the choice to continue when you feel ready or to end the interview.

Potential Benefits: You may experience greater self-awareness and deepening of your faith from sharing your experiences. In addition, you will help counselors and clergy better understand how the Christian faith can influence how people treat themselves in the face of challenges. This information will hopefully inform how counselors and clergy support the development of self-compassion, when working with Christians.

Confidentiality: Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. You will be asked to choose a pseudonym, which will be used to represent you in all documents related to the interview, including the final thesis document and any other reports of the study. Documents relating to the interview, including audio recordings, will be kept in a locked filing cabinet or a password-protected folder and only members of the research team will have access to these documents. All audio recordings will be destroyed once the project is completed, while interview transcripts will be kept for future research.

Compensation: As a small gesture of thanks for your participation, a \$20 gift certificate will be given upon completion of the follow-up interview.

Contact for information about the study: If you have questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact the principal investigator Genevieve Kalnins or the faculty supervisor Dr. Derrick Klaassen with the contact information provided above.

Contact for concerns about the rights of research participants: If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact Ms. Sue Funk in the Office of Research, Trinity Western University.

Consent: Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. Withdrawal from the study will not affect you in anyway. Your interview recordings and transcripts will be destroyed upon your written or verbal request to withdraw from the study.

Your signature below indicates that you have had your questions about the study answered to your satisfaction and have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your signature also indicates that you consent to participate in this study and that your responses may be put in anonymous form and kept for further use after the completion of this study.

Participant Signature

Date

Printed Name of the Participant

Appendix F: Interview Guide

Thank you, again, for agreeing to participate in this study. As I mentioned, I am interested in understanding self-compassion from a Christian perspective. You have been identified as someone who displays kindness and compassion toward yourself in the face of hardships and suffering. Today, I am interested in your story about how your Christian faith has influenced how you treat yourself in the face of failure, inadequacy, and suffering.

1. What does being compassionate toward yourself, or self-compassion, mean to you?
 - a. Does a definition, word, image or experience come to mind?
2. Can you tell me about your journey with self-compassion (captured in the definition or image from above) and how it has developed?
 - a. How have your experiences of compassion toward yourself developed over time?
 - b. Are there specific points in time where your experience of compassion toward yourself shifted?
 - c. What helps foster compassionate feelings toward yourself?
 - i. Are there any activities, thoughts, feelings or images that help you to feel self-compassionate?
 - d. Are there times when it is easier to experience compassion toward yourself?
 - e. Are there times when it is harder to experience compassion toward yourself?
 - f. [How has your journey as a Christian influenced the way you treat yourself when you experience a sense of failure, inadequacy, or suffering?]
 - g. In what ways does the church community you are a part of influence your self-compassion?
 - h. In what ways does your relationship with Christ influence your self-compassion?
 - i. Have you experienced any resistance toward self-compassion?
 - i. Have you perceived resistance within the church?
 - ii. Have you perceived resistance within yourself?
 - j. Have there been experiences or activities outside of your spiritual journey that have impacted your self-compassion?
3. How has self-compassion impacted your life?
4. Do you have any other thoughts or comment you would like to share?

Appendix G: Co-Researcher Confidentiality Agreement

As a research assistant, you will be in possession of personal, and at times sensitive, information about individuals, possibly including their identities, locations, as well as their study data. You are expected to keep all information confidential, and understand and abide by the ethics policy as described in the Tri-council Policy Statement (<http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/Default/>).

I, _____, research assistant, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audiotapes and documentation received from Genevieve Kalnins related to her thesis on Self-Compassion in the Lives of Christians. Furthermore, I agree:

- a. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audiotaped interviews, or in any associated documents;
- b. To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Genevieve Kalnins;
- c. To store all study related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;
- d. To return all audiotapes and study related documents to Genevieve Kalnins in a complete and timely manner.
- e. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any backup devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

Research Assistant Signature

Printed Name

Date

Appendix H: Sample I-Poem

It's hard for me
I think because I know
I think,
I think
I feel
I'm achieving
I have two images
I definitely- I think,

I'm thinking... okay
if I was
I was describing
I was like
I refuse
I was thinking, I- I know
I was just
I'm gonna
I tend to
I, I could just
I really

I just- I feel like,
I've known
I feel
I think
I feel like I can actually say okay, like, I *am* okay
I think

I think
I've thought
I'm like
I think, um, I really felt that shift
I did it
I was stressed out
I remember
I've always struggled to feel like I was understood,
"I need you to hear me
I have
I'm just as present
if I don't say anything, then I'm going to like feel small or insignificant
here I am
I feel
I need
I need to speak up."

I saw
I think
this is what I need
I had
I didn't feel comfortable
I didn't speak up
"It's okay that I don't
I should have
I'd like kinda
I don't even, I- uh, I could- I could

I'm just kinda

I think
I was
I'd been exposed
I started
here I am- I grew up
here I am
I wasn't
I was
I think it was
I believe in God
I am curious
I'm curious
I just- I really felt like God spoke to me that
I don't know
I might have
I was always
I just
I think
I-or if I was
I could help my mom
if I was a better daughter
if I could make my sister be a better daughter
I can't remember
"I'm not crazy?"
"I'm not defective?"
I'm not in control of everything
I don't know- maybe

I think for me
I have this
what I need and then *choose* to do

I was like, "I can't, like, I can't do this."

I really felt like can't- I
I was feeling very much like a failure,
I wanna quit and I wanna run
I remember
I was
I was just praying
"God *will* complete the good work he started in me"
I was like so humbled
I don't understand
have I failed?
I'm gonna trust
I should act towards myself compassionately.

I remember, I think
I um, and I- I remember
I just looked
"I'm beautiful."

I *am* a valuable
I have a lot to offer.
I'm worth being a friend
I'm a pretty awesome person

I just feel that
I can just say

I'll- I'll start
I noticed
I feel
I don't know
I can stay centered and grounded
I don't
what I can
I don't quite have the self-confidence
I went to
But I can do it because of God
I don't know
I -I get tense about it when I hear it
I, I feel really wrong
I knew,
I'm live such a transient life
I - I still feel like,
I just have so many impacts
I, I yeah.
I've reflected on it a lot
it's okay for me to be kind to myself

I see it's okay.
I knew their heart
I think. I... um, like I said like a lot of that
I feel like, it's God whose been my voice of self-compassion.

I interpret and read scripture
I get to know who God is
I remember
I have perspective
I think like within myself
I don't deserve it
I shouldn't
I'm not a still like meditator
I, Like I don't know
I think I don't
I don't recognize
I want to say I don't recognize who I am sometimes
I'm just full of opportunities
self-compassion takes away the fear
I *can* because I've lived differently
the self-compassion I have now

I don't feel like there's anything more I *need* to say
I think, as I was thinking
I've been mindful
"There's more I *want* to share, but there's not more I *need* to share."
I like to tell it
I come from a family of story-tellers
I can look back
if I'm really honest
I was listening
I feel like I don't
sometimes I wonder,
"Do I really understand who God is
Who am I to say
I should be kind
if I don't- can't
I still have value
I, I don't know how I made it through last year
I spent at least 3 days a week on my floor crying, all day
I could be
this is all I can do right now

I am in my journey
I have a struggle
I need you- I need to feel understood

“I don’t feel understood, I need to say it.”
I think, I’m able to do that more now