An Exploration of the Utilization of Self-compassion among Emerging Adult African American and Latino Students

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore the utilization of and barriers to self-compassion in emerging adult African American and Latino students. Researchers conducted 22 in-depth interviews and coded data using the Grounded Theory Method. The study revealed that students' of color greatest sources of self-judgment were poor school performance, dropping out of school, and disappointing and emotionally hurting family members. Furthermore, researchers found that participants' responses were generally high in the self-kindness component of self-compassion and that after such experiences most were able to move forward in their lives. These results may serve to inform human service providers and educators alike of the potential benefits of including self-compassion training; and education programs centered on self-worth, self-esteem and self-efficacy for emerging adult students of color. It is vital that emerging adult students of color are equipped to deal with challenges and adversities of postsecondary education and ultimately — their life.

Key words: race, self-compassion, students, African American, Latino, emerging adult

1. Introduction

Although national studies have found that the rates of some mental health issues such as substance abuse and depressive symptoms do not differ significantly across race and ethnicity (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 2014; Pratt & Brody, 2014), in their national study on mental health care in minority children and young adults, Marrast, Himmelstein and Woolhander (2016) found that Black and Latino youth received roughly half as many mental health and substance abuse services as whites, with the greatest disparities appearing in young adulthood. They concluded that, "psychiatric and behavioral problems among minority youth often result in school punishment or incarceration, but rarely mental health care" (p. 810), a finding echoed in a former study conducted by the National Mental Health Association (1999). This disturbing result is in line with data showing that adults of color use treatment services at less than half the rate of whites (SAMHSA, 2015; Davis & Ford, 2004). The problem here is obvious; lack of treatment can prolong suffering, and can cause existing symptoms to worsen whereby impact self-esteem and self-compassion (Wang, Berglund & Olfson, 2005; National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2005). For diagnoses like depression, the exacerbation of

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symptoms can lead to suicide (Hawton, Comabella, Haw & Saunders, 2013), the second leading cause of death for individuals aged 15 to 24 (American Association of Suicidology, 2015).

In addition to being undertreated and disproportionately punished, several studies have found that the dropout rates of Black and Latino students are still among the highest measured when compared to their white peers: in 2009, the dropout rate of Latino students was 17% and the rate for Black students was 9% while the rate for white students was only 6%. Researchers have also noted that low socioeconomic status along with unmet mental health needs can play a major role in dropout rates, poor self-esteem and obtaining a high grade point average (Jones, 2006; Jenkins, 2008; Arnold & Harris, 2011; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Cooper, 2012; Corry, Dardick, & Stella, 2016).

Both the lack of treatment and high dropout rates for adults and young adults of color suggests that students of color ages 18 to 24 — what Arnett (2000) refers to as emerging adulthood — experience a more grim and complex reality than the one researchers have ascribed to this life stage generally when not considering race (Galambos, Barker, Krahn & Harvey, 2006). Apart from being treated punitively for showing symptoms, there are other reasons why this population may actively avoid mental health treatment, such as a cultural history of being abused by Western medical institutions (Ashley, 2015). Furthermore, as many evidence-based practices were developed from studies that used white subjects, these treatment modules risk being ineffective for people of color (Briggs & McBeath, 2010), especially since discrimination — an experience widely shared by people of color — is associated with so many negative outcomes, mental health and otherwise (American Psychological Association, 2015; Ruekberg, 2006; Bang, 2015; Hwang & Goto, 2008).

This review explores the aptness of self-compassion training as a prevention and intervention for emerging adult students of color, both for addressing mental health needs and, by association, improving academic performance. Self-compassion is a promising new field of research, and as a trait has been associated with "increased psychological well-being" (Neff, Kirkpatrick & Rude, 2007, p. 141); however, its effectiveness for people of color specifically has not been widely explored (Lockard, Hayes, Neff & Locke, 2014). The review begins with a basic introduction to self-compassion research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Self-compassion

Neff (2003) defines self-compassion as the act of "experiencing feelings of caring and kindness toward oneself [and] taking an understanding, nonjudgmental attitude toward one's inadequacies and failures" (p. 224). Self-compassion has emerged in the research as a trait that can be increased in individuals to yield multiple benefits, including the alleviation of symptoms of depression, shame, negative affect, rumination, and the promotion of healthy self-regulation (Johnson & O'Brien, 2013; Reilly, Rochlen, & Awad, 2014; Joeng & Turner; Sirois, Kitner, & Hirsch, 2015). Research also indicates that it can serve as a buffer against anxiety and depressive symptoms (Neff, Kirkpatrick & Rude, 2007; Körner et al., 2015). Additionally, Morely (2015) found that self-compassion involves self-assurance, attention, and emotional regulation, all of which decrease aggressive behavior.

According to Neff (2003), self-compassion entails three basic components: "1. Self-kindness: extending kindness and understanding to oneself rather than harsh self-criticism and judgment; 2. Common Humanity: seeing one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than as separating and isolating; and 3.

Mindfulness: holding one's painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them" (p. 224). Self-compassion differs from self-esteem in that "self-esteem has been linked with greater denial and defensiveness, while self-compassion is associated with honestly confronting one's role in failures, more balanced emotional reactions, and a willingness to learn from mistakes" (Homan, 2016, p. 5). Furthermore, unlike self-esteem, self-compassion does not "involve evaluations of self or feeling superior to others" (p. 5).

2.2 Self-compassion in Emerging Adults

A growing body of research suggests that self-compassion is particularly beneficial for adolescents and young adults, who are still forming their identities amidst the pressures of these life stages (Neff & McGehee, 2010; Arnett, 2000). These pressures, which include "academic performance, the need to be popular...[and] body image" (Neff & McGehee, 2010, p. 225), can lead to both negative self-evaluations for failing to live up to these expectations, as well as trigger narcissistic personality traits associated with the inability to tolerate negative self-judgments; these in turn have been linked to the elevated rates of aggression, anxiety, depression, suicide attempts and self-injury documented in these groups (Neff & McGehee, 2010; Barry, Loflin & Doucette, 2015; Xavier, Gouveia & Cunha, 2016). Thus, it comes as no surprise that adolescents with higher levels of self-compassion have been shown to have a "relatively secure, positive sense of self" (Barry, Loflin & Doucette, 2015, p. 118).

Additionally, in Homan's (2016) study of self-compassion and psychological well-being in older adults, she found that there was a positive correlation with self-compassion and age (2016). Although one's self-compassion and overall well-being is generally viewed as subjective (Neff, 2003), Homan suggests that one's psychological well-being may also be based on fulfillment of human potential, which includes autonomy, positive relationships with others, growth, and finding a purpose in life (Homan, 2016). This is important because emerging adults are at an age-range where fulfillment of human potential is critical, as they may be leaving high school and entering the workforce, trying to make strong connections with others, engaging in romantic relationships, and attempting to find meaning in their lives.

2.3 Self-compassion in Emerging Adult Students of Color

Research on self-compassion in emerging adult students of color — or indeed people of color in general — is practically non-existent; however, in one study on college counseling center clients, Lockard, Hayes, Neff and Locke (2014) used Neff's (2003) Self-Compassion Scale to look for differences in scores associated with race and ethnicity. Although they found no meaningful differences of this kind, their study cannot be said to speak for all emerging adults of color (e.g., non college-going). More importantly perhaps, they argue that, "factors [such as race and ethnicity] may still matter when considering how to raise the self-compassion of clients" (Lockard et al., 2014, p. 257); they assert that while both white students and students of color had relatively equal levels of low self-compassion scores, the low scores for students of color may be explained by different reasons—reasons such as racial discrimination (p. 257). Thus, they posit that increasing self-compassion in these students may require "very different approaches" (p. 257) than those used with white students.

2.4 The Prevalence and Impact of Discrimination on Self-compassion

Although the connection may seem evident, it is imperative to look into the evidence for Lockard and colleagues' suggestion that discrimination based on race might account for low self-compassion scores among students of color (2014). Feagin and Sykes (1991) define discrimination as "actions or practices carried out by

members of dominant racial or ethnic groups that have a differential negative impact on members of subordinate racial or ethnic groups" (p. 102). Many people of color continue to see high levels of discrimination in their daily lives; for example a recent national poll found that 53% of African Americans and 36% of Latinos reported feeling unfairly treated due to their race within the last thirty days (Central News Network & Kaiser Family Foundation, 2015).

Unfortunately, researchers found no national polls regarding perceived racial discrimination among students, although research does exist on the subject; in their study on African American, Asian American and Latino American high school students, Rosenbloom and Way (2004) found that while Asian American students perceived more discrimination from their peers, African American and Latino students reported being more often discriminated against by adults, including "teachers, police and shopkeepers" (p. 420). Smith and Fincham (2015) found gender differences for perceived discrimination in their study on Black youth, with the males in their study being more likely to report discrimination from teachers and peers. They explain these differences as possibly arising from the fact that "Black males are stereotyped as physically threatening or as anti-intellectual and thus are disciplined more harshly or perceived as less smart than females and Other race/ethnic groups" (Smith & Fincham, 2015, p. 16). Discrimination is a serious mental health issue for students of color because it has been associated with various negative outcomes, including psychological distress, poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation (American Psychological Association, 2015; Ruekberg, 2006; Bang, 2015; Hwang & Goto, 2008).

2.5 Discrimination as a Reason for Low Self-compassion

As mentioned above, one main component of self-compassion is *self-kindness*, or the ability to treat oneself with understanding rather than harsh, negative self-judgments (Wilcomb & Soysa, 2013). One way discrimination can negatively impact self-kindness is that it can restrict economic or other forms of success for certain groups, which may lead some to believe that they are entirely to blame for their failures to meet societal norms; for example, there is evidence suggesting that some youth of color blame themselves for joblessness, an issue that has been clearly linked to hiring discrimination (Bowman, 1990; Cooper, McLoyd, Wood, & Hardaway, 2008). By judging themselves for issues caused by discrimination, these youth of color likely judge themselves harshly for not landing a job or even getting an interview, a harshness that could dissipate with the knowledge of how drastically the process is rigged against them to begin with (Moore, 2010; Stoll, Rafael & Holzer, 2004; Ziegert & Hanges, 2005).

However, discrimination as a cause for self-judgment is not limited to the concept of blaming oneself for issues caused by institutional racism. In their study on African American adolescents, Brody and colleagues (2006) found that discrimination predicted an increase in depressive symptoms, leading them to theorize that, "those at the receiving end of discrimination can, over time, come to internalize the discriminators' views" (p. 1183). Also known as internalized racism, this effect has been has been associated with similar negative mental health outcomes as discrimination (Williams, 1999). Internalized racism has also been shown to have a negative outcome on academic performance, an issue of particular relevance to the current topic; in their study on African American high school students, Mayo-Booker and Gibbs (1997) found that negative evaluations of one's race was associated with lower GPA, with the converse also being true. Seeing one's opportunities as limited may be a sad, yet somewhat realistic view for emerging adult students of color whose races and ethnicities are disproportionately represented among the incarcerated, jobless, and homeless (Cooper et al., 2008; US Department of Labor, 2011);

however being culturally indoctrinated with the view that oneself or one's race is at fault for these institutional problems represents a lack of kindness and understanding, and thus a lack of self-compassion.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Convenience sampling was used to recruit the participants for the study during an assembly at a High School in Southern California. The ages of the individuals that were interviewed ranged from 18–27. The participants identified as either African American/Black or Latino, and were enrolled in the High School during the time of the interview. The individuals partook in the study voluntarily. All participants were of low socioeconomic status and were living with caregiver, family member or friends. Around 5% of the participants had been corrections/systems involved.

3.2 Tools

The one-on-one interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. The consent forms were stored in a locked box in the locked office of one of the researchers. Audio recordings from the interviews were kept on password-protected computers belonging to the research team. Audio recordings were transcribed within 24 hours of the interview. Transcripts of the interviews were de-identified. The interview transcripts were kept in a lockbox separate from consent forms. Only de-identified data was used for analysis. All members of the research team had access to both identifiable and de-identified data. Identifiable data was destroyed upon completion of the study.

3.3 Research Design

Researchers utilized Grounded Theory Method (GTM) by searching for common themes from the transcribed interviews in order to inductively establish theories from the data (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). In developing themes, researchers coded data using both open and axial coding, and compare coded data using the constant comparative method. Researchers relied on Neff's (2003) operational definition of self-compassion when analyzing participants' self-compassion from the data.

3.4 Procedure

Participants met with one of the researchers for a one-on-one interview regarding the use of self-compassion to cope with what they perceived as failures, challenges and flaws. The semi-structure interview guide comprised of 9 questions and took place within one of the conference rooms in the high school. The interview space was completely private and confidential so that the participants could feel comfortable disclosing information during the interview. The interview centered on the utilization of self-compassion, and included questions such as: "*what do you say to yourself after you make a mistake?*" The interview process took about 15 to 45 minutes for each participant.

4. Results

The results from the study indicated a variety of responses expressed by the participants. The first three questions asked participants to identify their age, gender, and ethnicity (*see Table 1*). The mean age for the study was 21, with 14 of the participants identifying as male and 7 identifying as female. 16 participants identified

themselves as having Latin American heritage, 4 participants identified as African American/Black, and 2 participants identified as mixed-race, belonging to both of these categories.

Table 1   Age, Gender and Ethnicity of Participants

Participants (n = 22)	Age (M = 21.5)	Gender	Ethnicity
Ptp 1	19	Male	Latino/Salvadorian
Ptp 2	21	Male	African American
Ptp 3	24	Male	Latino
Ptp 4	19	Female	Latina
Ptp 5	20	Male	AA/Latino
Ptp 6	19	Female	Latina
Ptp 7	24	Male	Mexican
Ptp 8	18	Male	African American
Ptp 9	20	Male	Latino
Ptp 10	20	Female	Nicaraguan/Haitian
Ptp 11	25	Female	African-American
Ptp 12	26	Male	Mexican-American
Ptp 13	18	Female	Latino
Ptp 14	23	Female	Latina
Ptp 15	19	Male	Latino
Ptp 16	21	Female	Latino
Ptp 17	19	Male	African American
Ptp 18	23	Male	Mexican
Ptp 19	22	Male	Latino
Ptp 20	22	Female	Mexican/Black
Ptp 21	24	Male	Mexican
Ptp 22	27	Male	Latino

Q4: Can you describe what you say to yourself after you make a mistake?

60% of the participants (n = 12) answered that while they may initially experience frustration, they generally engage in positive self-talk; this includes telling themselves to fix the mistake if possible, but otherwise just to try harder next time and treat the mistake as a learning opportunity: **Participant #1:** "I tell myself to be more cautious next time about my actions"; **Participant #2:** "I [think] to myself what I could have done better, by learning from my mistakes".

The remaining participants did not include positive self-talk in their responses. Instead, their 'self-talk' ranged from relatively neutral to minimal negative self-talk, and consisted of ruminating on the mistake, expressing anger at themselves, or just experiencing negative feelings: **Participant #5:** "normally I go over every situation in my mind so if I mess up I make up 4, 5, 6 different scenarios of how it could have gone better"; **Participant #9** — "I just think about what I should have done better"; **Participant #16:** "Oh my god what did I do, why did I do this."

Q5: Can you describe situations where you felt disappointed in yourself?

50% of the participants brought up issues related to school. 9 participants reported that dropping out of high

school was a major source of disappointment — with some tying their own disappointment in this to their parents' — and 5 of the participants gave their current school performances as examples of disappointment. Both participant #6 and #10 stated that the feelings of disappointment are present especially after knowing that their peers have graduated and are attending college.

A sub-theme amongst three male participants (Participants #3, #8, and #18) was the feelings of disappointment after having felt taken advantage of by their peers. Participant #3 reported that he felt "punked around" in school, which led him to develop a drinking problem at age 15 and ultimately drop out of school and lose contact with his family. Participant #18 was upset that he was tricked into giving someone tainted candy and then getting suspended: "What they did to me and what they had me do to someone else, because basically I was disappointed in myself." He added that he was disappointed for socializing with the "wrong group of people" and disregarding his single-mother's hopes of him not being a part of "those statistics of Latinos or Blacks" getting into trouble.

It is important to note as well that three participants found it difficult to identify a past situation in which they felt disappointed in themselves.

Q6: Do you see the challenges in your life different than your peers?

50% of the participants reported that while their peers may have different challenges, they are generally no different in intensity: **Participant #1**: "I guess all in all we have the same struggles"; **Participant #2**: "Unless they're homeless, or anything like that, but I think that everybody always has equal opportunity to do whatever they want to whether they have parents or not"; **Participant #22**: "I understand everyone is different. I struggle a lot but who doesn't." **Participant #4** referred to other girls explicitly: "I think girls my age have the same challenges just in different styles." For **Participant #14**, stating her challenges were no greater than others meant blaming herself for her own difficulties: "[My challenges aren't different] because those challenges I put on myself. Because I could have the easy life, but I decided to go otherwise."

9 participants stated that their own challenges were greater. Of these, most referred to challenges related to external circumstances: **Participant #12**: "I have many challenges that they haven't gone through…[which makes] it hard for me to overcome normal things like school and work." **Participant #13**: "it's just crazy how other people think they're going through a rough time but I'm like [my challenges go] way back"; **Participant #16**: "I have kids so it's really hard for me to get myself to do what I want to do sometimes…. [My friends] have help or they have money for babysitters and I don't." Although Participant #3 was reluctant to compare himself, he stated: "I see myself as a person that has been through too much. I lived on the streets for four years or something. And people my age, I don't know how they have it with family and support and what not, some people take that for granted." Participants #5, #8 and #14 blamed themselves for their challenges. **Participant #5** stated: "Everyone else has an easier time getting over anything they do…. I can't overcome any issue or any problem."

Q7: Describe how you see yourself in comparison with your peers.

50% of the participants reported seeing themselves differently than that of their peers. 6 of the participants reported positive differences, 4 of whom saw themselves as more mature and motivated than their peers: **Participant #6**: "There are some students that are my age that started working and they leave school they don't stop they don't think to themselves that their future, it's their future, and then later on they're going to regret it because they won't have their diploma"; **Participant #8**: "in my head there is a huge line of people that will do something stupid and will act stupid and even when they try to act higher than you they will always put themselves lower." Participant #18 was reluctant to compare himself to others, however disclosed that he sees

himself as more authentic: "it seems that everyone is focused on what is in and out instead of focusing on what's really important in life. That's why I don't interact with people. I could if I wanted to, but I want to have conversations that are meaningful instead of materialistic or things I am not passionate about."

Of the 50% of the participants who saw themselves as different slightly less than half (n = 5) of the participants either put themselves down or viewed themselves as worse when compared to their peers: **Participant #3**: "I used to see myself as a leader as a person in a positive way. Depression hit me and that's when everything went out of my way and I didn't care anymore." Participant #5 reported that he sees himself as less arrogant and stubborn than others, but that thinks he does not have enough confidence: "I don't put myself on the highest peak I actually view myself lower than everyone else...which is personally a strength and a weakness in my opinion. The reason I feel it's a strength is because I don't think I am better than everyone else I always take people's opinion and see how the scenario can end up but it's a downfall because I don't take charge or have confidence in myself and I don't trust myself so it creates an issue in every part of my life." Participant #10 noted that she blames herself for being lazy and dropping out of school: "I just see myself being bad. Everybody works at the house or goes to school I dropped out for a complete year I would just stay home and just sleep".

Q8: Can you tell me about a time where you found it hard to forgive yourself?

45% of the participants gave examples of wronging or disappointing others, and 8 of these referred explicitly to wronging their parents or other members of their family: **Participant #2**: "I used to be hard on [my dad]. Instead of treating him like a father, I treated him like a friend, not really listening to what he said"; **Participant #4**: "when I disrespect or I am mean to my mom"; **Participant #10**: "When my uncle passed away he wanted to see me for the last time but I didn't want to see him"; **Participant #11**: "I had did something to my mom, and I still don't forgive myself for it."

3 male participants (#3, 17, and 22) gave experiences of going to jail as their examples: **Participant #3**: "I seen the person I hurt, two days after I got out of juvenile hall, it took me 2 years to ask for forgiveness"; **Participant #17**: "when I went to jail, how can I forgive myself to get put in that predicament"; **Participant #22**: "It could have been another alternative, like I could have just let it go. But that damaged my record. It is difficult getting a job because it comes up."

Although **Participant #18** could not give an example, he went into detail about why forgiveness was hard for him: "Because I tell others I can't forgive and forget you, I would be a hypocrite if I am forgiving myself" and "I've been through enough as an individual to a point where I carried a lot of anger within me…. That's why I can't give you an actual time where I forgave myself, because of all the anger I held in with all the years. I think that as it builds up, you can't feel anything else."

Finally, 8 of the 12 participants that answered also felt compelled to mention that they had either forgiven themselves, or were working to right whatever wrong they felt they had committed (although other participants may have felt the same without mentioning this): **Participant #3**: "It took me 2 years to ask for forgiveness. I felt better for myself"; **Participant #4**: "I thought about it and…I never did something like that again"; **Participant #11**: "I will make things better." **Participant #16**: "It took me years to forgive myself but I did"; **Participant #18**: "In life it's all about finding yourself, and that is what I am trying to do"; **Participant #22**: "I look at things differently now. I am still learning."

Q9: Can you describe how you feel after overcoming a challenging situation?

86% of the participants expressed positive feelings, while 2 participants either expressed negative feelings or were unsure of their feelings. For those who expressed positive feelings, 9 gave academic performance-related

examples when talking about overcoming challenges: **Participant #11**: "My first A's and B's"; **Participant #12**: "like doing good on a test a school test."

The positive feelings that were expressed by the participants included feelings of happiness, increase in confidence, and being proud of self. **Participant #3** sought group therapy to overcome challenges: "I feel stronger; mentally I have the courage of knowing to myself that hey I'm not the only one doing this there are other people with me too." **Participant #3** also discussed how he overcomes the challenge of not being with his daughters: "Like when I'm home alone in bed it hits me. I have two little daughters. And I can't see them for the fact that I and the mom had a situation happen. It's hard to overcome those days. I go out walk around I try to not think about. That's what helps me, either that or those classes." **Participant #6** compared herself to less academically focused peers: "I feel good because I am doing something good for myself then I see other people they're in the streets tagging it's like come on, it's our world you live in, you are doing all these things to our walls". **Participant #11, #12, and #18** reported experiencing positive feelings after overcoming challenges in their academics. **Participant #22** expressed a desire to achieve more: "If whatever I do is difficult I see to it that I accomplish it I tell myself all the way or no way. I won't give up until it breaks me"; **Participant #5** on the other hand, expressed feelings of shame after dropping out of school and how self-judgment obscures positive feelings: "I don't really overcome anything to be honest I think I may have done it once but it felt good for a brief second and then somewhere some negativity just comes up in my mind."

5. Common Themes

After analyzing the content, researchers determined that participants' responses were generally high in self-compassion, with most telling themselves that making mistakes were "okay" and "a part of life" and just "to be more cautious… next time." Furthermore, most students who provided examples of actions that were hard to forgive themselves for were able to either move past the incident (e.g., *"it took me years to forgive myself but I did"*) or otherwise see a way forward in their lives (e.g., *"I look at things differently now. I am still learning"*).

Another theme that emerged was that the majority of the interviewees reported negative feelings toward themselves in relation to low academic performances and especially dropping out of school, and likewise many associated overcoming challenges with improvements in academic performance. Additionally, researchers saw a trend regarding the impact of family relations on self-compassion; results indicated that participants were less able to be kind to themselves when they felt they had disappointed or hurt their parents (or sometimes other family members). Participants generally identified school performance issues when sharing times where they disappointed themselves, and largely brought up interpersonal issues — especially related to disappointing and hurting their parents — when providing examples for times when it was hard to forgive themselves. There was also some overlap between these two themes, with students being affected by their parents' disappointment in their school performance.

When comparing the challenges in their lives with those of their peers, half of the participants reported that their challenges were equal to those of their peers; while the other half felt that their own challenges were significantly greater. However, when comparing *themselves* to their peers, only around a quarter of participants saw themselves as average, and the remaining responses were split between feelings of superiority and inferiority. It is also significant to note that for both of these questions, despite the fact that most participants were reminded that in this case "peers" meant anyone else their age, 10 respondents specifically compared themselves with

people they knew, usually other classmates or friends outside of school (e.g., participants saw themselves as more mature than their old friends, who were still "out here in the streets").

Finally, throughout the interviews researchers learned significant environmental and psycho-sociological information about the participants; four male participants reported having experience with the criminal justice system (jail, juvenile hall, and probation); four participants mentioned that they had children; and one participant stated that he had been homeless ("living on the streets"). Apart from the men who discussed criminal justice issues, the only other gender related trend was that three male participants listed feeling taken advantage of by their peers (e.g., "punked around" at school) as situations that caused them to feel disappointment in themselves. Researchers noticed no differences in responses with regards to age and ethnicity.
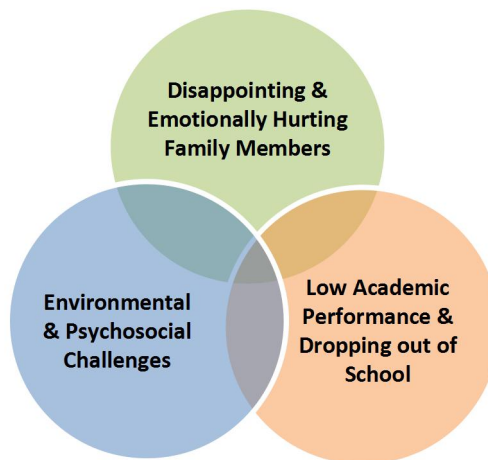

Figure 1   Common Themes

6. Discussion

Utilizing interview questions rather than Neff's (2003) self-compassion scale, researchers determined that responses were consistent with high levels of the self-kindness component of self-compassion. This is demonstrated by the fact that roughly 60% of the participants reported engaging in positive self-talk after making mistakes (e.g. "*After I make a mistake, I say to myself...that it's okay and that next time I should think twice before doing something*"), and two-thirds of respondents to the question regarding actions that were hard to forgive themselves for included that they were able to move on from these experiences. Even with the somewhat high levels of self-kindness in participants, the issues they judged themselves most harshly for — namely poor school performance, dropping out of school and disappointing/emotionally hurting family members — are nonetheless telling of the issues that cause them to struggle with self-kindness. This insight is essential because it illustrates potentially different reasons for low self-compassion felt by the participants' white counterparts; in one study Caucasian students had only identified family functioning, "*body image, and fitting in*" as contributors to low self-compassion (Neff & McGehee, 2010). As such, in order to successfully raise self-kindness levels in this group, a self-compassion training intervention would need to address these sources of self-judgment.

With regard to dropping out and other academic challenges specifically, researchers recommend that this intervention include a dialogue and education component regarding the external forces that may have contributed to participants' school challenges (i.e., which ultimately led to them dropping out). Although researchers did not seek to learn the reasons why participants dropped out of their original high schools, Corry, Dardick, and Stella

(2016) argue that the greater drop-out rates for Latino and African-American students are often due to socioeconomic factors such as low-income households. By helping students of color understand how the external factors of institutional racism, unjust socioeconomic factors, and other forms of discrimination and oppression may have contributed to their academic difficulties, they would likely engage in more self-kindness for their failures and not internalize the experiences, knowing that they may have more obstacles than those attending schools in more affluent areas. Of course, these students may be very aware of these issues, so providers of the intervention — especially if they are white identified — are advised to avoid taking on the role as "experts", but rather to engage in a dialogue, in which students are encouraged to re-examine their negative self-judgments in light of both the data presented as well as their own extracurricular struggles.

Although 50% of the participants reported viewing the struggles they face as similar to those of their peers, this does not necessarily indicate high levels of common humanity, the second component of Neff's (2003) self-compassion that concerns knowing that one is not alone in their struggles. This is because while some participants' responses clearly expressed this concept; "*I have the courage of knowing to myself that hey I'm not the only one doing this*"; other statements, such as "*everybody always has equal opportunity to do whatever they want to whether they have parents or not*", may point to an unhelpful belief that one's difficulties attaining the same material success as other groups (i.e., their white counterparts) are due entirely to personal failings. Such a belief may have the opposite effect of making individuals feel more isolated in their struggles, since they may feel that something is wrong with them — or, in the case of internalized racism — their race.

In comparing their challenges with others their age, researchers were surprised that no one referenced white privilege (most comparisons were made with those participants knew), though this may be due to the fact that the researchers were white. Still, it is telling that the one reference made to race was a negative one, where the participant in question felt disappointed in himself for getting into fights at school, despite his mother's urging that he not conform to the "*statistics of Latinos and Blacks*". In this way, researchers suggest that attempts to raise levels of common humanity in this group reflect the complexity of commonality by encouraging students to both see that others are struggling like they are without the potentially harmful belief that "everyone's challenges are the same".

Finally, although only four male participants mentioned their experiences with the criminal justice system (three referencing the experience as inducing intense negative self-judgment) researchers believe that such experiences might be particularly relevant to self-compassion training for male students of color. This is because as compared to white students of the same age, students and young adults of color generally — but especially males — are more frequently incarcerated for the same offenses (Lee, Guilamo-Ramos, Muñoz-Laboy, Lotz, & Bornheimer, 2016; Marrast et al., 2016, Neal & Rick, 2014).

7. Limitations

Although the goals of the research were met, there were a few limitations that the researchers came across. Given that the population being studied was students of color, the participants may have been reluctant to share their experiences due to the fact that the interviewers were two white identified males who may have been unfamiliar with their struggles. Furthermore, the participants may have avoided comparing themselves to white students as a result of the participants trying not to offend the researchers, although this may also have to do with the wording of the comparison questions; these asked participants to compare themselves to "peers", and although

researchers generally told participants that for interview purposes "peers" meant anyone their age, the word is largely associated with the words "friends" and "classmates". An additional limitation was that some participants may have not genuinely cared about the study, but rather only participated in hopes of winning a Gift Card or as an opportunity to skip class. There is also the chance that the male participants may not have been completely honest with their emotions, as they may have felt the need to abide by hegemonic masculinity and exude strength by hiding weakness. The participants may also have been unwilling to share experiences knowing that the researchers were of the social work profession, as one of the participants asked if the researchers were going to use the information to exploit him. Although the interview questions sought to explore the barriers to self-compassion faced by emerging adult students of color, the use of qualitative data — rather than Neff's self-compassion scale — makes comparing data with other self-compassion studies more difficult, especially since the questions focused primarily on the "self-kindness" and "common humanity" aspects, and neglected the "mindfulness" component of the scale.

8. Conclusion

Due to limited research regarding the usage of self-compassion in emerging adult students of color, this study sought to explore the aptness of self-compassion training as an early prevention and intervention for addressing causes of low-self compassion that may be unique to this group, including discrimination and institutional racism. The study revealed that students' greatest sources of self-judgment were poor school performance, dropping out of school, and disappointing and emotionally hurting family members; however, researchers found that participants' responses were generally high in the self-kindness component of self-compassion, and that after such experiences most were able to move forward in their lives. The researchers recommend the use of Neff's Self-compassion scale when assessing this often marginalized group of people to further clarify self-compassion levels. Researchers also recommend further study that more directly examines the relationship between discrimination, harassment, racialization, tokenization and low self-compassion. Finally, although only a few male participants brought up experiences with the criminal justice system as causes of intense self-judgment, researchers suspect that this may be a common source of low self-compassion for this population, given the higher incarceration rates of young male youth/emerging adults of color.

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