

# Psychological Well-being Among Survivors of College Sexual Assaults

Emily Manis and Alejandro Leguizamo, PhD

## Introduction

❖ Sexual assault, which affects approximately one in three women and one in six men, can have significant and long-lasting effects on the wellbeing of survivors (Smith et al. 2017).

❖ There are significant gender differences in well-being for the general population, and well as for survivors of sexual violence. Women are more likely to experience strong emotions, both negative and positive, causing them to report higher rates of depression and higher rates of happiness than men (Fujita et al., 1991).

## The Current Study

❖ In the present study we sought to explore gender differences in well-being of survivors of college sexual assault

❖ Based on the literature, we hypothesized that women would receive higher means scores in psychological well-being than men in this sample.

## Method

### Participants

❖ Participants included 400 community members from the U.S. (256 women and 144 men) who experienced some form of sexual assault while they were in college. Most of the participants were White (77.8%) and the average age of participants was 30.09 years old ( $SE = .451$ ). The project was approved by RWU's Human Subjects Review Board.

### Materials

❖ Participants completed a questionnaire in which they were asked a variety of demographic and historical information. In addition, they were asked detailed questions about the college(s) they attended, the assault(s) they experienced at the time, and the reasons behind their decision to report the assault(s) to their families and/or institution. Ryff Psychological Scales of Well-being (Ryff, 1995).

### Procedure

❖ Participants were recruited and compensated through Amazon's Mechanical Turk service. Participants were presented initially with a consent form in which the purpose of the study and risks associated with participation (minimal) were described. Participation took place via an online survey software (Qualtrics).

## Results

Ryff Scale	Women		Men		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Autonomy	57.895	12.195	54.882	9.428	2.752	0.003	0.28
Env Mastery	55.430	14.052	54.625	8.802	0.703	0.241	0.07
Personal Growth	62.160	12.232	57.299	10.113	4.272	< .001	0.43
Positive Relations	57.156	14.053	54.813	10.635	1.878	0.031	0.19
Purpose in Life	57.254	14.062	54.153	9.769	2.589	0.005	0.26
Self-Acceptance	54.023	15.673	52.826	10.669	0.905	0.183	0.09
Total	343.918	71.593	328.597	48.929	2.531	0.006	0.25

## Results

❖ Women received significantly higher mean scores than men on the overall Ryff measure ( $m = 343.92$  vs.  $m = 328.60$ ),  $t(383.18) = 2.53$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $d = .25$ , small.

❖ Women received significantly higher scores than men on the Autonomy Scale,  $t(360) = 2.752$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $d = .07$ , small.

❖ Women received significantly higher scores than men on the Personal Growth Scale,  $t(344.40) = 4.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .43$ , medium.

❖ Women received significantly higher mean scores than men on the Positive Relations Scale,  $t(364.60) = 1.88$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $d = .19$ , small.

❖ Women received significantly higher mean scores than men on the Purpose in Life Scale,  $t(380.64) = 2.59$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $d = .26$ , small.

❖ However, there were no significant gender differences on the Environmental Scale,  $t(393.45) = 0.70$ ,  $p = .241$  or the Self-Acceptance Scale,  $t(383.77) = .905$ ,  $p = .183$ .

## Discussion

As hypothesized, women's scores on overall well-being were significantly higher than those of men. This finding is consistent with those reported by Fujita et al. (1991). With respect the various Ryff scales, our findings suggest that women who experienced sexual assault(s) in college subsequently fair better than men with similar experiences with respect to independence, self-regulation, have clearer goals and sense of direction in their lives and in the way they see their development and potential. However, it is unclear whether these differences are based on their sexual victimization, resulting experiences, or events based on those experiences between their time in college and the current study. Moreover, they could be based on other factors as well. Future research should explore specific potential pathways that may contribute to psychological well-being in this population.