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Narratives of young women athletes' experiences of emotional pain and self-compassion

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Self-compassion is a healthy way of relating to the self when experiencing emotional pain, personal failure and difficult life experiences. However, there is limited research to date in the area of self-compassion and sport even though recent investigation shows it might act as a potential buffer to painful emotions for athletes. The purpose of this study was to explore and present narratives of six young women athletes (15–24 years) from a variety of sports about their experiences of emotional pain and self-compassion. Each woman took part in two individual semi-structured interviews, one of which involved reflexive photography. They were asked to reflect on a difficult experience with a personal failure in sport, followed by discussions around the potential role of self-compassion in their experiences. The interviews, combined with reflexive photography, helped build rich narratives organised around the following themes: (1) Broken bodies, wilted spirits, (2) why couldn't it have been someone else? (3) I should have, I could have, I would have and (4) fall down seven, stand up eight. Their narratives also suggested that while self-compassion can potentially be beneficial for athletes if developed and learned properly, concerns were expressed that being too self-compassionate may lead to mediocrity. Further research is needed on young women athletes' difficult emotional experiences in sport, and more specifically on the role that self-compassion plays as both a potential facilitator and barrier to emotional health and performance success in sport.

Keywords: self-concept; sport; qualitative; coping; emotion

Introduction

Sport can offer a means for women to challenge themselves, gain a sense of identity, learn about their physical capabilities and develop the skills, abilities and relationships that are needed to increase overall health and well-being (Krane *et al.* 2001, Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity 2003). Positive sport experiences can also help women build self-confidence and self-respect, as well as foster a sense of self-sufficiency and independence (Krane *et al.* 2004, George 2005, Mosewich *et al.* 2009). However, despite the benefits of sport participation, there are physical, mental, and emotional challenges that

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young women athletes often encounter, including appearance- and performance-based evaluations made by the self and others (Mosewich *et al.* 2009, *in press*). Hence, young women might benefit from a kind and understanding self-related resource to deal with their difficult sport experiences.

One such resource is self-compassion, which is an adaptive and kind way to relate to the self that offers warmth and kindness instead of positive or negative self-judgments (Neff 2003a, Neff and McGehee 2010). As outlined by Kristin Neff (2003a), self-compassion involves three elements: *self-kindness* entails being warm and understanding towards oneself during times of suffering or when feeling inadequate; *common humanity* in which one recognises that being imperfect, making mistakes and encountering life difficulties are part of the shared human experience; and *mindfulness*, which requires taking a non-judgmental, balanced approach to one's thoughts and feelings in order to avoid over-identifying with them or suppressing them. In contrast to self-esteem, having self-compassion does not require favourable self-evaluations in order to feel positively about oneself (Leary *et al.* 2007, Neff *et al.* 2007, Neff and Vonk 2009). In addition, self-compassion might be most useful when viewed as a resource that people can develop to facilitate mental well-being, acting as a buffer against reactions from negative life events such as anxiety, embarrassment and depression (Neff *et al.* 2007).

Crucial to our research, self-compassion has been advocated as a resource that is particularly relevant during times of suffering or failure to deal with life's challenges and difficulties (Neff 2003a, 2003b). Failure is the inability, for whatever reason, to satisfy personal and/or others' standards of goal-related performances. Failure can lead to negative consequences for young athletes such as guilt and shame, diminished sense of self and achievement, loss of motivation as well as negative evaluations by the self and others (Lazarus 2000, Sagar *et al.* 2007). Specific negative thoughts stemming from failure include those related to not accomplishing goals, opportunities wasted, disappointing oneself and others, and doubting one's abilities (Conroy *et al.* 2001). As athletes constantly try to achieve challenging goals and reach high standards, failure might more often be the rule, rather than the exception to the rule, in the pursuit of reaching challenging goals (Smith *et al.* 2006). Athletes have reported performing below the standards set by themselves and others as a prominent setback experience in sport that requires effective coping strategies (Mosewich *et al.* *in press*).

Research on self-compassion in sport is still in its infancy. Leary *et al.* (2007) found that self-compassion acted as a buffer against negative self-feelings when participants imagined distressing events, including a hypothetical sport-specific scenario focused on being responsible for a team loss in an athletic competition, albeit with a non-sport sample. With young women athletes as the specific focus, Mosewich *et al.* (2011) showed that self-compassion was negatively related to and explained unique variance beyond self-esteem on shame, objectified body consciousness, fear of failure and fear of negative evaluation. Subsequently, Mosewich *et al.* (2013, *in press*) discussed the relevance of self-compassion as a resource for managing emotionally difficult setbacks in sport (e.g. poor performance, injury and performance plateau) and developed a self-compassion intervention effective in increasing self-compassion and decreasing self-criticism, rumination and concern over mistakes for highly self-critical women athletes. In addition, Smith's (2013) narratives of men's disability spoke to the relevance of body self-compassion as a way to offset self-criticisms related to physical limitations and imperfections resulting from a spinal injury

through playing sport. Together, these findings suggest that self-compassion might act as a potential buffer to painful emotions for athletes, and that the development of self-compassion may be beneficial in cultivating positive sport experiences.

We hope to add to the self-compassion in sport literature by presenting narratives of young women athletes' experiences of emotional pain and self-compassion, which is important given the limited research to date specifically on self-compassion in sport. A narrative strategy of inquiry was considered particularly appropriate as it provides a methodological avenue for illuminating meaning in the lived stories of individuals, and it allows for integration of alternative forms of story-based material (Smith and Sparkes 2009, Creswell 2014). Smith and Sparkes (2009) defined a narrative as a complex, constructed form of making sense of ourselves and the world around us by connecting events over time to stories; in addition, narratives help researchers analyse the meanings people attach to experiences through the stories they tell. Narrative inquiry is a particularly useful methodology in sport and exercise psychology as it focuses on how constructs arise through a storied process of social interaction (Smith and Sparkes 2009).

It is also important to note that while self-compassion was a focus of our research, it seemed necessarily linked with first understanding the context of young women athletes' experiences of emotional pain. Thus, our multi-phase approach, in which we explored the context of the athletes' experiences of emotional pain associated with failure followed by discussion on the role of self-compassion in those experiences, was useful given the paucity of qualitative research to date on athletes' experiences of self-compassion. For clarity, in the writing of this manuscript 'I' will be used to represent my own assumptions and experiences as first author and 'we' will be used when the teams' perspective is represented.

Method

Participants

Six young women participated in our research following signed informed consent. They were involved in elite sport at the national/international level and represented a range of sports including athletics, basketball, cross-country running, figure skating, rugby and wrestling. A summary description of each participant and her failure experience, which I created from the interviews, is presented in Table 1.

Two types of sampling methods were employed. Purposeful sampling, in which a researcher actively selects participants who can best answer the research questions (Marshall 1996, Creswell 2013), and snowball sampling, which draws on referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Our main inclusion criteria was women athletes who had (a) participated in an individual or team competitive sport in the past year and (b) experienced emotional pain associated with failure in sport. We were aware that emotional pain associated with failure could take on different meanings to athletes, and would therefore be defined by the unique experiences for each individual athlete. As such, we were open to a wide range of failures in sport (e.g. not accomplishing goals, wasting an opportunity, doubting of abilities, loss of confidence and disappointing oneself and others; Conroy *et al.* 2001) that the athletes themselves identified as being emotionally difficult for them. Potential participants identified as having experienced emotional pain associated with failure via

Table 1. Summary descriptions of each participant and her failure experience.

Participant pseudonym	Summary description
Janelle	Basketball player who has a dream and will overcome anything to reach it Knee injury causing her nine months of rehabilitation and sitting out She is physically hurt and mentally weak 16 years old Let herself down
Lauren	Confidently she tops the charts in wrestling for young women Underestimates her opponent and loses city final match Loses all control of her emotions 17 years old Feels failure
Lexi	Rugby player who continues to find herself and her place in rugby Injured at women's national team tryout and has to sit out Easily influenced by the opinions of others 21 years old Failed in sport
Martha	Cross country and track and field athlete constantly pushing her physical boundaries Missed almost a complete track and field season with an injury Blamed others, even though she was responsible 21 years old She failed
Molly	Passionate figure skater trying to return back to a place where life makes sense Broken collar bone 12 days before the biggest competition of her life Doesn't believe that everything happens for a reason 16 years old Failed herself
Rachael	Female pole vault athlete breaking onto the international pole vault stage Puts everything on the line only to receive a silver medal Always comparing herself to other women 23 years old Has failed

my social or academic network were provided with study recruitment materials that included a message explaining the purpose, goals and potential benefits of the research study. Conversations with the athletes during the consent process confirmed that they met the study eligibility criteria.

Design and procedure

Following university ethics board approval, our study involved two phases across which the participants were asked to take part in a one-on-one semi-structured interview (Phase I), take photographs and record their thoughts related to the photographs (Phase II) and take part in a reflexive photography one-on-one interview (Phase II). Prior to starting the first interview, each participant's signed consent form was verbally reviewed and a pseudonym was selected by the athlete to ensure confidentiality. Participants also chose the dates and times for the interviews. Phase

I interviews ($M_{\text{length}} = 66$ min) tended to be longer than those in Phase II ($M_{\text{length}} = 51$ min) as a result of the need for rapport building and gathering information on each athlete's sporting background. Pilot testing of the interview guides was conducted with a female athlete and a graduate student familiar with qualitative research methods to ensure the questions asked were appropriate and worded effectively. I, as first author, conducted the interviews with each of the athletes in a university laboratory housing dedicated interview rooms, with only her and I present.

Phase I

As soon as I thought that we had adequate rapport in each one-on-one interview, facilitated by a sharing of my own sport experiences and obtaining background information on each of the athletes' sport participation (e.g. *When did your interest in sports first begin? How many years and what level did you play?*), questions were then directed at the young women athletes' personal experiences of emotional pain associated with failure. Following questions focused on identifying situations that the athletes thought they might experience failure in their sports (e.g. *What kinds of challenges or events arise in your sport that you would describe as a failure?*), each athlete was asked to describe, in depth, a specific experience in which she perceived that she had failed. Follow-up probes were directed primarily at the emotional experience of the failure (e.g. *What about this specific experience makes you feel like you have failed or let yourself down?*). At the end of each Phase I interview, the process of Phase II was explained and a photo release form (needed for Phase II) was provided to each participant.

Phase II

Phase II included a reflexive photography method in which the athletes were asked to take photographs to express their experiences of emotional pain associated with failure that were discussed in Phase I. Reflexive photography enables an opportunity for a researcher to see the world through the participant's eyes (Phoenix 2010). Morrow (2001) stated that research is often a matter of 'finding the right question' (p. 266), and using photographs as a way to produce the right question is often useful. Participants were asked to take as many photographs as needed to best represent their experiences discussed in Phase I. There was no maximum or minimum requirement for the number of photographs that could be taken; however, they were instructed that third-party consent would be required from anyone appearing in a photograph and that photographs including people under the age of 18 would not be published.

Each participant contacted me via email or phone when they captured what they wanted in their photographs and to set up the Phase II interview, which took place approximately 3–4 weeks ($M = 27.5$ days) following Phase I. The Phase II interview began with each participant providing feedback on the photography component (e.g. whether they found it beneficial, helpful, challenging, etc.) and then proceeded with the athlete presenting her photographs in whichever order she chose. As each image was presented, she was asked to explain and interpret the photograph (e.g. *What made you decide to take this picture? How does this picture represent your experiences of emotional pain?*); a framework guided by Phoenix's (2010) autophotography research with mature bodybuilders. This stage of the interview was

crucial in order to clarify the content (i.e. what was in the photographs), the process (i.e. how the photographs were taken) and the meaning (i.e. why were the photographs taken) of the photographs.

Once the participants had discussed their photographs, they were asked about the role of self-compassion in their experiences. Because they might not be familiar with the concept of self-compassion, a three-minute self-compassion video by Neff was shown to each of the women in order to help clarify the construct (see www.self-compassion.org). Questions were then focused specifically on the potential role of self-compassion in the participants' emotional experiences associated with failure in sport (e.g. *Based on our previous discussions, do you think that you acted self-compassionately during your difficult time? Do you typically think that you act self-compassionately when faced with negative experiences in sport?*).

After completion of each study phase, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and transcripts were sent to each respective participant for review. Upon completion, I met with each participant to collect a signed transcript release form. Copies of the full interview guides are available upon request from the corresponding author.

Data analysis

To interpret the narratives, we employed a holistic-content mode of analysis to understand the themes in relation to one another as a dynamic whole (Lieblich *et al.* 1998). More specifically, our interest was to understand the athletes' experiences of self-compassion in the context of the emotional pain narrative in its entirety. As such, this analytic approach was also consistent with our methodological decision to first explore the context of emotional pain (Phase I) followed by discussions focused on self-compassion (Phase II). Given that photographs in and of themselves do not necessarily provide information or insight, they were combined with the interviews in order for their value to become significant (Collier and Collier 1986). Combining the textual and visual data for each participant into one cohesive set of narrative data resulted in six complete but separate narratives. This strategy allowed for a close exploration of the narratives in order to develop understanding and meaning for each of the individual stories.

Following Creswell's (2014) outline for qualitative data analysis, the transcriptions were read and re-read in an attempt to get a sense of how they were structured and to become familiar with the material. A coding process then began, with the textual and visual data broken down into broad categories by means of a colour-coding scheme. Once the coding process was complete, common themes were identified. A more complex analysis followed that involved connecting the themes into storylines. By means of the descriptions the participants provided, the photographs were interpreted alongside the spoken text. The results were written in narrative form, with me taking the position as primary storyteller of the young women athlete's experiences of emotional pain and self-compassion.

Acknowledging that I am closely engaged to the research process and participants, it is therefore important to share some of my reflexive writing with the reader to improve credibility of the research (Tong *et al.* 2007):

This story isn't about me. I am a twenty-seven-year-old woman ex-athlete. I have participated in competitive sports for as long as I can remember, and I have formed my identity and developed my passion within the sport of basketball. Basketball has taken me to

several different places around the world, taught me many valuable lessons, created life-long relationships, gave me a sense of purpose, and has played a major role in shaping the person I am today. It has also brought me two season-ending injuries, several personal goals not met, lost championships, performance anxiety, and too many tear-filled moments to count. As an athlete I have failed more times than I have succeeded.

I have had a chance to look back and reflect on my previous athletic career and have realised that I have been very hard on myself ... I had to be ... or so I thought. Like many athletes, I learned at a young age that failure is part of sport and it will always be there. My failures have brought a lot of emotional pain into my life. Some pains were instant, others lingered, and some are still present with me today. It never occurred to me that the very same compassion I showed for my fellow teammates and coaches could be turned inward to help me deal with the emotional pain that has been weighing me down. I can't help but wonder what my previous athletic career would have been like if I replaced self-criticism with self-compassion.

Through the lived experiences of six other women athletes, I was able to find pieces of myself in all of their voices. I was drawn into their difficult experiences through both the interviews and photographs, which allowed us the opportunity to be creative and to openly share experiences with one another in a mutual search for greater understanding. As the athletes learned that I was, at one time, an elite athlete with moments of failure just like them, they became more comfortable telling me about the difficult times they had in their sports. The process allowed me to be open and honest; as well as to connect with the athletes' painful emotions and the role they played in the young women's experiences.

Following each of the interviews I tried to adopt the qualitative posture of 'indwelling', meaning 'to live within ... understanding the person's point of view from an empathetic rather than sympathetic position' (Maykut and Morehouse 1994, p. 25). I did this by listening to the audio-recordings several times, transcribing the interviews and reading through the transcripts, making notes along the way. I am aware that my personal experiences and biases can influence the research process, as detailed in my research journal as part of the reflexive process. However, throughout this process, rather than ignore the possibility that these same experiences and bias could influence the research process, I embraced a perspective recognising that different researchers can come up with different meanings from the same text depending on their perspectives and questions posed, and that a 'qualitative researcher's interpretive process often draws on existing knowledge, personal history, experience, creativity, and intuition' (Haverkamp 2005, p. 147). Each athlete contributed a voice and took me on a different journey through her personal struggle with failure in sport and the difficult emotions that were felt. What follows are the narratives of six young female athletes who, like me, have experienced personal failure in sport.

Results

The narratives of athletes' experiences of emotional pain is organised around four themes: (1) broken bodies, wilted spirits, (2) why couldn't it have been someone else?, (3) I should have, I could have, I would have and (4) fall down seven, stand up eight. Following the themes, the role of self-compassion in the women's failure experiences is presented.

Broken bodies, wilted spirits

Four of the six women discussed a time of personal failure due to being injured. Experiencing the struggle of physical and mental brokenness caused by an injury is something many athletes can relate to, as illustrated in Lexi's story:

Lexi is a shy young rugby player who got invited to try out for the National team. She arrived at the week-long training camp. Not only was she the youngest player at the camp, but she also knew very few of the other women trying out. Day 1 was fitness testing, something that was tough for Lexi; but she tested well, which allowed her to "get her feet under herself". She started to feel like she belonged there and that she could actually compete with the other women. However, she began to feel lost and out of place the second day. They were practicing unfamiliar plays that she had never seen or done previously. She spent the rest of her evenings at the camp in her dorm room reviewing the huge book of plays. She felt a strong sense of being overwhelmed, as represented in her photograph of rushing water. It continued to get worse from there. On the third day, Lexi was running in a drill and about to pass the ball when she got hit from behind. This caused her to fall hard onto her knee. Her knee had been "blown up", but she continued to play on it in hopes of not drawing attention to herself in a negative way. Eventually, the pain was too much.

The next day Lexi tried to hide that she was hurt again. She didn't want anyone to think she was weak. But as she was warming up for the morning session, she was pulled from the practice. She has never had a serious injury before, and this was the first time she had something take her out of her sport. Deep down she knew something was wrong with her knee and that she shouldn't be playing on it. But having someone tell her that she couldn't continue was too much to swallow. The point of participating in the camp was to show her talent. Being sent to the sidelines took away her ability to prove herself and show all of her hard work. She was there to play. But she wasn't playing.

Injury showed signs of weakness to Lexi. She expected herself to perform when asked or when the sport demanded it of her. To physically show that she couldn't do it meant she no longer had the ability to do what she wanted to. She was upset, frustrated, and disappointed with herself. The emotions seemed overwhelming. She couldn't change what had happened and was disappointed that she let her body get the best of her. She expected herself to just push through it. But she couldn't.

Each of the women suffered through different physical injuries, but all of them shared in the painful emotions that followed. They talked about how their injuries lead them on a journey of brokenness.

There wasn't any happiness. There was only crying, because I couldn't do what I wanted to do. And there was realisation that that [figure skating] is all I wanted to do. All my hard work that never got to be proven. (Molly)

Why couldn't it have been someone else?

Throughout each woman's struggle with failure, thoughts of 'why me' would continually come in and out of their experiences, each time creating strong feelings of disconnection from other people. During these times of detachment the women often felt alone in their personal suffering. For some, these feelings of isolation were relatively brief. For others, like Molly, these times were frequent and devastating.

Molly still cannot find a reason as to why she broke her collar bone less than two weeks before her big figure skating competition. Her coach would always tell her that everything happens for a reason. In her eyes, everything doesn't happen for a reason. She felt like she was betrayed by fate. Feeling bad for herself was not uncommon and quite debilitating. She still has no closure from her injury; a continuous nightmare that she cannot wake up from.

Subsequently, sitting on the sideline, watching a practice or trying to fall asleep at night were particularly challenging for the athletes. It was a vicious cycle for some of the women. They wanted to be alone with their failures; but when they were alone they felt sad and upset.

Rachael, while having lots of support from family and friends, talked about not wanting to express her personal suffering to others. She didn't think others would understand, or she simply didn't want to be a "bummer" to be around. Her suffering went undetected by the outside world. But on the inside, she was battling sadness.

All of the women struggled to accept what had happened to them. For many of the women, experiences with personal failure and painful emotions were rare. This may be why they found failure difficult to accept.

Even though she hasn't had much failure in her career, Lauren always wonders why she reacted the way she did after losing a wrestling match. She questions why it happened to her.

After working so hard, and having such passion for their sport, the women often expressed not understanding why awful things were happening to them. They asked questions of themselves, such as: Why were they the ones suffering? How come it had to happen to them? What did they do to deserve this? They also described struggling to move forward, often feeling overwhelmed by their emotions and negative thoughts.

I should have ... I could have ... I would have ...

All of the athletes described feeling like they had personally let themselves down. Although some of the outcomes were out of their control, they thought they should have, or at least could have, done something differently.

Lauren steps onto the wrestling match at city finals as a favourite to win. The fans know it. Her coaches know it. She knows it. Prior to this, she could have been found in the hallway talking with friends; completely unfocused on the task to come. Her typical pre-competition routine consists of taking 30 min by herself listening to music and getting into her zone. Today that is not the case. The gym is packed. All eyes are on her. Overconfident, she starts the match and finds herself in the third round down one point with two seconds left. She loses the match, and her eyes begin to fill up with tears. In this moment, all she feels is sadness. Before stepping off the wrestling mat she frantically tries to search for any excuse for her loss. She begins questioning the referee's decisions, in hopes that he might give her extra points. This is not the case. Her sadness quickly changes to anger as she storms off the wrestling mat refusing to shake hands with anyone in her path, including the referee and her opponent's coaches. She simply grabs her bag and runs out of the gym.

Her emotions slowly start to spiral out of control. Lauren feels embarrassment in her actions. She does not recognise this person, and doesn't know how to stop. She knows she wasn't prepared for the match, and feels instant regret for skipping her pre-competition routine. Never feeling like this before, she is confused and lost. Possibly it is because she portrayed bad sportsmanship, letting her frustration show to everyone around her. Regardless, she feels like she let herself down. Lauren is not proud of the way she reacted when she lost the match. From the start her coaches have taught her that it is not about winning or losing, it is about what you do with your ability and how you feel. She knows she has failed. Like cracks in a sidewalk, represented in a photograph, Lauren's choices that day made her feel broken. Although she has lost matches before, this loss sticks out for her. She knows what she could have done and should have done. When the time came she simply didn't do it.

Like Lauren, the other athletes talked about how they should have been able to prevent their unwanted painful thoughts.

I wish I had a better mindset during this time in my career, and not been so caught up in the competitive nature. I should have thought about how I am as an athlete and trust my ability. I would have, and I could have done something different. (Rachael)

Many of their painful thoughts came from feelings of shame and personal blame they put on themselves. Sadness, frustration, disappointment, guilt, relief, regret, embarrassment and anger are amongst many of the painful emotions expressed by the athletes as being associated with their failures.

Fall down seven, stand up eight

The women's shared stories of failure ultimately evolved into stories of success. As experiences of personal struggle developed, the necessity of those struggles also came to light. The women each found a way to overcome and turn their difficult experiences around and use them as opportunities to learn and grow as athletes.

Martha didn't see much point in wallowing in her sorrow, and realised that staying mad at herself was going to get her nowhere fast. She used her frustrations as a motivating tool for working harder. This approach made her feel like she was acting positively on her situation and that might help her get better faster. After injuring her iliotibial band, Martha decided to not take the fact that she can run every day for granted. There are a lot of athletes who get injured, and now she knows the amount of painful, frustrating emotions that come with having an injury. When she was away from running, she missed it. She has learned a lot about herself during the injury process, and is now more aware of what her body needs to perform at her best. Martha used her difficult experience as motivation and this helped her get through the painful emotions. She never dreamt that recovering from her injury would take as long as it did, but she could always see a glimmer of hope at the end. That was what kept her going.

Many of the women described using their sporting goals and dreams as motivation to continue on and to never give up. They remained committed to the long journey of obstacles that failure presented to them.

Janelle continually tells herself she needs to keep going and persevere because the end result is going to be worth it. She writes the Japanese proverb "fall down seven and stand up eight" everywhere, as it is a constant reminder that everything is going to be okay.

Some of the women recognised that they needed to ‘move on’ from the difficulties they were experiencing, as reflected in a photograph of a stop sign taken by Lauren.

Although the stop sign represented a “stop in her career” due to her emotional pain associated with failure, the stop sign wasn’t the important feature for Lauren; rather, it was the open blue sky behind the stop sign. The clear sky represented everything that Lauren had to look forward to, and served as reminder that anything was possible once she got past seeing her failure as a barrier.

Self-compassion

Aspects of self-compassion were woven throughout the athletes’ narratives of emotional pain associated with failure. While common humanity, one component of self-compassion, is often viewed as the recognition that personal suffering and inadequacy is part of the shared human experience, it also involves recognising that external factors can play a role in one’s experiences, to be acknowledged in a non-judgmental manner rather than taken as personal failings. For example, once Janelle, Lexi and Martha accepted that their injuries were out of their control, they were more effectively able to overcome negative thoughts associated with questioning why it was happening to them. In addition, the sharing of their experiences of emotional pain with others often acted as a form of common humanity, helping them to recognise it as part of a larger human experience. It was when they felt isolated that they struggled most to move on from the failure experience.

Some of the women also reflected upon times in which they realised they were acting too harshly and self-critical towards themselves. Lauren, for example, recognised that being hard on herself for losing control of her emotions didn’t help anything. Only once she was able to take a step back from her emotional pain, an important aspect of mindfulness, and observe her negative thoughts and emotions with openness and kindness, was she able to put the event in perspective and refocus on the potential opportunities that lay ahead. Thoughts of self-comparison and comparisons to others were often discussed by the women, which typically only made them feel worse about themselves. Martha for example, forced to do her rehabilitation workouts on a stationary bike overlooking the track that her team was practicing on, constantly felt like she was being surpassed in performance by her teammates. As a result, she was very self-critical, always viewing herself in relation to those around her, which is reflected in the following comment, ‘I was always feeling like my teammates were getting so much better than me. They got to run and I didn’t. I was on a bike and getting out of shape’. However, once she got beyond the comparisons to others, she was able to reduce the harsh self-criticisms and treat herself with self-kindness, facilitating a motivation to work harder through the injury rehabilitation process.

Thus, not surprisingly, the women all attested to the relevance of self-compassion to sport, specifically its potential benefits for athletes, why it may be a barrier for some athletes and the role it had within their own experiences with failure. Although each woman talked about becoming aware and understanding of her struggles in sport, none considered herself to be self-compassionate. Alternatively, the women noted that for the most part they are extremely hard on themselves, primarily because they expect the best of themselves. However, Rachael for one said now that she is older she recognises self-compassion as something necessary for long-term success.

Through a lot of my experiences with failure I don't think I was compassionate enough with myself. I think I let it go to an extent, but I really didn't follow through with telling myself it was going to be okay. So for now I would say I'm not self-compassionate, but I am recognising and becoming aware that I need to be. (Rachael)

Rachael's recognition and awareness that she is overly self-critical and that self-compassion might offer an alternative is itself evidence of a mindful perspective of her situation and emotions.

Almost all of the women agreed that self-compassion is an important quality for athletes to have. Janelle summed up:

As athletes if you don't care about yourself you are not going to be able to care for other people on your team. If during a situation you are always negative towards yourself, then obviously that is not going to get you anywhere. For you to be loving and caring towards yourself is a big thing for a female athlete. Obviously we are really caring towards other people and loving towards other people. But I think that in order to do those things you need to love and care for yourself first. (Janelle)

Reasons as to why self-compassion may be helpful in sport included an ability to stop dwelling on the bad things and move on, instilling self-confidence and motivation and facilitating responses to emotional pain that do not include giving up. Conversations about the potential benefits of self-compassion for athletes often included discussions about the role of self-compassion in difficult sporting situations, such as failures and setbacks.

Some of the women described that the openness and acceptance required when being self-compassionate could help athletes get through a rough period in their careers, allowing them to journey through sport in a healthy and balanced manner. They often talked about how self-compassion was noticeably absent when experiencing the emotional pain associated with failure; replaced instead by the raw emotional pain and negative thoughts of the moment. Eventually though, as they began to reflect upon their suffering, they described how aspects of self-compassion began to emerge as they tried to find strategies to effectively deal with the emotional pain. Lexi and the other women participating in the study were given the opportunity to understand, reflect, learn and grow from their difficult experiences; and an understanding of self-compassion gained through the research process itself could impact their experience next time they face emotionally challenging experiences. As Lexi described:

I think that through all of this, like talking about everything and taking the pictures, I've become a lot more aware of it [her difficult experiences]. Aware of what I felt, what I didn't like about those feelings, and what I didn't like about those experiences. I know I never want my [sport] experiences to go like this again ... I know how I should handle them and not take them for granted.

Some of the athletes also commented on self-compassion needing to come from within. Lauren in particular noted that self-compassion would be 'a positive thing if athletes were able to rely on themselves; to believe within that everything would be okay'.

Although the women agreed that self-compassion has the potential to be beneficial for athletes when going through difficult emotional experiences, there were still moments of hesitation and uncertainty in an endorsement of self-compassion for

athletes. For example, Lexi suggested that self-compassion might not be for everyone in that it might act as a barrier to performance for some athletes. There was also apprehension expressed over the possibility of *too much* self-compassion, because it could overshadow the self-criticalness that they thought necessary to be an elite athlete. Moreover, some of the women thought that too much self-compassion might be linked with mediocrity, leading an athlete to accept being average in sport:

If you are too self-compassionate you are always going to be fine with good enough. You are never going to strive to be better, and for an elite athlete that shouldn't be okay. I need to be hard on myself, because if I'm not then I am just going to settle for mediocrity; which I personally don't want. Other people may feel like good enough is good with them, but I want to be above the average person. Obviously if I am too self-compassionate, I'm not going to ever achieve that above exceptional kind of thing. (Janelle)

Across all of the women's narratives, it was this seeming contradiction between the potential benefits of self-compassion and fears of being too self-compassionate that was the overarching theme of our discussions.

Discussion

We have presented narratives of six athletes' experiences of emotional pain and self-compassion in sport. Underlying our narrative strategy of inquiry is a social constructivism epistemological view that emphasises collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places and in social interaction (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Moreover, this philosophical interpretive lens assumes there is no social reality independent of us (Smith and Sparkes 2009). With these viewpoints in mind, the findings of our research attest to concerns that participation in sport can include emotional pain stemming from personal mistakes, failures or inadequacies. However, our findings also highlight young women athletes' resilience to learn and grow from those experiences, and of the role of self-compassion as a potential resource during emotionally difficult times.

Given that young athletes can experience a diminished sense of self and achievement, guilt, emotional costs, negative self and social evaluation, and a loss of motivation after experiencing failure in sport (Sagar *et al.* 2007), the choice of coping to manage emotional responses can play an important role (Lazarus 1991, Giacobbi and Weinberg 2000). Although challenging to experience, emotional pain actually appeared to facilitate positive change and the development of healthy well-being for the athletes in our study. This was especially apparent for the athletes suffering from an injury, supporting previous research in which athletes described injury recovery as an opportunity to learn important lessons about their sport as well as themselves (Ievleva and Orlick 1991). The significance of injury as a precursor to emotional pain also supports previous research demonstrating injury can be among the most common setbacks and challenges experienced by athletes (Wiese-Bjornstal *et al.* 1998, Mosewich *et al.* 2013).

The narratives of the young women athletes suggest that self-compassion might be particularly useful in coping with emotional pain associated with failure, supporting recent research on the potential benefits of self-compassion in sport (e.g. Mosewich *et al.* 2011, 2013). Mosewich *et al.* (2011) showed self-compassion to be related to a range of emotions, including shame and anxiety, and highlighted key

steps for future research including the examination of the role of self-compassion in sport-specific situations (e.g. failure events). In addition, poor performance, injury and performance plateau might be particularly relevant situations for the application of self-compassion, as they have been reported by women athletes as setbacks that are emotionally difficult and challenging to manage (Mosewich *et al.* *in press*). However, the concept of self-compassion is still relatively new to the sport and exercise psychology literature, and currently there is limited understanding as to how self-compassion should best be applied in sport and exercise.

Mosewich *et al.* (2013) recently developed a one-week self-compassion intervention that shows much promise specifically for highly self-critical women athletes. Their intervention begins with an in-person psychoeducational component and a self-compassionate writing exercise, followed by five writing exercise modules. The modules include: (1) detailing the negative event, (2) thinking about others who experience similar events, (3) expressing kindness to oneself, (4) objectivity perspective taking and (5) integration of skills. Their findings showed the self-compassion intervention to be effective in increasing self-compassion and decreasing self-criticism, rumination and concern over mistakes. There are a number of other self-compassion interventions that have been developed, ranging from brief inductions such as compassionate writing (e.g. Leary *et al.* 2007) to longer workshops such as the eight-week Mindful Self-Compassion Programme (Neff and Germer 2013); however, establishing the effectiveness of these interventions with sporting samples remains for future research.

While there is growing evidence supporting the potential of self-compassion as a buffer to painful emotions, the question of whether self-compassion leads to passivity remains an important direction for future research. The women in our study reported that self-compassion might be a barrier to performance success. The fear of settling for mediocrity and experiencing a lack of motivation were specific concerns about potential consequences of self-compassion raised by the athletes. This result is consistent with recent research showing that some athletes may require, or at least feel that they require, some level of self-criticism to achieve optimal performance (Mosewich *et al.* *in press*). Similar types of concerns were highlighted in a study by Williams *et al.* (2008) who found that students with higher levels of self-compassion reported dramatically less motivation and anxiety and increased procrastination tendencies than those with low or moderate self-compassion. Recognising the significance of this potential concern, there is now a scale measuring fear of expressing kindness and compassion towards oneself (Gilbert *et al.* 2011). However, while some people may express the worry of being too self-compassionate as undermining their motivation and leading to self-indulgence, genuine self-compassion should motivate individuals to push through difficult challenges, learn from their mistakes and try hard because they want to be happy and free from suffering (Neff 2011). Likewise, Neff *et al.* (2007) indicated that self-compassion is associated with greater personal initiative to make needed changes in one's life. Regardless, to date it remains unclear whether self-compassion is ever maladaptive for athletes; and if so, when and if its benefits outweigh its costs.

There are a number of potential limitations in qualitative research on managing emotions in sport previously identified that are relevant to our study, including prolonged time in the field, the number of participants, bracketing and methods of representation of data (Crocker *et al.* 2010). First, although we had more than one time-point of data collection, we nonetheless were not immersed in the setting of the

athletes for a prolonged period of time, which limited our understanding of their experiences of emotional pain and self-compassion as they unfolded over time. However, in addition to the obvious personal and monetary resources, spending prolonged time in the field studying a topic like emotional pain as experienced by athletes would also likely require additional ethical sensitivity throughout the research process. Nonetheless, prolonged time in the field is criteria upon which qualitative research is often judged (Creswell 2014), and therefore represents a limitation to our approach. Second, as with any qualitative study, the number of participants selected for our research required finding a balance between breadth and depth of experience that best suited the research questions being asked (Crocker *et al.* 2010). Thus, while a sample size of six participants limits our breadth of understanding across a wide range of athletes and sports, we think that the depth provided by limiting the sample size is well suited to both the specific goals of our study and narrative research more broadly. In addition, we believe that our sampling strategy was well suited to hearing stories from women athletes who have dealt with emotional pain. Third, we acknowledge the role we play as researchers in the role of co-constructing meaning with the participants in the narratives presented. However, especially through the reflective journaling process of the first author, there was a commitment to critical self-reflection, or bracketing, to both acknowledge and embrace how our personal experiences and values impact the research process (Angen 2000). Fourth, we acknowledge the limitations inherent to our choice to publish our research as a journal manuscript, which necessarily limits the length and format of the narratives that we are able to present. However, balanced against the benefits of publishing our research in a high-quality journal focused on qualitative research in sport, exercise and health that will reach our intended academic audience, the costs these limitations impose seem necessary and minor in comparison. In addition, narrative, being a form of storytelling (Smith and Sparkes 2009), seems particularly well suited to presentation as written language, which is afforded by the journal process.

Perhaps our biggest limitation and challenge was that the participants were unfamiliar with the concept of self-compassion specifically prior to our study. This was no surprise given that self-compassion is not a concept most people use as part of everyday language. In addition, our research is consistent with research on body self-compassion in postpartum women by Woelke and Ebbeck (2013) who showed that the components of self-compassion are often integrated, making clear distinctions between self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness in the women's narratives not always clear. And in many ways, it is because self-compassion is not well known to athletes that our research is ideally suited to a qualitative research methodology. Hence, in order to enter into conversations about self-compassion it seemed necessary to first explore the context of emotional pain experienced by the athletes. As such, much of our manuscript necessarily was focused on the athletes' experiences of emotional pain. Additionally, we did not introduce the concept of self-compassion until the second phase in an attempt to allow the athletes time to first reflect upon (aided by interview and photograph methods) their emotionally painful experiences and to ensure they did not limit the discussions of their emotional painful experiences to a self-compassionate lens. However, the benefits of this choice were balanced against the cost of insight that could have been gained through additional post-interview reflection on self-compassion. Ultimately though, the themes of emotional pain that we presented provide a great deal of context for the

athletes' experiences of self-compassion, which we think is a strength of our approach.

Despite the study limitations and questions that remain for future research, a narrative approach to our research facilitated the opportunity for the young women athletes to share their experiences of emotional pain associated with failure in sport, and discuss the role of self-compassion in their experiences. As such, we agree fully with Smith and Sparkes (2009) who suggested that adopting a narrative perspective has the potential to make a positive contribution to psychological research in sport and exercise. Consistent with previous research (e.g. Mosewich *et al.* 2013), the narratives in our research support self-compassion as a potential way for athletes to manage negative cognitions and emotions associated with failure and negative events, while at the same time presenting athletes an opportunity for personal growth. Importantly, self-compassion seems to be a way for athletes to feel positively about themselves that does not require self-judgment, set standards and evaluation (Neff 2004, Neff and Vonk 2009, Mosewich *et al.* 2011). And, as Neff (2004) argued, self-compassion should also be easier to develop than self-esteem, a focus of many sport programmes, because it does not require people to convince themselves to like themselves more than they already do. An additional potential benefit of a shift in focus to self-compassion is that narcissism has been found to be a shortcoming to self-esteem but not self-compassion (Neff 2003b, Leary *et al.* 2007, Neff and Vonk 2009). Moreover, acting compassionately toward the self includes acknowledging areas of weakness and taking responsibility for things that need changing (Berry *et al.* 2010). Our work, however, also highlights potential challenges with intervention, in that athletes appear hesitant to fully embrace a self-compassionate approach to sport for fear that it might lead to mediocrity. In addition, the opportunity to share stories that are met with understanding, support and empathy is an important aspect of mental health and personal development (McLeod 1997). By expanding the narrative literature in sport and exercise psychology, athletes will have the opportunity to fit their lived experiences with the stories and journeys of others; thereby, preparing and opening up new possibilities for care and understanding.

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