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Narratives of adolescent women athletes’ body self-compassion, performance and emotional well-being

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ABSTRACT

Sport participation can be a highly rewarding experience for young women. However, it can also involve unpleasant experiences such as failing to meet performance goals and threats to body image, which may detrimentally impact athletes’ well-being. Body image is salient for women in sport and can also be a source of suffering/challenge. Treating oneself with compassion has been suggested as a resource to buffer against negative outcomes of failure and inadequacy in sport. Body self-compassion may be especially relevant in sport as it consists of a kind and non-judgmental attitude towards the body despite perceived physical imperfections. The purpose of this study was to explore the role of body self-compassion in adolescent women athletes’ performance perceptions and emotional well-being. Seven women athletes (14–17 years old) participated in two, one-on-one semi-structured interviews and a journaling activity. Interviews and journal data were analyzed using a holistic approach to thematic analysis. Four themes were developed that capture the athletes’ perceived role of body self-compassion: (a) Compassion for and confidence in my body, (b) “Their thoughts and my body,” (c) I will play to my potential, and (d) My strength is in my emotions. The women athletes explained that body self-compassion allows them to respect and treat their bodies with kindness; thus, positive emotions such as satisfaction with the body were strengthened and an adaptive focus placed on performance. These findings are consistent with the conceptualization of self-compassion and body self-compassion and suggest that being body self-compassionate may regulate emotions and sport performance perceptions.

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Body; adolescents; women athletes; body self-compassion; performance; emotional well-being

Introduction

In Western society, women are often socialized to the role of the body (Bordo 1993; McKinley 2002), which endorses sociocultural expectations of unrealistic body ideals whilst creating normative negative body experiences (McKinley 2002). Within a sporting context particularly, there is an inherent emphasis placed directly or indirectly on women’s body image, as athletes are evaluated on both their performance and appearance (Krane et al. 2001; Mosewich et al. 2009). Body image is a multidimensional construct that includes self-attitudes (i.e. thoughts, feelings, and behaviours) and perceptions (Cash and Pruzinsky 2002). The perceptual dimension of body image is the mental depiction of an individual’s body appearance and function (Cash and Brown 1987; Sabiston and Brunet 2016), which denotes the level of accuracy between perceived and actual characteristics of the body (Sabiston and Brunet 2016). Given the multifaceted nature of body image, an athlete...
could have positive and/or negative perceptions of her body. For instance, an athlete trains her body optimally in an embodied experience (i.e. the experiences of one's own body; Blood 2005) while her sport performance is ideally evaluated based on her body's abilities. If an athlete becomes preoccupied with her body, negative self-evaluations may prevent her from focusing on her athletic performance or her abilities as an athlete outside of her appearance.

Body dissatisfaction, one facet of body image is largely attributed to sociocultural factors (Tiggemann 2011) and could be partially attributed to significant developmental changes occurring during adolescence that include changes to physical appearance and self-image (Ricciardelli and Yager 2016; Tiggemann and Zaccardo 2015). Due to the developmental changes taking place during adolescence, Klump (2013) stated that many young women reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction and poorer self-image during this developmental period because of being preoccupied with their bodies. Mosewich et al. (2013) found that being preoccupied with one's body was related to social physique anxiety and objectified body consciousness in young women athletes. Being preoccupied with the body in a competitive sporting environment where more emphasis could be placed on improving performance and developing skills may be detrimental to one's success in sports. Perhaps in response to the pressures and evaluations placed on women athletes, a growing body of research has focused on extending understanding and kindness towards the self in sport (e.g. Ferguson et al. 2014; Mosewich et al. 2013; Reis et al. 2015; Sutherland et al. 2014).

Similar to having compassion towards others, self-compassion entails being compassionate and understanding to oneself in times of personal failures and embracing all aspects of one's experiences with kindness (Neff 2003a, 2003b). According to Neff (2003a), self-compassion is comprised of three components, which include self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-kindness is being kind and understanding to oneself during painful experiences or failures, rather than being harshly self-critical. Common humanity involves recognizing that imperfections are a part of the shared human experience and seeing each experience, regardless of the difficulty, as connecting rather than isolating (Neff 2003a). Lastly, Neff (2003a) describes mindfulness as ‘a balanced state of awareness that avoids the extremes of over-identification and disassociation with experience and entails the clear seeing and acceptance of mental and emotional phenomena as it arises’. The three components of self-compassion are linked together and interact with one another to establish a self-compassionate mindset.

Neff and McGehee (2010) proposed that self-compassion may be highly relevant to the adolescent experience. In particular, they claimed that the self-kindness component and associated feelings of self-acceptance inherent to self-compassion should reduce harsh judgments in both adolescents and adults. Additionally, the mindfulness aspect of self-compassion should help prevent adolescents from ruminating and having pessimistic thoughts and emotions. Neff and McGehee (2010) also found psychological health associations similar to what has previously been found with adult samples (Neff, Kirkpatrick, and Rude 2007; Leary et al. 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising that self-compassion is emerging as a potential resource for young women athletes, as it may provide them with the avenues needed to excel psychologically and maneuver through the evaluative aspects of their sport experiences (Ferguson et al. 2014; Killham et al. 2018; Mosewich et al. 2013). Ferguson et al. (2014) qualitatively explored the role self-compassion may play in young women athletes’ psychological flourishing, and self-compassion was identified as potentially useful during difficult times in sport that relate specifically to the body – managing an injury and navigating performance plateaus (Ferguson et al. 2014).

A growing body of literature has found that self-compassion is associated with adults’ body image (Albertson, Neff, and Dill-Shackleford 2015; Duarte et al. 2015; Wasyliw, MacKinnon, and MacLellan 2012). The notion of taking a compassionate approach to the self and its relationship with body image suggests that a compassionate approach to the body, in particular, may be an important area for further consideration. Using an empirical phenomenology, Berry et al. (2010) proposed the phenomenon of body self-compassion and explored the meanings and experiences of body self-compassion among five young adult women exercisers. Three essential structures were generated based on the
women’s descriptions of their body self-compassion: appreciating one’s unique body, taking ownership of one’s body, and engaging in less social comparison. A possible fourth facilitating structure was also presented, which was the importance of others. As a result of the essential structures, Berry et al. (2010, 295) proposed body self-compassion ‘as a kind, understanding and nonjudgmental attitude individuals extend towards their body in response to their perceived physical imperfections, limitations, and failures’. Developing a compassionate approach towards one’s body may help reduce the focus on evaluation, which is an inherent feature of self-compassion.

Although Berry et al. (2010) explored body self-compassion among women exercisers, the phenomenon may be particularly relevant and highly valuable to young women athletes given the heightened and often times evaluative focus on the body in sport contexts. Women athletes may face difficulties or struggle with their body image because of the various physical requirements in their sport and the demands placed on the body to train and compete. Though, what is unknown is if compassionate attitudes to the body are relevant to sport performance. Based on Butler (1996) and Killham et al.’s (2018) conceptualizations, sport performance is defined as the views, cognitions, and evaluations attributed to an athlete’s performance and progress within a sport context. Moreover, competitive sporting environments inevitably involve evaluations of one’s skills and performance by the self and others. Horn and Hasbrook (1987) found that a sample of adolescent (boys and girls) soccer players engaged in both peer comparison and internal standards of evaluation to determine their perceived competence. Athletes’ performance perceptions are important to understand as they might impact one’s actual performance, since perceptions indicate how a person views their abilities and examines their successes or failures (Woodman and Hardy 2003). Donaldson and Ronan (2006) found that a higher level of participation in sports was related to perceived competence to perform. The connection between sport participation and perceived competence highlights the important role that perception may play in sport and how perceptions might influence performance.

Sport also has the potential of playing an important role in promoting positive development in adolescence by increasing attributes for social growth and development (Fraser-Thomas and Côté 2009). When one uses positive emotions to deal with difficulties, they are better able to cope with such difficulties than when negative emotions are used (Fredrickson and Joiner 2002). Positive emotion is associated with expanded capacity for thinking, improved coping, and an upward spiral towards emotional well-being (Fredrickson and Joiner 2002). Steptoe and Butler (1996) suggest that participating in sports and recreational activities is associated with positive emotional and psychological states. Given the connection between athletes’ physical self (i.e. body image, performance demands) and various aspects of psychological well-being (Albertson, Neff, and Dill-Shackleford 2015; Ferguson et al. 2014), and the idea that women’s bodies are often culturally viewed as objects (Bordo 1993), having compassion for one’s body might be particularly valuable to one’s performance, thoughts, self-attitudes, and well-being. Allowing one to experience the body as a functional entity rather than an object that should be internalized may create adaptive embodied experiences. The purpose of this study was to explore the role of body self-compassion in adolescent women athletes’ performance perceptions and emotional well-being. Exploring women athletes’ sport experiences, and if a kind and understanding approach to one’s physical self is useful for adolescent women athletes may suggest resources that are beneficial and relevant in competitive sports to nurture athletes’ sport experiences.

Method

Study design

A narrative framework was applied to explore the potential role of body self-compassion in adolescent women athletes’ performance perceptions and emotional well-being. Narrative inquiry is the way human beings make sense of random experiences by the imposition of story structures
Individual experiences are expressed in lived and told stories as a spoken or written text to give an account of an event or series of events. Narrative inquiry encourages a researcher to present rich and complex stories and experiences in a holistic manner, allowing for an interpretation of the underlying assumptions and insights that the story illustrates (Bell 2002). Narrative strategy of inquiry is becoming more popular in sport and exercise psychology research (Carless and Douglas 2012; Smith, Bundon, and Best 2016; Sutherland et al. 2014). It is particularly pertinent in this study because understanding the lived experiences of body self-compassion amongst adolescent women athletes can shape their experiences and the experiences of other women athletes (Smith and Sparkes 2009).

Setting and data generation

Following university research ethics board approval, participants were recruited via social media advertisements, posters, and recruitment visits to sport clubs within a mid-Western Canadian province. Potential participants expressed interest in the study by contacting the first author. Those that met the inclusion criteria (i.e. adolescent women athletes ages 14–17 years and currently participating and have participated in an individual or team competitive sport in the past year) were invited to participate. Participants (and parents) provided signed informed consent (and assent) to participate in three study phases. Phase one consisted of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews (20–45 minutes) to introduce self-compassion and body self-compassion to the athletes, as well as discuss their experiences of the phenomenon in their sports. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in a location that was convenient for each participant, with most electing to be interviewed in a meeting room-style laboratory at the university. Following a brief ice-breaker discussion, the women athletes were asked a series of questions about their sport experiences and their current body attitudes in sports. To introduce self-compassion, the athletes watched a short publicly available video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tyl6YXp1Y6M) by Dr. Kristin Neff about self-compassion (an approach used in previous research; Ferguson et al. 2014; Sutherland et al. 2014). In our attempt to ascertain an understanding of body self-compassion for these adolescent women, each participant was asked to explain and define what body self-compassion meant to her after watching Neff’s self-compassion video (i.e. ‘what would you say being compassionate to your body, in particular, would be?’). The athletes were provided with Berry et al.’s (2010) definition of body self-compassion after establishing their own meanings of body self-compassion.

Phase two consisted of journaling activities that were completed over a two-to-three-week period, which is consistent with the duration of self-compassion activities in previous studies (Mosewich et al. 2013; Neff, Kirkpatrick, and Rude 2007). We anticipated that some aspects of the current study could be difficult for the women to openly discuss (e.g. body image, performance evaluations, emotions), therefore journaling activities were included, which provided a less invasive method for data generation. Participants were provided with small soft-covered journals with 70 lined pages (including typed directions from the first author on the first page reminding the participant to write as much as she likes about her body-related sport experiences) at the end of their first one-on-one interviews. All participants were sent reminder emails once a week to write in their journals about their body experiences during competitions and trainings. Each participant’s definition of body self-compassion was handwritten on the second page of her journal, which included both her personal definition and Berry et al.’s (2010) definition. Participants were invited to use the journals to document information about moments that they were being body self-compassionate (or lacking body self-compassion) in sport and how/why it played a role in their sport performance(s) and emotional state(s). Journaling was a reflective process and structured each participant’s stories to provide information on personal meanings in varying situations (Creswell and Poth 2018; Creswell 2014).
The third phase consisted of follow-up one-on-one semi-structured interviews, with the goal to review and discuss the participants’ journal entries (two-three weeks after phase one). Participants were encouraged to share three to five key experiences they documented in their journals that focused on body self-compassion (or lack thereof), performance, and emotional well-being. Interview questions stemmed from discussions in the initial interviews and evolved naturally from discussions that transpired while sharing the participants’ journal entries (e.g. ‘How did your attitude towards your body during this experience influence your sport performance?’ and ‘What emotions were present during this experience for you?’). The handwritten journal entries facilitated data generation by helping build and direct the discussions.

All participants approved their phase one and phase three interview transcripts before inclusion in data analysis. Participants were given 35 gift cards as a token of appreciation for sharing their experiences.

Participants

Seven adolescent Canadian women athletes participated in this study (see Table 1 for participants summary). Stemming from similar past research (Ferguson et al. 2014; Sutherland et al. 2014) an ‘athlete’ was defined as having been involved in at least one competitive sport in the past 12 months at a level higher than recreational. All athletes self-identified as Caucasian and ranged in age from 14 to 17 years ($M_{age} = 15$ years). The women athletes reported that they participate in a range of both individual and team sports (badminton, basketball, softball, soccer, swimming, volleyball). As this was the first study to our knowledge exploring athletes and body self-compassion, the only restriction on the current level of sport participation for the women athlete participants was to be above recreational, which implied competitive sports. At the time of data generation, the athletes were competing at various levels, ranging from local to elite. The highest level these women athletes had ever competed ranged from regional to international.

Researcher reflexivity

My role as first author in this research process was that of a listener, interpreter, and story analyst (Smith 2016). As a listener, I gave an attentive ear to the women athletes as they told me their stories. As the interpreter, I provided a translation of my understanding of the women athletes’ stories. Finally, as a story analyst, I ultimately drew conclusions from distinct stories of each participant and constructed them into the themes that represent the narratives of the seven women athletes. As a qualitative researcher, I understand that my personal experiences can influence the research process. When I was a young athlete throwing shotput, I struggled with my body image and performance. I often did not feel like I was strong enough to shoot the distances required to qualify for the podium. I acknowledged that my role as an interviewer may create a power dynamic with each participant and as such, I assessed the potential impact of the study on both the participants and myself in my reflexive journal (Sparkes and Smith 2014). This was an ongoing process of considering how the interview questions were communicated and perceived,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Current Sport(s)</th>
<th>Current Competition Level</th>
<th>Sport Activities During Phase Two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Casie</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Softball</td>
<td>Provincial</td>
<td>Provincial competition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>Tournament/training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>Regional swim meets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Basketball, Badminton</td>
<td>Local Club</td>
<td>Badminton tournament</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>Regional swim meets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kale</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Volleyball, Softball</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Softball competitions/training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>International tournament/training</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
writing down my responses to some of the participants’ stories, and reflecting on how my thoughts and feelings were shaped by the stories (McGannon and Smith 2015). My positionality served as a guide to be sensitive while listening to the women’s stories, which shaped my reflexive process through the evaluation of my initial thoughts and ideas and how the stories have been presented (McGannon and Smith 2015). The development of narratives involved the participants and myself jointly constructing their stories (McGannon and Smith 2015) and also involved the last author playing the role of a critical friend.

I interacted with each athlete prior to data collection and throughout the data generation process alongside keeping my own reflective journal notes. I spent time listening to each athlete’s story and re-listening to our recorded conversations from which I began to draw initial meanings from their stories. Taking into consideration my own experiences as an athlete throughout the research process, I shared some of my sport stories with the women to establish a connection. In doing so, I was able to delve deeper into the athletes’ experiences and attempted to retell their stories based on my understanding of the stories and an analytic examination of the assumptions that each story represents (Bell 2002).

Data analysis

With the first author as the primary data analyst, a thematic data analysis was employed. Understanding that data analysis is a cyclical process in qualitative research (Miles and Huberman 1994), the stories collected from the interviews and journal entries were collated and reorganized in sequential order of key elements of each story to create a restory (Creswell 2014). The analysis followed Hays and Singh’s (2012) eight steps for qualitative data analysis. The first and second steps involved collecting, reducing, and organizing data. Third, memoing and summarizing took place, and field notes were taken during each interview. Memos were used to summarize preliminary findings and provided an initial narrative. Fourth, organizing the text comprised transcribing the one-on-one interviews and reviewing field notes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and all participants had the opportunity to read and review their respective transcripts (Kowalski et al. 2018). One participant made changes to her first interview transcript to provide more explanation to her stories (e.g. from ‘… anytime I got the ball, I just wanted to throw it away’, to ‘Whenever I would get the ball, I was so afraid of making mistakes … ’); others approved the transcripts without corrections. Fifth, the transcribed text and pre-identified journal entries (entries participants chose to discuss during the second interview) were coded to allow each data set to evolve based on meanings derived from experiences. Each transcript was read at least three times to get a general and descriptive sense of the data and to identify meanings. It was at this stage that meanings were reflected upon to consider what they revealed about the athletes’ perceived role of body self-compassion. Sixth, themes and patterns were developed from similarities, frequency and sequence of events, and co-occurrence of codes and corroborations. Seventh, a codebook to document a list of codes, sub codes, and patterns was created, alongside their descriptions.

Last, identified patterns and themes from one-one-one interviews and journals were brought together and examined to develop narratives. Transcribed interviews were reviewed and analyzed on paper for patterns and themes and interpreted directly as presented (Creswell 2014). Steps one to four occurred during the larger data generation process, while steps five to eight occurred after data generation. The first author engaged in peer debriefing (Creswell 2014) with the last author. The last author’s role was to constructively challenge the first author’s interpretations in an attempt to ensure they were representative of the athletes’ recalled experiences, as well as resonated with people other than the first author. NVivo was also used for organization of codes and themes; the software provided an avenue to manage our dataset and organize our coding structure as we began forming narratives from the patterns and themes initially proposed.
Findings

The adolescent women athletes’ stories have been co-constructed and organized into four overarching themes that describe the role of body self-compassion in their performance perceptions and emotional well-being.

Compassion for and confidence in my body

As the athletes recalled their sport experiences, they shared stories of being body self-compassionate. When asked to initially explain what they thought it was, the women athletes described being compassionate to their bodies as being confident in their bodies. Having confidence in their bodies included taking care of their bodies, knowing how their body works and maintaining its composition to be strong, avoiding comparisons to others, and being kind and positive towards their bodies.

I would describe body self-compassion as, looking at yourself and noticing what you need to do to make it better or what you need to maintain it. And understand how to compliment yourself and constructively criticize yourself as well.

Knowing how your body works, if you are prone to losing or gaining weight. (Claire, I1)

Just don’t worry about the negative things other people say, and just focus on positives, whether it’s from coaches or teammates. Because if you do, it would show through. (Emma, I1).

… Training your body well, eating healthy, doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks as long as you feel good. Being happy with your body, respecting your body, feeling good about your body and treating your body well. (Kale, I1).

I think it is taking care of your body, being in-tune with yourself and knowing your body, treating your body with respect. (Sally, I1).

The athletes noted that important aspects of body self-compassion were being comfortable in their bodies and caring for their bodies.

… it’s feeling, like just kind of being positive towards your body. And that much like treating it right, once again I think that’s a really big part of it and learning to feel comfortable in the body you’re given and not compare it to other people’s (Jenny, I1).

Some of the women athletes stated that being compassionate to their body was not only taking ownership of their bodies, but also knowing that training may sometimes be difficult, which can result in being better athletes and more confident players. When Kale described body self-compassion, she stated that training her body well and eating healthily creates a balance for her that allows her to feel confident in her body. She also explained that body self-compassion meant telling herself that it is okay to make mistakes, and that sometimes this meant that she might feel down, but making mistakes happens to everyone. Kale further explained that it does not matter what anyone else thinks; if she feels good, is happy with her body, and respects her body, she is able to play with confidence.

The women also described how showing compassion to their bodies helped them recognize moments where they did not feel confident in their bodies, and how they had to remember to be understanding and kind to their bodies during those moments. Ella described a situation where she initially felt confident in her body at the start of a swim meet, but soon started losing confidence in her body as she approached the finals. She was feeling tired from training and competing for a long period of time, and when it came time to compete at finals she wanted to quit. Nevertheless, by being compassionate to her body and remembering that she had worked hard to get to where she was, she was able to change those thoughts very quickly. She explained:
I felt really confident in how I was swimming. But then on the last day, that’s usually like the worst day, because you are tired and it’s been super long, and I added a lot of time to one of my races. And so, I was really mad at myself, and I didn’t want to do my finals because I felt I wasn’t going to do good at it anyways… I think being compassionate to my body helps, like, it just helps me think more like about it, like it helps me get more confident in myself, and like how I can do better. (Ella, I2)

When Ella was asked why she had a turn in her thoughts and the courage to compete, she stated:

I think that like swimming, it is a physical sport, but you really have to have a good mindset otherwise it’s not going to go good. I have to be confident otherwise like I said it doesn’t work out. (Ella, I2)

These women are not always confident in how their bodies perform in sport, especially when they compare themselves to other athletes. Comparisons to others sometimes made them self-conscious of certain aspects of themselves that they had not noticed or paid attention to in the past, which as the athletes explained can impact their sport performance. Casie explained how sometimes she feels different from other athletes because others can ‘do it all’. She explained further that she tries not to focus too much on what makes other athletes better players than she is; instead, she tries to focus her energy on constantly improving herself. Casie’s story is one example where being compassionate to her body is vital in keeping focused on performing at her best, rather than overly criticizing her body or comparing herself to other athletes.

Compassion for and confidence in my body identifies how the women athletes describe body self-compassion, and how being considerate of their unique bodies allows them to be confident in them. The athletes’ descriptions of body self-compassion included taking care of their bodies, being wholehearted, recognizing their suffering, and being positive towards the body. By showing concern and recognizing their suffering, the women athletes are demonstrating compassion and care for their bodies. For these women athletes, showing compassion for one’s body might allow one to not just be content or satisfied with the body, but to be confident in their bodies’ abilities.

‘Their’ thoughts and my body

When referring to their bodies, the athletes stated that the opinions of significant others such as coaches and teammates sometimes influences their thoughts and feelings about their bodies and their sport performance. The women athletes either feel encouraged by others’ positive feedback or downcast by their criticisms. To avoid disappointing these significant others, some of the women are in a mental battle on how to remain poised in their body and skills, while also taking criticisms on their performance; posing a challenge on not being compassionate towards their bodies. Casie, a softball player, described a time when her coach encouraged the team to get fitter, but she struggled with some of the physical training because of her body shape. As such, she couldn’t play as well as her teammates, which she thought resulted in less playing time on the field. This experience made her feel like she was not contributing as much as she could to the team. She thought she was letting her team down because of her body’s inability to run as fast as the others. Casie wrote in her journal:

I went into yesterday’s game mentally prepared and when we started warming up, I felt like I was physically ready too. I started pitching and I was doing pretty good, I started to feel good about myself and the practicing I had done worked out and paid off. While I was batting, I wasn’t doing the greatest and I started to get mad at myself for not playing good. In the second game I pitched again but it wasn’t as good, I was a bit tired and I thought if I was more fit I wouldn’t be tired by now and would be able to play longer with more energy, by not pitching my best I could tell that my coach was getting a little upset with me, which made me feel worse about myself because I was letting the team down. My batting was the same and when I was running I could start to feel my hips starting to hurt, so I got mad at myself for not stretching and exercising properly. This also made me think it could be from my body type and that I was bigger and putting more strain on my hips. (Casie, J1)
Upon reflecting on this experience, Casie stated that being compassionate to her body would have meant focusing less on what her body could not do, and more on what she could have improved, without having a feeling of disappointing her coach or teammates. Learning to be compassionate to her body meant she avoided comparisons to her teammates and focused on improving her skill. Kale also shared a similar experience when her coach moved her to playing a different position on the team. In her reflection, she thought she could be more compassionate to her body and spend less effort analyzing her body’s inabilities.

Having feelings of discouragement brought on by an important person in one’s sport might negatively influence one’s performance, just like in Casie’s experience. Casie’s performance was influenced by her coach’s perspective of her body’s capabilities. Her reduced playing time led to self-criticism of her skills, body, and overall performance perceptions. In contrast, when positive feedback is received from significant others in sport, these women athletes improve in their performance perceptions because they are encouraged. For instance, receiving encouraging words about an athlete’s body from a coach could provide a boost to one’s ego. Jenny shared an experience in swimming where her coach’s words served as a form of encouragement for her and provided her with positive thoughts about her body.

... I guess I would have to say like my coach, she’s like talked to me a couple times saying like, like you’re really strong like in your upper body so, don’t be scared to use your arms like a lot and I think that moment kind of replayed in my head and I thought about it on and on, I mean so it helped. (Jenny, I2)

Consequently, to an extent, cues from important others in sport may significantly influence these women athletes’ thoughts and emotions about their body and performance. However, when an athlete is compassionate to her body, she can accept cues and feedback without overcriticizing her body and sport skills.

Some of the athletes explained that, at times, they are actively seeking reassurance from others such as their teammates or coaches to reaffirm confidence in their bodies. For instance, Claire talked about the role her teammates and coach play in the thoughts she has about her body when playing soccer. Claire explained that during games she is sometimes looking to her teammates to positively influence her thoughts and feelings, and subsequently her performance. When she has some doubts while playing, she often looks to her teammates for positively reinforcing comments from the sidelines. These comments help her feel self-assured in her skills and structure her mind to be calm. Claire explained:

... I thought that players on my team would help influence me in a positive way, just because they are trying to set me up to do well, and yeah. So, my coach from the sideline, you know was like talking, if he wants me to do something specific, or not. So that was helping too. (Claire, I2)

Receiving such feedback during games helps reassure Claire that she is on the right track while playing. If Claire fails to receive these reassuring cues from her teammates and coach, she explained that she might fall short in her performance.

In contrast to the supportive impact that important others may have on athletes’ confidence in their bodies and performance, many of the athletes explained that receiving cues from teammates and coaches that are less encouraging may result in a loss of focus and a subsequent negative influence on one’s performance. As such, the athletes recognized that coaches, teammates, and others are influential in their own thoughts about their bodies. By extending compassion to the body, the athletes created space to process the opinions that have been shared by significant others. Hence, they were able to identify certain elements in the received feedback as constructive rather than negative.

I will play to my potential

The women provided various reasons for playing sports, such as their love for the sport, having a good relationship with teammates, growing up with family members who played sports, and
learning new skills. All the athletes indicated that watching elite athletes in their sport and reaching the highest level possible in their sport careers keeps them motivated to play. The athletes train to be better by attaining a standard of high performance to achieve their goal of remaining in sport for as long as they physically can. However, becoming elite athletes entails overcoming many obstacles throughout their sport careers, which includes accepting criticisms about their performance regardless of their own performance perceptions.

For some of the athletes, their perceptions about their performance or abilities as an athlete differed from the perspectives of their coaches. Still, some of the athletes who recognized the differences in opinions worked very hard to try and have their perceived performance match the expectations of their coaches. This level of consistency may allow the athletes to grow and gain the skills they need to be excellent high-performance athletes. For Kale, she was initially unhappy about a new playing position with her volleyball team, as her coach unexpectedly placed her in this position without voicing any concerns to her about her previous position. Upon further discussion on her experience, Kale noted that she thought the experience was:

It was probably negative at the time, and then coming back now I'm probably thinking it was kind of a positive one. Not necessarily saying that I was kind of short, but just getting the experience playing in different positions … (Kale, I2)

Reflecting on this experience, Kale recognized that as a body self-compassionate athlete, she has an opportunity to grow in a different area of volleyball to improve her power skills and better prepare for future team try outs. Kale is now attempting to understand her coach's perspective of her performance and recognizes the difference in their perspectives. Coaches and important others sometimes play a positive or facilitating role in changing athletes' performance perceptions.

Claire, a soccer player, prides herself on hard work and dedication to excel as an athlete. When she first joined the team, Claire felt small compared to her teammates; she played with a group of athletes who were older and more muscular than she was. She admired her teammates' talent and dedication and decided that she was going to train even harder to measure up to their standards. At the start of the next season when baseline measurements were taken, Claire was happy because the hard work she had put into training was showing; she had grown in many ways and her performance had improved. She recalled:

… we had to do something called baseline testing. I guess you measure the growth of like your thighs and your calves and stuff, and they measured mine and like mine stood out because they were bigger than most people's I guess you could say. So yeah that felt good because I had been working on it, trying to make myself have like bigger muscles to play better. So, I thought that maybe that positively influence how I played. (Claire, I1)

Claire was inspired by her teammates to be a good player, and to do so she worked on her body to be stronger and to perform better. She didn’t always feel particularly encouraged while training because of the intensity of some training days. However, she continued to push through by recognizing the areas she needed to improve and reminding herself of her goal to be better at soccer. To this end, she was understanding of her body's abilities and strived for improvement while being body self-compassionate. This included reminding herself to be kind to her body and to trust what her body is capable of doing without overworking it.

Regardless of who encourages these women to be better athletes, their goal is to always try to play to their utmost potential. These athletes continue to recognize that their performance perceptions sometimes differ from that of their coaches. The differing perceptions provide them with an alternative perspective on their sport performance. As such, body self-compassion allows the women athletes to be open to alternative perspectives of their performance and recognize that some of these perspectives may include important information to improve their skills and help them play to their potential. As such, a body self-compassionate athlete may be more aware of her body's abilities and skills and thus competence to perform.
My strength is in my emotions

From the first interviews to the second interviews, the women athletes’ accounts of their experiences evolved into how beneficial it was to each of them to be compassionate towards their bodies. The women athletes mainly discussed how being body self-compassionate influenced their emotional well-being. As they practiced being compassionate to their body during the journaling process, they began identifying how their emotions directed their attitudes towards their bodies and influenced their performance. Some of the women’s awareness led to recognizing their positive and negative thoughts during their time in this study. For instance, Sally, shared a story where her day started off with negative thoughts, which got worse as the day progressed:

I feel like when I was rushed or I was feeling bad, I just like, every time I made a mistake I just kind of like dug myself deeper to this hole like, “oh I can’t do this”. Like, my thoughts throughout the whole day was just negative, and whenever I did something that I didn’t want to do, it just kept getting worse and worse. But I think I felt better about myself, I was like, you know it’s okay, I can still do this. Because, maybe I had more positive attitude throughout the whole day maybe. And it just kind of carried into my training. (Sally, J2)

When Sally’s mindset changed, those negative thoughts became positive and the way she approached things for the rest of the day changed. The change in her mindset was a result of internalizing compassion for her body and subsequently her emotions influenced how her training proceeded. While reflecting on this experience, Sally stated that at some point during that day she wanted to change her thoughts to be less critical and more positive. Hence, she thought about being kind to herself and began creating a balance in her mind towards positivity. By changing her mindset, she became more empathetic to herself and transitioned to a happier and more self-accepting attitude, which then allowed her to focus on playing better. Jenny also shared a similar experience:

Today my races went really well. I have to admit that when I went to go put on my racing suit it felt tighter than usual, which made me feel like there was a possibility that I gained weight. This made me feel a little uncomfortable for a bit. I knew that I had to brush off these feelings, so I could race well so that’s what I did. I felt very confident after my races. The pain from working so hard was like a badge of honor. (Jenny, J1)

Though Jenny’s experience with her swim suit may stem from a variety of factors, it is possible she is experiencing normative adolescent developmental changes. Given that adolescents undergo many bodily changes, knowledge of body self-compassion may help them accept, appreciate, and respect these changes and their body’s strengths and limitations. For Jenny, she was able to improve the quality of her sport experience.

At the start of the interviewing process, Claire thought of herself as a jolly and body confident person, and as such believed that her positive mindset allows her to be focused during practices and competitions. She never thought of herself as having any negative feelings towards her body and indicated that she rarely compared herself to others. When reflecting on and discussing her journal entries, Claire explained that it was interesting to see specific times that she was not being positive or compassionate to her body like she thought she always had been. For instance, there was a time she experienced feelings of uneasiness when she went to the gym and was overwhelmed by the people around her and their workout regimes. This feeling of uneasiness was unlike the confident and cheerful person that Claire believed she was. Claire found herself in unfamiliar territory with her emotions, and she was feeling anxious and intimidated in a room that she had always felt comfortable. Feeling less confident in her body influenced how her workout routine progressed that day, as she left the gym earlier than she normally would have. When she returned the next day to workout, Claire mentally prepared herself to be proud of the strong athlete that she is and to be compassionate to her body and she had a better workout in the gym.

Emma described a time during her basketball practice where her emotions and mindset kept her in high spirits despite the results of the game.
what a magical basketball practice. There was only seven of us and on the rare occasion, I can say I did great. I had good memories in the gym, which I think boosted my mood. My lungs did good – plus we didn’t do a lot of running. Drills went swiftly when we played a game, instead of just assisting like I usually do, I scored! Multiple times. I was calm and collected and positive with myself and my team, which greatly contributed to our success. Even though we lost, it was very rewarding and made the rest of my evening go along with more energy. (Emma, J6)

Emma explained that her emotions each day determine how her mind allows her to stay afloat. Whether she is happy, sad, frustrated or excited, it is how she manages her emotions, specifically her emotions related to her body, that will keep her focused on her game. The women athletes described this process as balancing their emotions. Emma expressed that she recognizes her body can do many amazing things, but the moment she doubts her body’s abilities and has negative thoughts, she does not perform as well as she knows she can. By adopting a compassionate approach to her body, Emma aspires to be whole-hearted and recognize her own suffering. Similarly, when identifying how emotions direct her attitude towards her body and influence her performance, Kale explained that by being compassionate to her body she feels good and can push out negative thoughts and feelings such as feelings of inadequacy, sadness, and frustration. Being compassionate to her body gives her the opportunity to find inspirations to be a better and well-rounded athlete; an athlete that allows her emotions to positively influence her sport performance. By respecting their bodies and treating them with kindness, the athletes shaped positive emotions, such as satisfaction with the body and body confidence. These positive emotions may be better established because the athletes are becoming more compassionate to their body experiences.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of body self-compassion in adolescent women athletes’ performance perceptions and emotional well-being. The women athletes’ compassionate body experiences in sport comprised of having confidence in their bodies, recognizing the role of important others, playing to their potential, and finding strength through their emotional well-being. Despite the unique insights gleaned from the athletes’ meanings of body self-compassion, the athletes’ general descriptions of body self-compassion support Berry et al.’s (2010) findings. Similar to findings from Berry et al. (2010), a key aspect of body self-compassion for the women athletes was that it allowed them to recognize the negative and positive feelings they had towards their bodies, and subsequently appreciate their unique qualities. The similar findings are meaningful given the differing domain being explored (i.e. exercise versus competitive sport) and age of participants (adult women versus adolescent women). Three key contributions to the literature include the potential for body self-compassion to (a) build confidence in the functionality of the body to perform in sport, (b) facilitate engaging in less social comparison, and (c) harness more positive emotions in sport performance.

For the athletes in the current study, body self-compassion consisted of having or building confidence in their bodies, as well as developing an adaptive focus on their bodies’ abilities while competing in their sport. By internalizing compassion for their bodies, the women athletes were able to recognize moments of negative body evaluation, which brought on showing kindness to the body and being mindful, an important recognition for adolescents who are experiencing developmental and psychological changes (Ricciardelli and Yager 2016). The seeming change in participants’ accounts of their compassionate body experiences between the first and second interviews revealed how their perceived confidence impacted their sport performance. The women athletes’ performances were influenced positively and negatively by their own perceived confidence as well as significant others’ performance expectations. Durand-Bush and Salmela (2010) found that the expectations of significant others created pressure and stress for athletes in their study, which affected the athletes’ performance. The pressures faced by athletes that stem from high expectations of significant others have an impact on athletes’ perceived competence.
and hence performance. All the athletes in the current study described having confidence in their bodies and their athletic skills as two of the most important attributes needed for them to be well-rounded athletes. As such body self-compassion allows them to have confidence in their bodies and athletic skills.

In addition to potentially facilitating athletes’ confidence in their bodies, shifting from an appearance focus to a functional focus on the body may be another role of body self-compassion in sport. A key finding in this study is that by being body self-compassionate, the women celebrated what their bodies had the potential to do in sport rather than just focus on its appearance. Functionality is an aspect of multidimensional body image (Alleva et al. 2014, 2015; Cash 2002), and our findings suggest that body self-compassion may help nurture this constructive focus on the body. Research suggests that focusing on body functionality (i.e. what the body is capable of doing, which includes functions related to physical capacities, health, and senses) may help improve body image (Alleva et al. 2018; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Horvath 2010). Alleva et al. (2018) found that the women who focused on body functionality improved aspects of positive body image (e.g. body appreciation) and focused on strengths concerning their own body. The athletes’ stories in the present study highlight that as the women focused more on their sport performance during competitions and practices and less on their appearance, they stated that they performed better. As such, body self-compassion could play a critical role in helping adolescent women athletes develop their skills and abilities in sport.

Body self-compassion has the potential to also facilitate a process of engaging in less social comparisons. The adolescent athletes in the current study explained that being compassionate to their bodies made them more aware of instances where they had negative body evaluations brought on by their appearance evaluations or by comparing themselves to others. However, by internalizing compassion for their bodies the women athletes were able to recognize these moments of negative body evaluation. This brought on showing kindness to the body and being mindful in their awareness of negative thoughts and feelings. The women athletes are in a period of adolescence where more body awareness and changes to physical appearance and self-image occurs and may result in body dissatisfaction (Ricciardelli and Yager 2016; Tiggemann and Zaccardo 2015). The findings of the current study suggest that extending understanding, confidence, and appreciation to one’s body may constructively interrupt patterns of social comparison. The athletes expressed less preoccupation with social comparisons and more acceptance of their bodies’ unique qualities as they either continued to or began embracing body self-compassion.

The women athletes also reflected on the potential usefulness of body self-compassion in their emotional well-being. In their reflections, they stated that they experienced more feelings of happiness, gratitude, and satisfaction with their bodies when extending compassion to their bodies. Both positive and negative emotions directed their attitudes towards their sport performance. Particularly, being compassionate to the body created a process of stabilizing their emotions, which meant engaging in less negative and more positive emotions. This was reflected in the women athletes’ descriptions of their body attitudes and sport performances. Likewise, the more the athletes embraced their bodies, the more positive their emotions were, and the better they reported playing. This is similar to the findings of Wasylkiw and colleagues (2012), which suggest that the more kindness a person shows to his/her physical self, the less negatively occupied one would be with the body.

As with all research, our study is not without its limitations. The women athletes were presented with Berry et al.’s (2010) definition of body self-compassion after they had an opportunity to construct their own meanings following a self-compassion video by Kristin Neff; however, we cannot be certain that the athletes truly grasped the phenomenon based on the one definition they were presented with after their own descriptions. The women athletes’ descriptions of body self-compassion largely included discussions around being confident in their bodies. This is not surprising as Berry et al. (2010) positioned body self-compassion as inherently including a sense of empowerment that shows some resemblance to self-confidence. Previous studies have also
reported an association between self-compassion and self-confidence (Neff, Hsieh, and Dejitterat 2005; Smeets et al. 2014), particularly that some components of self-compassion (e.g. self-kindness) may have elements of self-confidence (Barry, Loflin, and Doucette 2015). Nonetheless, the women athletes may not have understood the distinction between self-compassion and self-confidence, which could provide an explanation for the athletes’ use of self-compassion as potentially resembling self-confidence.

The athletes’ difficulty with comprehending the phenomena may have been further exacerbated because they likely do not use the terms self-compassion, or body self-compassion, in their day-to-day lives. Only one of the athletes was familiar with the concept of self-compassion at the start of her first interview. However, we strove to find complexities in views rather than narrowing the athletes’ meanings into a single definition of body self-compassion (Creswell 2014). This is because our guiding philosophical worldview is constructivism, necessitating multiple meanings and interpretations to guide the work (Creswell 2014). There is also the potential that our data generation methods (i.e. journaling) could have changed the participants’ meanings, perspectives, and experiences of body self-compassion. Though not intended as an intervention, the journaling process was similar to exercises that have been used in previous self-compassion intervention studies (i.e. Mosewich et al. 2013; Neff, Kirkpatrick, and Rude 2007). Anecdotally, there appeared to be a shift in at least some of the women athletes’ descriptions and experiences of body self-compassion throughout the study as they deepened their engagement in the research process. Nevertheless, there remain similarities between our translation of the athletes’ descriptions with elements of Berry et al.’s (2010) definition of body self-compassion.

An important strength of this study was introducing body self-compassion to a group of adolescent women athletes in a manner that allowed them to form their own meanings of the phenomenon. Embracing the role of a listener in understanding what is being said while allowing conclusions to challenge one’s prejudices are qualities of a strong researcher (Sparkes and Smith 2009). To our knowledge, there has only been one published study that has explored body self-compassion. The use of multiple forms of data generation methods (i.e. interviews and journals) was another strength of this study (Kowalski et al. 2018). Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility in probing different questions to each individual athlete based on her unique stories. Interviewing each participant twice, before and after the journaling process, allowed the athletes to dive into their sport experiences both before and after the introduction of body self-compassion. Journaling provided more richness to the data by allowing participants the time and space to immerse themselves in their recollections, and to reveal experiences that they may not have identified in the face-to-face interviews. Interviews and journals each provided unique details and accounts of the athletes’ experiences of body self-compassion, which contributed depth to our data and an overall richer description of the research (Shenton 2004). Other strategies that contributed to the strength of our study included member reflections (Smith and McGannon 2018), peer debriefing between the first and last authors, in-depth accounts of participant experiences as presented through direct quotations, and the use of a researcher reflective journal (Kowalski et al. 2018).

In conclusion, our findings support the growing literature that emphasizes the usefulness of self-compassion in buffering against negative sport and body experiences (Albertson, Neff, and Dill-Shackleford 2015; Ferguson et al. 2014; Mosewich et al. 2013). The current study advances the sport psychology literature by focusing specifically on a compassionate approach to the body in sport. Adolescent women athletes in the current study embraced body self-compassion by allowing themselves to explore the phenomenon and its perceived influence on their sport performance and emotional well-being. It remains unknown if and how others might benefit from being body self-compassionate. Therefore, research should continue to explore body self-compassion as it may contribute to the capacity for happiness, satisfaction with the body, and enhanced emotional well-being (Donaldson and Ronan 2006; Neff 2003b). Further research is also needed to investigate the impact of a compassionate approach to the body in target groups (e.g. ethnically diverse samples, different age groups, and men athletes).
Despite the limitations within our study, being body self-compassionate may be influential beyond the body and physical experiences and may influence larger sport experiences. A focus on the body through self-compassionate body attitudes could highlight the body as a functional entity in the midst of the evaluative nature of a sporting context, leading to a positive outward spiral from the body to overall sport experiences. By being compassionate to the body, women athletes may become more aware of and confident in the functionality of their bodies to perform – a process of shaping the sporting body, mind, and overall sport experience.

Notes
1. The following notation is used when referencing quotes from specific parts of data generation: I1 = Interview one; I2 = Interview two; J1 = Journal entry one (with the appended number reflecting the corresponding journal entry).
2. As the athletes’ coaches and teammates were not interviewed, this theme reflects the women athletes’ perceptions of important others’ thoughts and perspectives about their performances.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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