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Insight Grant 2015

Men athletes' self-compassion and masculinity

Project Summary

Self-compassion represents one's acknowledgement of emotional suffering and a desire to provide oneself the care needed to effectively alleviate that suffering. The focus on general self-compassion in the general psychology literature has exploded over the past decade, and there is a growing body of evidence to support the benefits of self-compassion in women athletes. However, there remain few studies that focus on men and masculinity, particularly in the sport context. As such, our research aimed to explore men athletes' self-compassion and masculinity. We did so across two main studies. In the first study, we explored the interaction of self-compassion and diverse versions of masculinity on the psychosocial well-being of men athletes. In the second study, we explored men athletes' lived experiences of self-compassion through the lens of masculinity. Taken together our findings support self-compassion as a promising resource for men athletes to buffer emotionally difficult sport experiences, and that masculinity is an important part of the picture. More specifically, attempts to develop self-compassion will likely be more challenging for athletes who represent traditional masculinity (e.g., self-reliance, hiding emotions, dominance) versus inclusive masculinity (i.e., a horizontal alignment, or equal treatment, and acceptance of all representations and embodiments of masculinity). Due to COVID 19, we are just completing a third and final study, in which we are examining a one-week self-compassion intervention that was originally developed for women athletes, to see if it is also effective for men athletes. A specific aim of the third study is to examine whether varied representations of masculinities (i.e., traditional masculinity, inclusive masculinity) impact the efficacy of the self-compassion intervention for men athletes.

Research Methods

In the first study, to explore the interaction of self-compassion and diverse versions of masculinity on the psychosocial well-being of men athletes, we sampled 172 men athletes ($N=172$, $M_{\text{age}} = 22.8$ years) from a variety of sports. The athletes in the study completed a series of on-line questionnaires that included psychosocial outcome variables/reactions that (a) were all previously identified as related to self-compassion ($r > .40$) in relevant populations (i.e., men athletes, women athletes, and men who are not athletes), (b) were related to self-compassion in a sport-specific context (e.g., constructive and destructive reactions to a hypothetical emotionally difficult sport-specific scenario), and/or (c) were measures of masculinity. In addition to looking at key relationships, we aimed to determine whether relationships between self-compassion and the psychosocial outcome variables/reactions remained after removing the influence of self-esteem, since self-esteem has been found to be related to self-

compassion in samples of athletes. We also explored whether self-compassion moderates (i.e., changes the nature of) the relationship between masculinity and the psychosocial outcome variables/reactions. In the second study, to explore men athletes' lived experiences of self-compassion through the lens of masculinity, we recruited 16 men athletes ($M_{age} = 21.4$ years; $SD = 3.7$) to participate in two semi-structured interviews with a reflexive photography task between interviews. The intent of the reflexive photography task was to give the men athletes an opportunity to describe their respective experiences of self-compassion through the lens of masculinity. Our approach of conducting two interviews with each participant, as well as having them engage in a reflexive photography task, provided the men athletes an opportunity to express their views on masculinity, self-compassion, and sport through a combination of visual and verbal methods. In the third study, athletes will complete questionnaires before, after, and one-month following the self-compassion intervention (and will be compared against a writing control group). The intervention has previously been shown to be effective for women athletes and includes a psychoeducation session and self-directed writing exercises that had the original aim to increase self-compassion and decrease self-criticism, rumination, and excessive concern over mistakes. The psychoeducation component contains a presentation that briefly overviews basic tenets of stress, coping, and self-compassion in sport, and it addresses possible concerns about self-compassion leading to complacency. A version with a video specific to men athletes has been developed. Athletes then complete additional writing exercises over the next seven days and focus on (a) thinking about others who experience similar events (i.e., common humanity), (b) expressing kindness and support to oneself (i.e., self-kindness), (c) promoting a more objective perspective (i.e., mindfulness), and (d) integrating the set of self-compassion skills.

Research Results

In the first study, we found that self-compassion was related to most variables (e.g., psychological well-being, fear of negative evaluation, internalized shame) in hypothesized directions, and that it was important beyond self-esteem. In addition, self-compassion was negatively related to traditional masculinity (e.g., self-reliance, hiding emotions, dominance) and positively related to inclusive masculinity (i.e., a horizontal alignment, or equal treatment, and acceptance of all representations and embodiments of masculinity). We also found that self-compassion moderated (i.e., changed the nature of) relationships between masculinity and both autonomy and attitudes towards gay men. In other words, when men athletes had higher levels of self-compassion, the negative relationship between traditional masculinity and autonomy was stronger than when men athletes had lower levels of self-compassion; and when men athletes had lower levels of self-compassion, the positive relationship between traditional masculinity and (negative) attitudes towards gay men was stronger than when men athletes had higher levels of self-compassion. We found that the men athletes in our second study generally represent a version of masculinity that is accepting of non-traditional representations of masculinity (e.g., homosexuality), and they were open and willing to accept and embrace self-compassion, particularly if it helps them improve their sport performance. Specific themes generated related to masculinity included: (a) expectations to fulfill traditionally masculine ideologies, often stemming from media influence, and (b) expressions of distaste towards

particularly hypermasculine displays that align with traditional masculine norms (e.g., bravado, machismo, arrogance, cockiness). Specific themes generated related to self-compassion included: (a) and openness to self-compassion, (b) being self-compassionate is being masculine, (c) initial reservations to embrace self-compassion and the potential stigma of being self-compassionate, and (d) the need for self-compassion education.

Policy and Program Implications

The emotional challenges of sport can be high, and many of the emotional challenges men athletes face is linked to masculinity. Having a resource like self-compassion that can help men athletes better manage setbacks, emotional challenges, and evaluation, particularly in a way that isn't harsh and self-critical can be an important strategy to help them (a) stay in sport longer and (b) have a more positive sport experience. Our research also highlights the importance of supporting various forms of masculinity in sport, especially those that are counter to a traditional masculinity that provides many barriers to a healthy sport experience.

Next Steps

There are two next steps we'd like to highlight. First, finding the most effective way to structure and develop self-compassion intervention for men athletes is important; and it is likely that integrating a focus on masculinity could enhance effectiveness. Second, men athletes, sports, and teams who embrace traditional masculinity might face particular challenges to adopting self-compassion; therefore, finding language that will resonate across different groups will be important, as will continuing efforts to show evidence of the benefits of self-compassion to performance.

Knowledge Translation

The first two studies have been published in top journals in the field of sport and exercise psychology. However, we have also undertaken applied efforts, including: (a) delivering multiple workshop on self-compassion in sport; (b) developing a web-site (self-kinpassion.org), which hosts a summary of research and self-compassion strategies and should be available as of Sept 1, 2021; and (c) completing a "Self-compassion in sport 101" article for Sircuit (<https://sirc.ca/blog/self-compassion-in-sport-101/>). We have worked closely with SaskSport in particular and delivered a self-compassion workshop for coaches, so they would be an ideal sport organization to receive this report.

