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Self-Compassion

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Definition of Self-Compassion

Self-compassion refers to compassion directed towards one's own suffering. It contains three components: self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity.

Self-Compassion

Self-compassion can be understood as compassion directed towards one's own suffering. It relates to how we treat ourselves during times of perceived failure, personal challenges, and feelings of inadequacy. Empirical research on self-compassion has soared in the past 20 years (see Neff, 2022 for a review), but the concept has featured in discourse across the centuries. The most common operationalization of self-compassion (Neff, 2003b) is based on Buddhist philosophy where compassion extends to the self as well as others. Self-compassion involves "being present with our own pain, feeling connected to others who are also suffering, and understanding and supporting ourselves through difficult moments" (Neff, 2022).

Self-compassion has been operationalized as a multi-faceted construct with three key components: self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity (Neff, 2003a). Self-kindness involves extending kindness and understanding to ourselves rather than judgement or criticism (Neff, 2003a). Mindfulness is a type of balanced awareness, where we are willing to be open and accepting of the pain in the present moment, without exaggerating or over-identifying with our negative feelings or thoughts (Neff, 2003a). Common humanity involves perceiving one's suffering as part of the human experience, rather than as an isolated and lonely experience (Neff, 2003a). Common humanity reminds us that nobody is perfect and all humans experience suffering and challenges. Self-compassion thus helps us to feel connected to others, rather than alone.

Unsurprisingly, a tendency to be self-compassionate has been linked to a range of positive outcomes for psychological well-being and physical health (MacBeth and Gumley, 2012; Phillips and Hine, 2021). By treating ourselves with compassion, we are less likely to experience the negative psychological outcomes associated with difficult and self-threatening events (Leary et al., 2007). Self-compassion is consistently negatively associated with

psychopathology, including lower depression, anxiety, and stress (MacBeth and Gumley, 2012). It can increase our perceptions of meaning in life (O'Dea et al., 2022). Self-compassion promotes autonomy, competence, and adaptive coping (Ewert et al., 2021). The evidence is clear that being kind to ourselves makes us strong, productive, and is not a selfish act, despite common misconceptions. However, social norms, particularly in Western culture, do not tend to promote self-compassion as an admirable character strength (Neff, 2022). Humility, selflessness, and compassion for others are instead championed, with an apparent ignorance of the fact that being self-compassionate will help to further engender such virtues, rather than hinder them.

Heroes and Self-Compassion

In the emerging field of hero science, heroes may be defined as individuals, real or imagined "representing an ideal self-image" (Sullivan and Venter, 2010, p. 474). Their heroic actions typically involve "prosocial behavior characterized by high risk, sacrifice, without expectation of personal benefit" (Kneuer et al., 2022, p. 59; Allison et al., 2017). An examination of lay perceptions of heroes (Kinsella et al., 2015b) revealed that the ascribed characteristics of heroes are diverse; heroes come in many shapes and forms, and there are important cultural differences in these characteristics (Sun et al., 2023). Yet, some characteristics may feature more prominently than others in the hero lay concept, including bravery, moral integrity, courageousness, protection, conviction, honesty, altruism, willingness to self-sacrifice, selflessness, determination, and saving, inspiring, and helping others (Kinsella et al., 2015b). The traits that heroes possess are both communal and agentic, though the comparatively high prominence of communal features sets them apart from other admired individuals, such as leaders (Hoyt et al., 2020).

There is considerable consensus that heroes occupy an important role in society as a whole and for the individual in particular. For example, people believe that their heroes fulfill

several psychological and social functions (Kinsella et al., 2015a). These include an *enhancing function* whereby heroes impart guidance, motivation, and companionship onto their admirers. Heroes serve a *moral modelling* function by demonstrating, and reminding others of, important values, distinctions between good and bad, and ways in which one can improve the world. A third function, *protection*, refers to heroes (perceived) capacity to ward off danger and threats, and to keep one safe. Consistent with these believed functions, studies show that heroes assuage existential threats and elevate perceived personal power (Ulqinaku et al., 2020), remedy boredom and enhance perceived meaning in life (Coughlan et al., 2019), and may benefit self-responsibility and volitional control among their admirers (Thrash et al., 2010).

It bears mentioning that, despite the undoubtedly significant role that heroes play in society, the consequences of hero reverie are not exclusively positive. It has been suggested that labeling individuals, such as overworked healthcare workers in the COVID-19 pandemic, 'heroes' may prevent society from acknowledging their plight and implementing support (Cox, 2020), and can significantly limit the employment opportunities of these individuals (Stanley et al., 2023). Furthermore, in a world where one's successes and failures are often unpredictable, emulating those individuals who achieve success can inspire unwarranted risk-taking (Van Tilburg and Mahadevan, 2020).

To date, the dedicated empirical study of links between heroes and self-compassion is limited—possibly a consequence of the relatively recent emergence of these fields. The same is true for links between heroes and the self-kindness and common humanity components of self-compassion, which have not featured in empirical treatises as primary variables alongside heroes. Nonetheless, there are several areas where the study of hero characteristics and functions on the one hand, and the study of self-compassion on the other, intersect. Furthermore, several studies have examined heroes in context of the third self-compassion

component—mindfulness. These intersections suggest links between heroes and self-compassion in three forms: being self-compassionate can be a characteristic of heroes, heroes may especially benefit from self-compassion, and heroes may foster self-compassion in others.

Heroes can be Self-Compassionate

Many of the prototypical features that lay people ascribe to heroes focus on heroes' tendency to be compassionate towards *others* rather than themselves. Is there reason to believe that self-compassion is a trait that makes a hero? This is indeed plausible. Work on mindfulness—one of three components of self-compassion—suggests that this feature of self-compassion may turn some into heroes. Jones (2018) observed that qualities of heroes identified by Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011) overlapped with features of mindfulness. For example, the presence of a quest that heroes pursue may be directed at feeling enlightenment, an experience that mindfulness practice seeks to offer. As another example, a hero's tendency to sacrifice has parallels with the willingness to dissolve the ego among those practicing mindfulness. What Jones subsequently proposes is that a person's pursuit of mindfulness may cause them to become a hero for others (2019).

As of yet, the literature on self-compassion as a heroic attribute is limited, and dedicated empirical studies appear wholly absent. Nevertheless, its study is deserving and may offer new insight into causes of heroism attributions, and, perhaps, the recognition that compassion for the self, rather than self-sacrifice, can be an admirable quality.

Heroes need Self-Compassion

Heroes are characterized by prosocial, other-oriented behaviors such as self-sacrifice, selflessness, and altruism (Kinsella et al., 2015b). While many heroes thus demonstrate high levels of compassion for others, research shows that compassion for others does not necessitate high compassion for the self (Neff and Pommier, 2013). This is noteworthy, given

that many of the occupations associated with high levels of burnout tend to be helping roles

(Taris et al., 2005) involving engagement with the public, such as healthcare workers,

veterinarians, and civil defense forces, where the hero label is often assigned. For example

during the Covid-19 pandemic, frontline workers were hailed as heroes for their displays of

bravery, self-sacrifice, and compassion for others in extremely challenging environments

(Sumner and Kinsella, 2021). However, being willing to go "above and beyond" for the

greater good of society, accompanied by the heightened expectations associated with being a

hero, can come at the sacrifice of psychological and physical well-being (Kinsella et al.,

2022; Preti et al., 2020).

　　　　Self-compassion has particular utility in the challenging environments heroes often

find themselves in (Leary et al., 2007). Consistently, robust evidence suggests that self-

compassion promotes adaptive coping and is an important factor for acquiring and

maintaining resilience during life challenges (e.g., Sbarra et al., 2012). For example, self-

compassion predicts lower levels of suicide risk in Veterans (Rabon et al., 2019), a group

frequently venerated as heroes (Stanley et al., 2023). Showing compassion for oneself, both

during and after stressful experiences often associated with being a hero, is arguably vital for

the mental and physical health of those regarded as heroes. Perhaps the societal pressure

placed on heroes to be selfless (Kinsella et al., 2015b), hinders their ability to practice to self-

compassion. However, research shows that self-compassion is not selfish and can in fact

promote positive work engagement, reduce emotional, physical, and cognitive exhaustion due

to work demands, and offer greater satisfaction with one's professional life (Babenko et al.,

2019). Future research should focus on promoting targeted self-compassion interventions for

those placed in heroic roles.

Heroes can Inspire Self-Compassion (500 words)

Self-compassion is not a fixed personality trait and can be cultivated, for example through specific self-compassion interventions, and thus it is likely that self-compassion is malleable through modelling a hero's example. Like self-compassion as a putative characteristic of heroes, little work has considered if heroes serve as source of self-compassion for others. However, there are reason to expect that they are. This may occur through two routes: Firstly, if self-compassion, or its components, can be a heroic feature for some (e.g., mindful heroes, Jones, 2018), then heroes may encourage self-compassion in others through their moral modeling function (Kinsella et al., 2015a). Indeed, the effect of positive role models, of which heroes are arguably a special category, is well-documented (e.g., Lockwood and Kunda, 1997; Van Tilburg and Mahadevan, 2020). It is thus reasonable to expect that having heroes model virtues, such as altruism, can promote observers to act in the same way (Schnall and Roper, 2012) and normalize the behavior. Heroes displaying self-compassion in a highly observable manner can encourage others to deploy more self-compassion and encourage the development of the trait.

A recent example of self-compassion being modelled by someone of heroic quality can be found in New Zealand politics. Former prime minister, Jacinta Arden, became the world's youngest female head of government at age 37. But her displays of humanity and compassion, rather than her age or gender, led to her being labeled a hero in public discourse (e.g., Cave, 2020; *News 18*, 2020) and considered by some a hero for feminism (e.g., Pullen and Vachhani, 2021). In her resignation speech, Arden expressed a display of self-compassion that is rare in the political sphere; "I hope I leave New Zealanders with a belief that you can be kind, but strong, empathetic but decisive, optimistic but focused. And that you can be your own kind of leader – one who knows when it's time to go" (McClure, 2023). Such displays of self-compassion are vital in terms of normalizing the notion that it is okay to

admit when one's mental and physical health is on the line. This acknowledgment is essential for preventing burnout in heroes, and perhaps is a heroic act in itself.

A second route through which heroes may inspire self-compassion is through being compassionate towards others. Studies on childhood attachment show that parental warmth predicts higher self-compassion, whereas parental rejection and overprotection predict lower levels (Pepping et al., 2015). Indeed, the origins of self-compassion have been ascribed in part to attachment, security, and social connectedness (e.g., Neff and Dahm, 2015). While heroes are not necessarily parents in the literal sense, their functions and prototypical features resonate with several characteristics of positive parenting styles (e.g., offering guidance, protection, security, motivation, companionship; showing compassion; Kinsella et al., 2015a, 2015b). Thus, by cultivating for others a safe, kind, and compassionate environment, heroes may indirectly impart self-compassion skills.

Conclusion

The putative link between self-compassion and heroes has receive little empirical scrutiny so far. Yet, an inspection of the intersections between heroism science and the study of self-compassion shows that there are at least three likely links to be found. Firstly, the ability to be self-compassionate may for some be what makes a hero. Secondly, heroes, especially those under excessive strain and burdened by the perceived expectations associated with being a hero, may benefit especially from practicing self-compassion. Thirdly, self- or other-compassionate heroes may engender self-compassion in others and play an important role in shifting common misconceptions about the trait.

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