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Sink or Swim: Adversity- and Growth-Related  
Experiences in Olympic Swimming Champions  
Karen Howells and David Fletcher  
Loughborough University, United Kingdom

Author Note

Karen Howells and David Fletcher, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences,  
Loughborough University, United Kingdom.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Karen Howells, School of  
Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Epinal Way, Loughborough,  
Leicestershire LE11 3TU, United Kingdom. Voice: 4415-0922-8450. E-mail:  
K.Howells@lboro.ac.uk

27 Abstract

28 *Objective:* To explore the adversity- and growth-related experiences of swimmers at the highest  
29 competitive level. Of particular interest was the transitional process that the swimmers progress  
30 through to positively transform their experiences.

31 *Design and method:* Eight autobiographies of Olympic swimming champions were sampled and  
32 analyzed. The books were written by four male and three female swimmers whose ages at the  
33 time of their Olympic swims ranged from 14-41 years ( $M = 23.39$ ,  $SD = 6.04$ ). Informed by a  
34 narrative tradition, the autobiographies were subjected to a holistic analysis which involved  
35 scrutinizing the form of the structure and style of the narrative, and the content relating to the  
36 events and meanings described by the authors.

37 *Results and conclusion:* The swimmers perceived their adversity-related experiences to be  
38 traumatic and initially attempted to negotiate them by maintaining a state of normality through  
39 the development of an emotional and embodied relationship with water. This relationship  
40 involved the non-disclosure of traumatic adversities and the development of multiple identities.  
41 As these strategies eventually proved to be maladaptive and exposed the swimmers to further  
42 adversity, the dialogue of the autobiographies typically shifted to a more quest-focused narrative  
43 with the swimmers seeking meaning in their experiences and looking to others for support.  
44 Adoption of these strategies was necessary for the swimmers to experience growth, which was  
45 identifiable through superior performance, enhanced relationships, spiritual awareness, and  
46 prosocial behavior. The findings provide broad support for theories of posttraumatic growth and  
47 suggest that assimilation processes may comprise initial phases of the transition between  
48 adversity and growth. The authors discuss a number of practical implications for psychologists  
49 and significant others involved with elite swimmers.

50 *Keywords:* autobiographies, elite, narrative, qualitative, sport, swimming

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52 Sink or Swim: Adversity- and Growth-Related  
53 Experiences in Olympic Swimming Champions

54 Over the past few decades, the topic of adversity has received increasing interest within  
55 the academic literature. Luthar and Cicchetti (2000) defined adversity as typically encompassing  
56 “negative life circumstances that are known to be statistically associated with adjustment  
57 difficulties” (p. 858). This perspective employs a threshold-dependent definition of adversity  
58 analogous to the notion of risk (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013), whereas other researchers have adopted  
59 a less stringent and broader approach to defining adversity. For example, Jackson, Firtko, and  
60 Edenborough (2007) defined adversity as “the state of hardship or suffering associated with  
61 misfortune, trauma, distress, difficulty, or a tragic event” (p. 3). The definitional focus shifts  
62 from a predominately external ‘circumstance’ to incorporating internal cognitions and affect,  
63 thereby conceiving adversity as a relational ‘state’ between an individual and his or her  
64 environment. Since the relationship between environmental stressors and psychological  
65 outcomes is highly complex (cf. Jones & Bright, 2001; McMahon, Grant, Compas, Thurm, & Ey,  
66 2003), sport psychology researchers have typically adopted a broader perspective of adversity,  
67 exploring sexual harassment or abuse (Fasting, Brackenridge, & Walseth, 2002; Tamminen, Holt,  
68 & Neely, 2013), depression (Galli & Reel, 2012a; Mummery, 2005), emotional abuse or bullying  
69 (Stirling & Kerr, 2008; Tamminen et al., 2013), eating disorders (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2010;  
70 Tamminen et al., 2013), and injury (Galli & Reel, 2012a; Wadey, Evans, Evans, & Mitchell,  
71 2011).

72 Adversities clearly represent difficult periods in people’s lives; however, various religious  
73 and philosophical writing, anecdotal evidence, and psychosocial theory and research collectively  
74 point to the potential for individuals to experience growth following such experiences (Tedeschi  
75 & Calhoun, 1995). Within the psychology literature, various terms have been used to describe  
76 growth-related experiences, including perceived benefits (Affleck, Tennen, Croog, & Levine,  
77 1987), positive changes in outlook (Joseph, Williams, & Yule, 1993), stress-related growth (SRG;  
78 Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), posttraumatic growth (PTG; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), thriving

79 (Carver, 1998), positive by-products (McMillen, Howard, Nower, & Chung, 2001), positive  
80 adaptation (Linley, 2003), and adversarial growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Although these terms  
81 all pertain to growth-related experiences, there are often subtle differences at a conceptual level.  
82 For example, Park (2009) identified four main differences between SRG and PTG relating to: (a)  
83 the severity of the event (with PTG involving a more severe occurrence), (b) the mechanism of  
84 growth (PTG assumes a restructuring of basic life assumptions whereas SRG involves making  
85 meaning out of stressor), (c) the commonality of the occurrence (with PTG being less common  
86 than SRG), and (d) the duration of change (PTG is assumed to involve an enduring and  
87 permanent change whereas SRG may involve a regression back to former thoughts, beliefs, and  
88 behaviors). Despite these differences, three areas of consensus in respect of growth following  
89 adversity have emerged: relationships are enhanced, individuals develop an altered view of  
90 themselves, and individuals re-evaluate and change their life philosophy (Joseph, Murphy, &  
91 Regel, 2012).

92         From a theoretical perspective (cf. Joseph & Linley, 2006), a number of approaches have  
93 been developed, including a functional descriptive model (FDM) of posttraumatic growth  
94 (Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 2010; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995,  
95 Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) and an organismic valuing theory (OVT) of growth through adversity  
96 (Joseph & Linley, 2005). These theories posit that growth arises out of a person's struggle to deal  
97 with the shattered self (cf. Janoff-Bulman, 1992) that occurs as a result of a traumatic experience.  
98 According to the theories, this involves interaction between a variety of person and situational  
99 variables, central to which is an individual's cognitive processing. The main differences between  
100 the theories are the primacy of individual's intrinsic motives in OVT (Joseph & Linley, 2005) and  
101 the significant role of cultural influences in the FDM (Calhoun et al., 2010).

102         The most recent theoretical development in this area is Joseph et al.'s (2012) proposal of  
103 an affective-cognitive processing model (ACPM) of PTG. This model is based on the  
104 assumption that the relationship between PTG and post-traumatic stress is a function of the  
105 intensity of the stress experienced. More specifically, that there is there is a curvilinear

106 relationship between these concepts, whereby PTG occurs at an optimal point when there has  
107 been sufficient stress to challenge fundamental assumptions, yet not so much stress that an  
108 individual is unable to cognitively process and cope with the stress. The premise of the model is  
109 that following event stimuli, various event-related cognitions lead to cognitive appraisal activity,  
110 which in turn has a reciprocal relationship with an individual's emotional state and coping  
111 strategies. This ongoing process is influenced by the social-environmental context and by levels  
112 of personality. Central processes in the model involve an individual maintaining ("assimilation")  
113 or modifying ("accommodation") their pre-traumatic assumptions. Critical to posttraumatic  
114 growth is the process of "positive accommodation" during which an individual changes his or her  
115 schema to realize congruence with the new trauma-related information and the expression of an  
116 intrinsic drive towards psychological well-being. Despite these theoretical advances, the growth-  
117 related literature has been critiqued for overemphasizing cognitive and affective characteristics  
118 rather than evidence of change demonstrated through action (cf. Hobfoll et al., 2007; Westphal &  
119 Bonanno, 2007). Only when the search for and the subsequent presence of meaning are  
120 translated into action can a more complete experience of growth be realized.

121         Within the sport psychology literature, theorists and researchers have recently begun to  
122 recognize the benefits of adversity. In a study of psychological resilience in Olympic champions,  
123 Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) found that "most of the participants argued that if they had not  
124 experienced certain types of stressors...., including highly demanding adversities such as parental  
125 divorce, serious illness, and career-threatening injuries, they would not have won their gold  
126 medals" (p. 672). In an opinion piece, Collins and MacNamara (2012) speculated that talented  
127 youth athletes can often benefit from, or even need, a variety of challenges to facilitate eventual  
128 adult performance; or, as they succinctly put it in the title of their article: "Talent Needs Trauma"  
129 (p. 907). From a sport injury perspective, research examining athletes' responses to injury has  
130 identified a range of perceived benefits and underlying mechanisms (Wadey et al., 2011).  
131 Collectively, this work suggests that the role of adversity in sport performers' lives warrants  
132 further research, particularly in respect of the processes that may facilitate positive outcomes.

133           Research in this area has begun to explicitly explore adversity and growth in sport  
134 performers. In 2012, Galli and Reel conducted two studies in this area. In their first study, they  
135 interviewed eleven intercollegiate athletes and developed a conceptual model of SRG that  
136 illustrates how, within a performer's personal and social context, social support is used to work  
137 through the disruption caused by stressors and realize positive psychological outcomes (Galli &  
138 Reel, 2012a). For these athletes, growth was perceived in the form of a new life philosophy, self-  
139 changes, and interpersonal changes. In their second study, Galli and Reel (2012b) distributed the  
140 Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) to intercollegiate athletes to  
141 further investigate experiences of adversarial growth. They found that athletes reported low to  
142 moderate levels of positive change following their most difficult adversity, that females reported  
143 greater spiritual growth than males, and that time demands are associated with growth in terms of  
144 an enhanced appreciation for life. The following year, Tamminen et al. (2013) interviewed five  
145 elite female performers about their experiences of adversity and their potential for growth. They  
146 found that as the athletes sought and found meaning in their experiences of adversity, they  
147 identified opportunities for growth associated with social support and as the performers realized  
148 the role of sport in their lives. Other studies in this area have explored coaches' perceptions of  
149 athletes' stress-related growth following an injury (Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullough, 2013),  
150 and posttraumatic growth in disability athletes (Crawford, Gayman, & Tracey 2014; Day, 2013).

151           Recent research points to the salience of adversity and growth-related experiences in sport  
152 performers' lives. However, it has been acknowledged that this work has tended to provide a  
153 'snapshot' of the phenomenon under investigation and a "somewhat narrow focus on a single  
154 stressor" (Galli & Reel, 2012a, p. 315). A need exists to examine "the temporal course of  
155 growth" (Galli & Reel, 2012a, p. 315) "over longer periods of time" (Tamminen et al., 2013, p.  
156 35) that better capture the complexity of performers' life stories (see also Galli & Reel, 2012b).  
157 Furthermore, given that certain trauma-related experiences appear to be associated with certain  
158 sports (cf. Collins & MacNamara, 2012), experiences of adversity and growth are likely to be  
159 idiosyncratic and contextually dependent at a sport-specific level. One sport that is particularly

160 demanding is competitive swimming which typically involves intensive training from a relatively  
161 early age, engagement in a conformist and disciplined environment, and a high risk of medical-  
162 related issues. Many swimmers begin training prior to the onset of puberty with this commitment  
163 involving increasing intensity and volumes of training (Lang & Light, 2010). This training  
164 occurs within an environment which demands adherence to normative social practices which can  
165 create a “climate of fear” (Lang, 2010, p. 29) that fosters a culture of non-disclosure of issues of  
166 concern. Given this intensive and conformist training environment, it is perhaps not surprising  
167 that swimmers are particularly susceptible to certain injuries, illnesses and overtraining (Chase,  
168 Caine, Goodwin, Whitehead, & Romanick, 2013; Kammer, Young, & Niedfeldt, 1999). In this  
169 study, we explored the adversity- and growth-related experiences of swimmers at the highest  
170 competitive level. Of particular interest was the transitional process that the swimmers progress  
171 through to positively transform their experiences.

### 172 **Method**

173 This study was grounded in a constructivist paradigm which assumes changing and  
174 sometimes conflicting social realities, and seeks to understand people’s constructions of their  
175 lived experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Within this paradigm, the researcher(s) acts as an  
176 active instrument in the constructivist process. As such, it is worth noting that we have a  
177 combined experience of 35 years as competitive swimmers, 20 years as swimming coaches, 18  
178 years as swimming psychologists, and 15 years as swimming parents. We have therefore  
179 acquired insight and understanding of the competitive swimming community, nomenclature, and  
180 culture. In view of the assumptions underpinning the constructivist paradigm, a qualitative  
181 approach was deemed appropriate to investigate the research question because it is well suited to  
182 revealing the subjective meanings that individuals attribute to events in their lives and can be  
183 particularly useful for exploring “problematic moments and meanings” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011,  
184 p. 4). In their discussion about the value of qualitative approaches in the study of the related area  
185 of thriving, Massey, Cameron, Ouellette, and Fine (1998) highlighted a number of opportunities  
186 relevant to the study of growth (cf. Hussain, & Bhushan, 2012), including hearing how people

187 make meaning of their lives, understanding the idiosyncratic nature of people’s narratives,  
188 chronicling the process-related changes over time, and highlighting the meaningfulness of context  
189 and multiple discourses. The value of such an approach in growth research has also recently been  
190 recognized by sport psychology researchers who asserted that “qualitative investigations remain  
191 important due to the powerful narratives that often emerge from attempts to explore the lived  
192 experiences of those who perceive growth from adversity” (Galli & Reel, 2012a, p. 298). In  
193 addressing the future direction of growth research Galli and Reel proposed the use of grounded  
194 theory, phenomenology or narrative analysis to further inform our understanding of growth in  
195 sport.

### 196 **Autobiographical Research**

197 Human beings typically convey their socially constructed experiences through the act of  
198 storytelling (Bakhtin, 1981), an act which is epitomized in autobiographies. Autobiography is a  
199 genre of writing that provides a retrospective account of an individual’s experiences. With their  
200 origins in classical Greek writing, autobiographies became popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and  
201 provide a unique contribution to understanding the practices and behaviors of individuals within a  
202 given context (Bakhtin, 1981). From a research perspective, there is a long history of analyzing  
203 autobiographies within literary studies and life writing. In 1974, Howarth argued that  
204 autobiographies represent a “self-portrait” (p. 364) of the storyteller and proposed that they may  
205 be legitimately studied alongside other literary genres. More recently, autobiographies have  
206 become an established source of empirical data in a number of disciplines, such as criminology  
207 (Morgan, 1999), psychology (Suedfeld & Weiszbeck, 2004), sociology (Shamir, Dayan-Horesh,  
208 & Adler, 2005), accounting (Haynes, 2006), and nursing (Power, Jackson, Weaver, Wilkes, &  
209 Carter, 2012). In the past decade, sport researchers have also begun to use autobiographies to  
210 better understand the lives of athletes. For example, Butryn and Masucci (2003) analyzed the  
211 cyclist Lance Armstrong’s autobiography and constructed a parallel counternarrative based on his  
212 relationship with technology alongside his account of his life story. Sparkes’ (2004) study of the  
213 same book provided insights into the bodies, selves and narratives that circulate within the

214 autobiography and highlighted issues regarding the cultural shaping of the narratives. Most  
215 recently, Thing and Ronglan (2014) analyzed the cyclist Jesper Skibby's autobiography focusing  
216 on social interactions, emotions, and personality constructions. In addition to examining single  
217 autobiographies, researchers have also begun to analyze multiple sport-related autobiographies.  
218 The selection of multiple autobiographies has the advantage of portraying diverse perspectives  
219 and voices that communicate "a more evocative force" (Frank, 2012, p. 36) than a single case.  
220 Drawing on six autobiographies of high altitude mountaineers, Burke and Sparkes (2009)  
221 explored the construction of the self in relation to cognitive dissonance. Stewart, Smith, and  
222 Sparkes (2011) analyzed the autobiographies of 12 elite sport performers and focused on the role  
223 of metaphors in shaping athletes' experiences of illness. Collectively, this research points to the  
224 usefulness of autobiographies in understanding sport performers' experiences, particularly when  
225 they involve significant adversity.

## 226 **Sample**

227         Eight autobiographies of Olympic swimming champions were sampled, a quantity which  
228 is broadly consistent with previous research that has studied multiple sport-related  
229 autobiographies (viz. Burke & Sparkes, 2009; Stewart et al., 2011). Olympic champions were  
230 selected because they epitomize competitive swimming at the highest level and typically  
231 encounter adversities and potential for growth during their careers (cf. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012).  
232 We sampled all of the Olympic swimming champions' autobiographies published between 2002  
233 and 2012. The publication year rather than the year of Olympic Games took precedence because  
234 autobiographical accounts are reflective of the historical era in which they were written  
235 (Crossley, 2000) and are situated within the context of what is publishable and marketable at any  
236 given time (Smith & Watson, 2010). Autobiographies published during this decade are, to some  
237 extent, products of a post 9/11 era of heightened awareness and sensitivity to significant  
238 adversity. Indeed, during this period the "sports-consuming public" (Morgan, 2010, p. 1580)  
239 increasingly demanded accounts of star athletes' personal struggles to overcome adversity  
240 (Schaffer & Smith, 2004). Given the psychosocial focus of this study, and the salience of world

241 events at the start of the 21st century, we delimited the selection of autobiographies to after 2001.  
242 As Schaffer and Smith (2004) remarked: “stories of suffering and survival sell to readers” (p. 12).

243 The autobiographies were written by four male and three female swimmers whose details  
244 are summarized in Table 1. Collectively, the swimmers represented four countries at seven  
245 Olympic Games, with each swimmer competing in at least two Olympic Games and winning at  
246 least one Olympic gold medal at either of the Games. Their ages at the time of their Olympic  
247 swims ranged from 14-41 years ( $M = 23.39$ ,  $SD = 6.04$ ). The swimmers used one of the  
248 following genres of writing: the swimmer as sole author written in the first person (viz. Mark  
249 Tewksbury), the swimmer as primary author (with a co-author) written in the first person (viz.  
250 Amanda Beard, Ryk Neethling, Michael Phelps (two autobiographies), Ian Thorpe, and Dara  
251 Torres), and the swimmer as co-author written in the third person (viz. Natalie Coughlin).

## 252 **Data Analysis**

253 The autobiographies provide multiple narratives of Olympic swimming champions’  
254 experiences and are therefore appropriate for analysis informed by a narrative tradition (Lieblich,  
255 Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Smith and Sparkes (2009) defined a narrative as “a complex  
256 genre that routinely contains a *point* and *characters* along with a *plot* connecting *events* that  
257 unfold *sequentially* over *time* and *space* to provide an overarching *explanation or consequence*”  
258 (p. 2). The autobiographies align well with this definition and were subjected to a holistic  
259 analysis whereby the text was interpreted within the context of the whole story (Lieblich et al.,  
260 1998). This analytical approach involves scrutinizing the plots of complete life stories, thus  
261 being particularly appropriate for providing insight into autobiographical accounts. Within this  
262 holistic approach, the *form* of the structure and style of the narrative was analyzed, and the  
263 *content* relating to the events and meanings described by the authors was analyzed (Lieblich et  
264 al., 1998). The holistic analysis was accompanied by Smith and Watson’s (2010) strategies for  
265 reading and engaging with life narratives and autobiographies. Among the strategies they  
266 suggested, narrative plottings and modes, voice, trauma, and embodiment were deemed  
267 particularly appropriate for addressing the purpose of this study.

268           During multiple readings of the autobiographies, two strategies (viz. narrative patterns  
269 and voice) were aligned with holistic-form analysis and two strategies (viz. trauma and  
270 embodiment) aligned with holistic-content analysis. In terms of the narrative pattern, Smith and  
271 Watson (2010) advocated the exploration of the plottings used to structure the narrative and, for  
272 example, reflecting on whether there are multiple plottings in the text or whether one pattern  
273 dominates. A performance narrative (cf. Douglas & Carless, 2006) was not surprisingly apparent  
274 in the readings; however, a quest narrative (cf. Frank, 1995) was also evident in the swimmers'  
275 experiences and lives. Within the narrative patterns, Smith and Watson recommended exploring  
276 whether there is a dominant voice or whether there are multiple and/or conflicting voices.  
277 Autobiographies are typically conceived to be the stories of one individual's experiences, but  
278 these accounts are often delivered through multiple voices, either explicitly as when  
279 autobiographies are written collaboratively with ghost writers, or implicitly through structural  
280 writing strategies. For example, several of the swimmers used italics or quotation marks to  
281 portray internal ruminations about adversity, thus representing additional voices which are  
282 present alongside the narrative of the primary storytelling voice. Turning to the significant events  
283 and meanings within the autobiographies, Smith and Watson provided guidance on dealing with  
284 traumatic issues and advised a focus on how the author deals with trauma, suffering, and the  
285 resultant experience. Adversity-related trauma and negotiation of experience were consistent  
286 themes across the swimmers' experiences. In addressing embodiment, Smith and Watson (2010)  
287 suggested that the role of the body in the narrative should be considered in relation to the cultural  
288 meanings attached to the body and what bodily processes are significant. In the autobiographies,  
289 the focus of the narratives was often on the performance and aesthetic meanings of the  
290 swimmers' bodies and as such the embodied experience or, as Pipkin (2008) put it, the "body  
291 songs" (p. 44) recounted by the swimmers was a noteworthy aspect of their stories.

292           Within the constructivist paradigm, the notions of truthfulness and trustworthiness are  
293 important considerations in understanding people's lived experiences. Autobiographical  
294 accounts do not constitute an exact – or 'true' – representation of events and will likely involve

295 inconsistent and shifting views of the narrator. Rather, they involve reconstruction from the  
296 storyteller's perspective relying on their personal memory within a cultural context, a process that  
297 may be motivated by deceit or positive self-presentation (Smith & Watson, 2010). In reading  
298 autobiographical accounts, Smith and Watson argued that the reader's expectations of truth have  
299 to be adjusted to acknowledge that it is impossible to fully verify or, conversely, fully discredit  
300 the truth. Elite athletes are, however, in a position to provide valuable firsthand perspectives of  
301 sport that are not normally accessible to the majority and "*their stories*" (Pipkin, 2008, p. 11)  
302 provide a certain degree of trustworthiness to their interpretations. As Smith and Watson  
303 elucidated, "any utterance ... even if accurate or distorted, is a characterization of its writer" (p.  
304 15). Thus, although at one level these accounts offer a privileged insight into the world of elite  
305 sport, they also offer at another level opportunities for critical enlightenment that go beyond  
306 many other forms of inquiry. The first author used a reflective journal to enhance her self-  
307 awareness during the data analysis process, and the second author acted as a 'critical friend' to  
308 constructively challenge the analytical decisions. As Stanley (1992) remarked: "we may be  
309 textually persuaded, cajoled, led and misled; but we can... scrutinize and analyze, puzzle and  
310 ponder, resist and reject" (p. 131).

## 311 **Results and Discussion**

### 312 **Embedded Narratives**

313 The analysis of the autobiographies revealed that all of the Olympic champion swimmers  
314 experienced adversity during their lives, and that they progressed through a transitional process to  
315 positively transform their experiences into growth. From a holistic perspective, it was evident  
316 from the swimmers' narratives and voices that adversity was typically a traumatic experience for  
317 them. Initially, the swimmers often attempted to maintain normality through an embodied  
318 relationship with water, which involved the non-disclosure of traumatic adversities and the  
319 development of multiple identities. Although this proved to be a somewhat effective strategy in  
320 the short-term, it became increasingly maladaptive in the longer term resulting in the swimmers  
321 acknowledging the need to confront their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. In doing so, the

322 swimmers sought meaning in their experiences, accepted the support of others and, subsequently,  
323 they experienced growth. For these champion swimmers, growth was ultimately represented by  
324 superior performance, enhanced relationships, spiritual awareness, and prosocial behavior.

325         The swimmers' stories are consistent with aspects of both performance and quest  
326 narratives. According to Douglas and Carless (2006), the performance narrative is dominant in  
327 sport and comprises a "primacy of performance" (p. 15) where performance and results are  
328 prioritized at the expense of other aspects of athletes' lives. They argued that this narrative,  
329 typically characterized by a focus on competition and winning, is present in all levels of sport and  
330 in both male and female athletes (see also Douglas & Carless, 2009). This focus is explored in  
331 Coakley's (2014) power and performance model of sport which identified that a win at all costs  
332 sport ethic requires conformity to the values of an individual's chosen sport. For the Olympic  
333 swimming champions, the pathway to the podium entailed adherence to this performance  
334 narrative and acceptance of pain and sacrifice in the pursuit of their sporting goals. Beard  
335 reflected that "it's staggering when I think about how much time and energy swimming has  
336 consumed in my life. An athlete has to sacrifice everything for her sport" (Beard & Paley, 2012,  
337 p. 243). Even pregnancy did not stop Torres from ignoring her doctor's advice to reduce the  
338 intensity of her training: "not surprisingly, over the course of my pregnancy . . . [my coach] and I  
339 kept on having the same conversation. 'Dara, remember what your doctor said', 'Yeah but...'"  
340 (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 24). Adherence to the performance narrative means that failure can  
341 bring about feelings of shame for individuals who have invested their identity in their  
342 performance (Douglas & Carless, 2009). For Torres, her silver medal in the 2008 Olympics was  
343 a failure: "I'd come up short" (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 222). After winning a bronze medal at the  
344 2004 Olympics, Phelps recalled, "I hated standing on that third-place podium. Hated it, hated it"  
345 (Phelps & Cazeneuve, 2012, p. 203). Following eighth place position at the 2000 Olympics,  
346 Neethling reflected, "I was devastated. There's no other way to put it... I was embarrassed"  
347 (Neethling & Van der Berg, 2008, p. 63).

348         When their stories became incompatible with the dominant performance narrative, the

349 swimmers experienced “narrative tension” (Carless & Douglas, 2013, p. 8) and were susceptible  
350 to mental health problems and experiencing further adversity. To avoid becoming a “narrative  
351 wreck” (Frank, 1995, p. 54), the swimmers shifted the focus of their stories and ascribed to a  
352 quest narrative. Quest narratives involve individuals confronting their suffering, accepting the  
353 consequences, and striving to gain something positive from the experience (Frank, 1995).  
354 Neethling perceived a debilitating shoulder injury prior to the 2000 Olympic Trials as if “I had  
355 been sentenced to death” (Neethling & Van der Berg, 2008, p. 170), but he eventually perceived  
356 it as “a blessing in disguise” (p. 166) as it allowed him to focus on other aspects of his training  
357 and his “spirits were up again” (p. 167). Tewksbury reflected that homophobic graffiti on his  
358 school locker “sent me on a path that brought me to the height of Olympic sport, to being an  
359 advocate for human rights, to becoming who I am today” (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 249). Phelps  
360 revealed that “when I was in grade school, I was diagnosed with... ADHD [Attention Deficit  
361 Hyperactivity Disorder]. I had overcome that. When I was in school, a teacher said I’d never be  
362 successful. Things like that stick with you and motivate you” (Phelps & Abrahamson, 2008, pp.  
363 4-5). The performance and quest narratives that were apparent in the swimmers’ autobiographies  
364 contained multiple themes pertaining to adversity-related experiences, transitional processes, and  
365 growth-related experiences.

### 366 **Adversity-Related Experiences**

367         The swimmers’ adversity-related experiences comprised developmental stressors,  
368 external stressors, embodied states, psychological states and externalized behaviors. These  
369 experiences represent both adverse events and individuals’ responses because the swimmers often  
370 identified their responses as becoming adversities in their own right (cf. Jones & Bright, 2001;  
371 McMahon et al., 2003).

372         **Developmental stressors.** Early adversity was not uncommon among the swimmers with  
373 Phelps suffering from ADHD, Neethling from a speech impediment, and Beard from dyslexia and  
374 obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). These developmental stressors interfered with their  
375 academic and social lives. Neethling referred to his childhood stutter as “the most traumatic

376 thing in an otherwise perfect childhood” (Neethling & Van der Berg, 2008, p. 8). Beard’s  
377 dyslexia meant that her school years were characterized by failure and mortification, stating that  
378 “school made me cry out of frustration or humiliation on a daily basis. I felt like a complete  
379 idiot...” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 37).

380         **External stressors.** Several of the swimmers experienced family dysfunction. Beard  
381 described her early childhood as “perfect” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 13) and believed this until  
382 her parents separated: “my parents weren’t into confrontation... weren’t really into  
383 communication. I had no idea why they were breaking up. I had never even seen them fight” (p.  
384 16). Phelps’ father was absent from his formative years: “my father moved out... when I was  
385 seven. As time went on we spent less and less time together” (Phelps & Abrahamson, 2008, p.  
386 23). The adversities related to family members and coaches were traumatic experiences for the  
387 swimmers. Phelps lived in the shadow of his sister’s back injury and eating disorder that quashed  
388 her own Olympic ambitions, and Neethling’s aspirations were against the backdrop of his sister’s  
389 battle with cancer, initially in childhood and then during his preparation for the 2008 Olympics  
390 when she was diagnosed with an aggressive tumor. Torres was particularly close to her divorced  
391 father who died following a long battle with cancer “just as I was getting serious about swimming  
392 again” (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 98). When her coach was diagnosed with serious aplastic  
393 anemia, Torres was distraught: “ten days before the start of the Olympics, I was so sapped by  
394 worrying about [him]” (p. 195). After “Dad and I had run from settling unresolved issues  
395 between us” (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 134), Tewksbury’s father was diagnosed with cancer.  
396 Tewksbury referred to the enormity of the “emotional toll that the disease had taken on our  
397 family” (p. 135) which he perceived as “a turning point for [us]” (p. 132).

398         A notable stressor that many of the swimmers encountered at some point in their career  
399 was their coach’s style of practice and communication. Coughlin reflected that “if gymnastics  
400 and figure skating were the gravest examples of sports whose coaches habitually inflicted  
401 physical, mental and emotional elite-level youth standouts... swimming was quite possibly the  
402 next worst” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, pp. 30-31). Thorpe referred to his coach’s style which was

403 “to flog swimmers in the belief that it was the way to get the best out of them” (Thorpe, 2012, p.  
404 87). This style of coaching was evident in many of the autobiographies and is normalized  
405 behavior within the elite swimming culture (Stirling & Kerr, 2008). It was also common for the  
406 swimmers to become embroiled in conflict with their teammates. Coughlin found herself isolated  
407 from teammates who “resented her” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 128) and Torres had to leave  
408 her coach’s team in the buildup to the 2000 Olympics following a deterioration in her relationship  
409 with a competitor in the group: “my beating her in the 50-meter freestyle was more than our  
410 increasingly fragile relationship could bear” (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 61). As the most successful  
411 swimmers of their generation, the media was never far from their lives. Thorpe found himself  
412 subject to intense media scrutiny over his sexuality and drug allegations and ultimately led to his  
413 premature retirement from swimming: “the attention had become like a cancer” (Thorpe, 2012, p.  
414 292).

415 **Embodied states.** Injury, often the impetus for growth (cf. Wade et al., 2011), was  
416 common among the swimmers. Following the 2004 Olympics, Phelps was diagnosed with  
417 spondylolysis of the back which echoed back to his sister’s injury: “I tried not to think that my  
418 career might end prematurely, as hers did, but of course it entered my mind” (Phelps &  
419 Cazeneuve, 2012, p. 231). Coughlin, Neethling and Torres all suffered from debilitating shoulder  
420 injuries that at various times threatened to end their Olympic careers. The swimmers learned that  
421 overcoming physical pain was not only desirable, but necessary as both coaches and swimmers  
422 internalized the belief that injuries and illnesses are indicators of weakness. Coughlin explained  
423 that “coaches encourage their ailing athletes to ‘swim through it’ whenever possible, and those  
424 that can’t end up quitting the sport or being labeled malingerers” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p.  
425 46). This was even the case when medical experts expressed concern. Coughlin recounted that  
426 one of her early coaches insisted that she swim despite a serious shoulder injury: “the doctor  
427 would say one thing... and [my coach] would walk out of the room and say I could swim through  
428 it” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 47). A bout of illness was perceived by Coughlin to be a “key  
429 moment” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006 p. xv) when, at the World Championships in 2003, she was

430 felled by a flu-like virus that caused her “body [to] breakdown” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 10).

431         **Psychological states.** The swimmers went through episodes of ruminations signifying  
432 affective-cognitive processing (Joseph et al., 2012) which were apparent in instances of body  
433 dissatisfaction, depression, and suicidal thoughts. For Beard, puberty shattered her perceptions of  
434 self and resulted in extreme body dissatisfaction: “...my brain... kept returning to that negative  
435 tape playing over and over: You’re fat and disgusting, unlovable” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 68).  
436 She questioned “whose body is this?” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 65) and recalls her disgust with  
437 her appearance: “I could feel every little despicable part of me jiggle when I walked across the  
438 deck to the blocks. My swimsuit rode up my hips... making me conscious about my thighs and  
439 my butt” (Beard & Paley, 2012, pp. 64-65). Similarly, Tewksbury focused on his body to  
440 identify why he was not in a relationship: “my mind needed to identify some reason why I was  
441 alone... I left no stone unturned on the path to destruction. I played the ‘you are too hairy, you  
442 are too hairy’ tape through my mind” (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 87).

443         Several of the swimmers overtly referred to depression with Thorpe identifying that  
444 “I’ve spent a lot of my life battling what I can only describe as a crippling depression” (Thorpe,  
445 2012, p. 272). Tewksbury stated that “my depression had been building for months, perhaps  
446 years” (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 86) and Beard was referred to a psychiatrist and prescribed  
447 medication for depression. Others used language that suggests depressive symptoms. Neethling  
448 referred to “my dark mood” (Neethling & Van der Berg, 2008, p. 64), Coughlin to “a hollow  
449 numbness that was equal parts depression and disbelief” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 173), and  
450 Torres to the difficulties dealing with her father’s death: “for the next year I’d cry at the drop of a  
451 hat” (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 96). Although depression was clearly a psychological state or  
452 outcome of an adversity (e.g., “there was a connection between my being gay and my being  
453 depressed” (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 90)), it was also evident that depression represented an  
454 adversity in its own right. For example, Thorpe reflected that his depression had no discernible  
455 environmental cause: “just as I believe sexuality to be a genetic disposition, so too is depression.  
456 It was something that I would have had to deal with whether I was a swimmer or not” (Thorpe,

457 2012, p. 274) and not the outcome of anything specific: "...it wasn't a reaction to the high life of  
458 red carpets and speeches, neither can I blame the media intrusion" (Thorpe, 2012, p. 273).

459 The depression that Thorpe and Tewksbury experienced was so severe that they  
460 contemplated suicide. Thorpe explained that "my blackest moments would often last a month  
461 and it was during those times that I thought about 'it' happening. I even considered specific  
462 places and or a [sic] specific ways to kill myself" (Thorpe, 2012, p. 278). Unable to subscribe to  
463 the prevailing heterosexual stereotype, Tewksbury existed in a "monadic body" (Frank, 1995, p.  
464 36), whereby he felt physically and emotionally isolated from those around him. His shame led  
465 to extreme self-loathing: "I was consumed with the thought of killing myself. The intense and  
466 relentless bullying and ostracizing had taken its toll" (Tewksbury, 2006, pp. 35-36).

467 **Externalized behaviors.** In an attempt to deal with trauma, the swimmers often  
468 externalized their emotions and turned on their bodies, abusing them in ways that created further  
469 adversity. Beard described her self-harm in detail and as "...my own revelation. Through it I  
470 could finally solve something" (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 135). Both Beard and Torres  
471 experienced bouts of disordered eating throughout their careers with Torres admitting that "I'd  
472 been bulimic when I'd swum in college and at the 1988 Olympics" (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 29).  
473 She recalled experiences of weigh-ins and having to attend additional workouts – named "the  
474 breakfast club" – if swimmers did not make target weights: "I was desperate to please [my  
475 coach]... I would have done anything not to join the breakfast club. And I did" (Torres & Weil,  
476 2009, p. 31). She managed her weight through purging which is a practice often introduced by  
477 other swimmers to ensure conformity to swimming ideals and to retain an illusion of control over  
478 the body (McMahon, Penney, & Dinan-Thompson, 2012). Torres recounted that "three or four of  
479 us followed [one of the swimmers]. She stuck her fingers down her throat and she made herself  
480 throw up" (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 32). Beard used italicized writing to highlight her self-  
481 dialogue relating to her disordered eating alongside her narrating position: "*I can't have this food*  
482 *in me.... I need to get it out.... Get it out. Get it out.... I got that shit out of me*" (Beard & Paley,  
483 2012, pp. 91-2).

484           Several of the swimmers engaged in substance abuse which has been viewed as an  
485           adversity from which growth can occur (McMillen et al., 2001). After taking a recreational  
486           hallucinogenic drug, Beard remarked: “I was plagued by nightmarish visions and spent hours in  
487           the throes of the scariest experience of my life” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 123). In February 2000,  
488           allegations surfaced that Thorpe was taking performance-enhancing drugs and contributed to  
489           “...[one] of the saddest [moments of my career]” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 244). Phelps explained his  
490           driving under the influence charge following a back injury: “In November 2004... I drove after  
491           drinking [alcohol]... By way of explanation, not excuse: After the Athens Games ended, I was for  
492           the first time in my life, on my own” (Phelps & Abrahamson, 2008, p. 141).

### 493           **The Transitional Process**

494           The transition from adversity to growth involved a number of processes. Initially, the  
495           swimmers attempted to maintain normality and equilibrium in their lives; however, it became  
496           clear that this was ultimately unsustainable. This realization prompted a number of related  
497           processes involving the questioning of the performance narrative, a search for meaning, and the  
498           enlistment of social networks to support the swimmers through their adversity-related experiences  
499           to promote growth. Within this transitional process, there were often pivotal moments that  
500           represented turning points in the swimmers’ lives. For Thorpe, “swimming [was] a safety net and  
501           a security blanket which I was about to cast off...” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 296).

502           **Maintenance of normality.** Following adversity-related experiences, the swimmers  
503           typically tried to maintain a state of normality. Torres stated that “swimming gives me a feeling  
504           – really the illusion – that life is orderly” (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 186). The swimmers who  
505           experienced adversity early in their lives found solace in the protective solitude of swimming  
506           through the development of an emotional and embodied relationship with water. Following  
507           family breakdown, Beard reflected that the “water had become my getaway. The silent sanctuary  
508           was my biggest distraction away from the troubles of my family” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 22).  
509           Neethling explained that he swam to escape the humiliation of a childhood stutter: “in the pool,  
510           I’d be in my own world. I didn’t need to communicate very much. It was perfect for a shy, self-

511 conscious child. No talking – just me and the cool, smooth water” (Neethling & Van der Berg,  
512 2008, p. 9). In reference to his ADHD, Phelps referred to the pool as “my safe haven” (Phelps &  
513 Abrahamson, 2008, p. 20). Thorpe talked of the importance of swimming in his battles with  
514 depression, suicidal thoughts, and the intense media glare: “the water gives me respite. It’s one  
515 of the few places I can be completely comfortable with myself; a place where I am truly happy”  
516 (Thorpe, 2012, p. 21). For many of the swimmers the protective solitude of the water echoed  
517 back to the prenatal experience and a time of safety and security (Strang, 2004). A coach  
518 remarked that Coughlin swam “like she’s in the womb” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 89).

519         At the same time as seeking solace to maintain normality, the swimmers also used  
520 strategies that involved the nondisclosure of traumatic adversities. A closed door analogy was  
521 ubiquitous with sexuality, disordered eating, self-harm, alcohol use, depression, and pain all  
522 being outwardly denied. At the age of seven, Tewksbury began wearing his grandmother’s  
523 clothes which she encouraged until he was 14 years old: “it was our little secret. No one from the  
524 family ever knew about this. Keep it in the closet. Even at this young age I got the message loud  
525 and clear” (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 5). Beard learned to keep her dysfunctional behavior secret; her  
526 purging and self-harming were done behind the bathroom door: “I made sure to carefully cover  
527 my tracks and never get caught” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 92). Thorpe “used alcohol as a means  
528 to rid my head of terrible thoughts, a way of managing my moods – but I did it behind closed  
529 doors, where many depressed people choose to fight their demons” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 275). He  
530 escaped to a similar place to hide his physical pain from the media: “there were occasions when  
531 in closed rooms out of the sight of cameras I collapsed and convulsed in pain” (p. 19).

532         In a further attempt to maintain normality, the swimmers often developed multiple  
533 identities to compartmentalize aspects of their lives (cf. Smith & Watson, 2010). For example, to  
534 avoid the potential stigma attached to disordered eating, some athletes opt to lead a “double life”  
535 (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2010, p. 364) in preference to seeking professional support; a strategy  
536 evident in Torres and Beard’s accounts of their disordered eating. Thorpe described himself as  
537 being made up of many parts or “masks” (Thorpe, 2012, pp. 19-20) with few people having

538 access to, or knowing his true self. Tewksbury separated his sexual orientation from his  
539 swimming persona: “I would do whatever I could to hide it. It started simply by lying to  
540 myself... I was going to ignore this gay thing, hoping it was some strange phase that I would  
541 eventually outgrow” (Tewksbury 2006, pp. 36-37).

542 Although the maintenance of normality proved to be a somewhat effective strategy in the  
543 short-term, it was ultimately unsustainable resulting in the swimmers acknowledging the need to  
544 confront their issues. Struggling with dyslexia, Beard recognized that “I outswam my  
545 problems... but it never lasted. Although a hard swim temporarily washed away my stress, my  
546 problems refused to budge” (Beard, 2012, p. 38). After five years of hiding it, Torres admitted to  
547 an eating disorder: “I was tired of all my secrets, tired of feeling ashamed and weak” (Torres &  
548 Weil, 2009, p. 34).

549 **Questioning the performance narrative.** As the swimmers began to realize that  
550 normality could not be sustained, many of them began to question the dominant performance  
551 narrative within the sport and their lives. The prioritization of performance and results in their  
552 lives had taken its toll on their health, well-being, and personal relationships. For most of the  
553 swimmers this led to them doubting their focus on success and to retiring from the sport.  
554 Thorpe’s retirement as a result of the pressures inherent in top level swimming meant that he had  
555 to “walk away from the sport I loved before I was ready, simply because of [pressures] that  
556 destroyed my enjoyment” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 72). However, he did return to the sport four years  
557 later, not to recapture glory, but because he wanted to integrate competitive swimming back into  
558 his life and that “the truth is that it’s actually a process of self-discovery” (p. 18). Making a  
559 comeback represented a period of self-reflection for some of the swimmers and signified a shift  
560 towards a quest narrative and a change in life philosophy. After briefly giving-up swimming and  
561 abandoning the performance narrative following the 2000 Olympics when he became  
562 disillusioned with what he perceived to be extensive doping within the sport, Neethling reflected  
563 that “walking away gave me perspective. . . . but for that fresh perspective, I may not have  
564 become an Olympic Champion” (Neethling & Van der Berg, 2008, p. 66). For Beard, a return to

565 competitive swimming following the birth of her son was not solely about performance and  
566 results: “I really didn’t worry too much about failing at swimming. Failing my son was my only  
567 serious concern now” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 232).

568       **The search for meaning.** The process of seeking meaning appears to be important for  
569 facilitating growth (Linley & Joseph, 2011). With the exception of Phelps, there was an explicit  
570 acknowledgement by all of the swimmers for the need to identify the meaning underlying specific  
571 adversities. After moving out from his parents’ home, Thorpe (2012) “finally decided to get  
572 some answers . . . the [depression] had become crushing and I knew I needed to seek out other  
573 ways of managing it” (p. 274). For Tewksbury (2006) “perhaps one of the greatest fringe  
574 benefits to being gay was that it forced me to constantly question, first myself, then the world  
575 around me” (p. 135). He found meaning in others’ allegations that he used drugs: “. . . it was one  
576 of the best things that happened to me. . . the strain that had developed . . . would continue to  
577 challenge me, eventually forcing me to change in ways I had never imagined” (Tewksbury, 2006,  
578 p. 196). Linley and Joseph (2011) have argued that although finding meaning is associated with  
579 positive change, the process through which this occurs often involves negative experiences.  
580 Following an illness that derailed her performance at the 2003 World Championships, Coughlin  
581 highlighted the lessons she had learned in “perseverance and handling adversity by fighting  
582 through the discomfort” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 12).

583       **Social support.** Consistent with the findings of previous research exploring growth in  
584 sport performers (Galli & Reel, 2012a; Tamminen et al, 2013; Wadey et al., 2011, 2013), the  
585 swimmers cited the important role of family, friends and coaches in the transformational process.  
586 Having initially used strategies that involved the nondisclosure of their traumatic adversities, the  
587 swimmers began to seek social support and reveal their experiences. Thorpe acknowledged the  
588 importance of discussing his problems with his family: “I realize it is time to be open. I need to  
589 talk to them about [my depression]” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 273). Following Torres’s disclosure of her  
590 eating disorder, it was her mother who made her consult a psychiatrist. Tewksbury  
591 acknowledged that “what I needed was the support of a family unit” (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 90)

592 and, following the breakdown of a long-term relationship, he found support in friendship: “[my  
593 friend] helped me reconnect to community, but more importantly he showed me how to connect  
594 to myself” (p. 189). When Beard was confronted about self-harming by her boyfriend she  
595 recalled his reaction: “‘we’re going to do this together,’ he replies. ‘I will help you find a  
596 therapist. I will go with you to therapy. Whatever you need me to do, I will do’” (Beard &  
597 Paley, 2012, p. 198). It was her relationship with her most recent coach that allowed Coughlin to  
598 put her previous negative experiences behind her: “[after] the nightmarish clash with her club  
599 coach... it had taken 4 enlightening years with... [her current coach]...to make her feel free once  
600 more” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 284). The importance of the coach was identified by Phelps  
601 who remarked that “soon enough [my coach] would help me find myself through swimming”  
602 (Phelps & Cazeneuve, 2012, p. 28).

### 603 **Growth-Related Experiences**

604 For these champion swimmers, growth-related experiences were represented by superior  
605 performance, enhanced relationships, spiritual awareness, and prosocial behavior. To avoid  
606 identifying retrospective reattribution of experiences as evidence of growth – articulated as “I am  
607 better now, so I must have grown” (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007, p. 419) – confirmation must be  
608 identifiable through action (cf. Hobfoll et al., 2007; Westphal & Bonanno, 2007) otherwise the  
609 change is “hollow” (Hobfoll et al., 2007, p. 361). Within the autobiographies, several of the  
610 swimmers used writing styles that employed italics or quotation marks to portray internal  
611 ruminations about adversity. Ruminative brooding and reflective pondering have been previously  
612 identified as important stages in the growth process (Joseph et al., 2012). By the end of the books  
613 there is a closure to the multiple narrator voices, a development which is indicative of growth  
614 (Smith & Watson, 2010). For example, in Beard’s final chapter her inner voice, which is visible  
615 for the majority of her memoir, has become silent.

616 **Superior performance.** In support of resilience research with Olympic champions that  
617 suggested that stressors provide opportunities to develop an edge over the competition (Fletcher  
618 & Sarkar, 2012), the swimmers subscribed to the motivational and positive impact that adversity

619 had in their lives. In discussing the impact of his childhood adversities, Phelps explained: “I  
620 firmly believe these episodes taught me not just how to manage my emotions to my advantage. I  
621 also learned what was worth getting worked up about, what was meaningful and important in my  
622 life...” (Phelps & Abrahamson, 2008, p. 135) and, in doing so, “...I could accomplish anything”  
623 (p. 137). Tangible evidence of this superior performance is evidenced in the medal haul of the  
624 swimmers, a total of 67 Olympic medals of which 34 were gold, numerous world records, and  
625 international recognition and acclaim. Neethling referred to his Olympic victory as the result of a  
626 “journey that culminated in my dream of winning an Olympic gold medal” (Neethling & Van der  
627 Berg, 2008, p. 220).

628         **Enhanced social relationships.** Through reflecting on their adversity- and  
629 transformational-related experiences, the swimmers identified enhanced social relationships (cf.  
630 Galli & Reel, 2012a). Neethling acknowledged that in the pursuit of his Olympic dream he had  
631 neglected his relationships and resolved “to reconnect with my many friends, people who have  
632 always been there for me... their support has been unwavering” (Neethling & Van der Berg,  
633 2008, p. 220). Tewksbury finished his autobiography by acknowledging the important role of his  
634 family: “I felt wonderful, realizing that I had never loved my family as much or felt closer to  
635 them as I did at this time in my life. The incredible thing was that they had been there all along”  
636 (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 253). Beard’s engagement represented an enhanced commitment: “we had  
637 been through a lot together and I never doubted that he was the man of my life” (Beard & Paley,  
638 2012, p. 222).

639         **Spiritual outcomes.** Only Thorpe and Tewksbury explicitly mentioned increased  
640 spirituality as a consequence of their adversity-related experiences. Thorpe’s beliefs were  
641 reinforced through reflection of events both in and out of the pool, such as narrowly avoiding the  
642 9/11 attacks in New York City. He stated his belief in “a greater being and there are things that  
643 happen that can never be explained. This is the foundation of my spirituality” (Thorpe, 2012, p.  
644 208). Tewksbury (2006) stated that “my father’s illness coincided, probably not accidentally, with a  
645 time in my life when I was doing a lot of reading and spiritual soul-searching” (p. 135). These

646 quotes provide support for FDM (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) which posits that increased  
647 spirituality may be identifiable in individuals who experience growth from adversity. Indeed,  
648 using the PTGI (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), Galli and Reel (2012b) found that female  
649 intercollegiate athletes experienced more spiritual growth than male intercollegiate athletes.

650       **Prosocial behavior.** Success, relationships, and spirituality were all indicative of growth  
651 in these swimmers, but the ultimate indicator was assisting and supporting others in the form of  
652 prosocial behavior. Hobfoll et al. (2007) refer to the importance of the “right action and right  
653 conduct” (p. 349) in the conceptualization of growth. At the height of her final comeback and  
654 moments before an Olympic semi-final, Torres displayed inspirational empathy when she halted  
655 proceedings so that one of her rivals could change out of a faulty swim suit. Neethling reflected  
656 that “I love being around kids and the opportunity to give something back to the sport of  
657 swimming motivates me” (Neethling & Van der Berg, 2008, p. 218) and that “being an  
658 inspiration to [youth swimmers] is more rewarding than all the records and medals I have” (p.  
659 161). Phelps, the most decorated Olympian in history, appears at first glance to be the epitome of  
660 personal growth but his “main goal was to raise the sport of swimming as ‘high as I can get it’”  
661 (Phelps & Abrahamson, 2008, p. 221), thus transcending his own personal achievements.  
662 Following the acknowledgement of his sexuality, Tewksbury found acceptance of his identity  
663 was “standing up for something I believed” (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 167). As an illustration of  
664 “action growth” (Hobfoll et al., 2007, p. 356), he championed gay and lesbian rights in elite sport  
665 and fought corruption in the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Charitable engagement  
666 from Thorpe, Neethling, Torres and Phelps revealed altruism that is consistent with findings from  
667 previous research (Galli & Reel, 2012a). Neethling helped to set-up and support charitable  
668 organizations following the murder of a distant family member and because “the plight of these  
669 children matters to me. I want to make a difference and I will help in any way I can” (Neethling  
670 & Van der Berg, 2008, p. 220). Torres stated that “now, I’m all for helping other people out...  
671 with my resources and my time. . . I’m all for giving back” (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 73).

672

**General Discussion**

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Through the analysis of autobiographies, we explored the adversity- and growth- related experiences of Olympic swimming champions with a particular emphasis on the transitional processes involved in transforming adversity into growth. The presence of significant adversity in the form of developmental and external stressors, embodied and psychological states, and externalized behaviors was a key feature of the swimmers' narratives. The adversity-related experiences identified in this study are noticeably more diverse than those reported in previous adversity-related growth research involving sport performers (Galli & Reel, 2012a, 2012b; Tamminen et al, 2013; Wadey et al., 2013). Specifically, the novel adversities to emerge were OCD, ADHD, speech impediment, dyslexia, family dysfunction, family and coach adversity, bereavement, conflicts within the team, media intrusion, illness, body dissatisfaction, sexuality, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, and substance abuse. Furthermore, unlike previous research in this area, the swimmers sometimes identified their responses to events as becoming adversities in their own right (cf. Evans, Wadey, Hanton, & Mitchell, 2012). Examples in the present study include body dissatisfaction, depression, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, disordered eating, and substance abuse. Although at times these represented responses (e.g., body dissatisfaction) to other adversities (e.g., coaching style and emotional abuse), it was clear that they also then caused subsequent dysfunctional psychological states and behavior (e.g., disordered eating) thus representing deleterious adversity-response cycles. Regardless of the nature of the adversity-related experiences, the swimmers all subscribed to the powerful impact that they had on them. For several of the swimmers, certain adversities represented significant, life-changing events that acted as extreme motivational triggers. For example, the homophobic graffiti on Tewksbury's school locker and Phelps's teacher's disparaging comments were both cited as causal events in their development of highly driven mindsets that bordered on the obsessional (cf. Vallerand et al., 2003, 2006, 2008).

The swimmers perceived that their adversity-related experiences were necessary, although not sufficient on their own, for winning their Olympic gold medal(s). What transpired

699 as pivotal for growth was the transitional and transformational process that ensued. Our findings  
700 provide broad support for Joseph et al.'s (2012) affective-cognitive processing model of  
701 posttraumatic growth which involves individuals dealing with their experiences of adversity  
702 through a cycle of appraisal, emotions, and coping. More specifically, the model illustrates a link  
703 between negative appraisal mechanisms, labeled as ruminative brooding, and an individual  
704 maintaining their pre-traumatic assumptions, labeled as assimilation. For example, some of the  
705 swimmers referred to a disparaging "tape" playing over and over in their minds which reinforced  
706 their body dissatisfaction. Attempts at maintaining normality forestalled the need to confront and  
707 resolve experiences equating to what Westphal and Bonanno (2007) refer to as pragmatic coping  
708 or "coping ugly" (p. 422). During this phase, the swimmers' adversity-related experiences were  
709 assimilated into existing schemas which left them with unresolved issues (Payne, Joseph, &  
710 Tudway, 2007) and susceptible to further traumatization. Interestingly, research that has explored  
711 adversity and growth in sport performers occasionally cites growth theory in the review of  
712 literature or as a potential future research direction (see Galli & Reel, 2012a, 2012b; Tamminen et  
713 al., 2013; Wadey et al., 2013), but none discuss assimilation or ruminative brooding and their role  
714 in the experience of growth. In part contrast to findings reported in the general psychology  
715 literature which have indicated that assimilation-related processes such as intrusive and  
716 ruminative brooding are not associated with growth (Stockton, Hunt, & Joseph, 2011), our  
717 findings suggest that they may be apparent in the initial phases of the transition between adversity  
718 and growth.

719         A pivotal phase in the transition and transformation to growth involved the majority of  
720 the swimmers questioning the performance narrative and shifting to a quest narrative of self-  
721 discovery. This change of outlook represents a "confidence in what is waiting to emerge from  
722 suffering" (Frank, 1995, p. 171). The questioning (and sometimes rejection of) the dominant  
723 (performance) narrative is a novel finding in the growth research. For these swimmers, it  
724 involved the search for meaning in their adversity-related experiences, the reframing of their  
725 myopic focus, and the illumination of other (non-performance) aspects of their lives. This is

726 consistent with the affective-cognitive processing model of posttraumatic growth (Joseph et al.,  
727 2012) which illustrates a link between positive appraisal mechanisms, labeled as reflective  
728 pondering, and an individual modifying their pre-traumatic assumptions, labeled as  
729 accommodation. The enlistment of social networks was vital during this phase and supports the  
730 findings of previous sport growth research (see Galli & Reel, 2012a; Tamminen et al., 2013).

731         In addition to superior performance, growth-related experiences in these Olympic gold  
732 medalists were represented by enhanced relationships, spiritual awareness, and prosocial  
733 behavior. As noted above, social support is reported in this study and in previous research as a  
734 facilitator of growth but, in accepting social support, the swimmers found that their relationships  
735 with family, friends and coaches were enhanced. Turning to spiritual awareness, two male  
736 swimmers exhibited increased spirituality which, while lending support to previous general  
737 psychology research (see, for a review, Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005), differs somewhat from  
738 Galli and Reel's (2012a) finding that female sport performers are more likely than males to  
739 experience spiritual change during adversarial growth. Perhaps the ultimate indicator of growth  
740 was the observable actions (cf. Hobfoll et al., 2007; Westphal & Bonanno, 2007) associated with  
741 assisting and supporting others in the form of prosocial behavior. Galli and Reel (2012b)  
742 reported similar findings with respect to altruistic acts which they suggested might be encouraged  
743 by the team environment in collegiate sport. This hypothesis was not, however, supported in the  
744 swimmers' highly individualistic accounts but an alternative explanation may be that they  
745 experienced an increased awareness of pain and suffering, which stimulated feelings of empathy  
746 and responsibility, and resulted in a commitment to helping others (cf. Staub & Vollhardt, 2008).

747         The findings have potential application in the competitive swimming environment for  
748 sport psychologists and coaches working with elite level swimmers and for the parents and  
749 significant others involved with them. Although even the most severe adversity has the potential  
750 to have a powerful positive impact on swimmers, it is important to highlight the difference  
751 between unavoidable events and imposed difficulties. For unavoidable adversities, psychologists  
752 and coaches should be aware that swimmers may initially attempt to maintain normality by

753 engaging with maladaptive coping strategies. These swimmers should be carefully and patiently  
754 observed, with an appropriate practitioner letting it be known that he or she is an available  
755 “empathetic expert companion” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2009, p. 215). When the swimmer is  
756 receptive to this or similar support, various counseling and supportive interventions can  
757 commence. Such strategies may include using role models, such as the Olympic champions  
758 quoted in this study, to help the swimmer find meaning in their adversity-related experiences.  
759 Arguably a more complex practical issue than unavoidable adversities is the imposition of  
760 difficulties. Psychologists and coaches should seek to create an environment with regular  
761 appropriate challenges that help swimmers to develop (cf. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012); however,  
762 there may come a point when these practices contribute to or become inappropriate adversities  
763 that have a negative impact on performance and/or well-being. Practitioners therefore need to  
764 maintain a reflective outlook that constantly reviews the consequence of their practices (cf.  
765 Knowles, Gilbourne, Copley, & Dugdill, 2014) because, if they do become an active agent in an  
766 (inappropriate) adversity, it is likely to compromise their ability to facilitate growth.

767         A noteworthy strength of this study is the use of autobiographies that span top sport  
768 performers’ lives and provide valuable and privileged insights into psychosocial processes and  
769 changes. Notwithstanding this strength, these accounts are influenced by the writers’ motives and  
770 biases, their ability to recall events and experiences, and others’ expectations and potential  
771 judgments. For example, the production of the autobiographies as “a commercial commitment”  
772 (Thing & Ronglan, 2014, p. 1) may impact on their “unmediated authenticity” (Smith & Watson,  
773 2010, p. 69). Hence, commercial interests are likely to influence the length, depth and specific  
774 content of the narratives, which will dictate the inclusion and relevance of the psychosocial-  
775 related content. Another example, relates to in each of the autobiographies there being at least  
776 two individuals involved in the production of the narrative (including Tewksbury’s sole authored  
777 account where editorial input would have occurred). Smith and Watson (2010) noted that  
778 researchers should be mindful that collaborative texts represent cultural products with multiple  
779 voices, each vying for authority. Due to these and other potential influences, adopting a critical

780 analytical stance in relation to the multiple autobiographies was essential to gaining insight into  
781 both the depth and breadth of the participants' experiences. At a deeper level of profundity, the  
782 narratives provide a cultural script of elite Olympic swimming that represents both an adherence  
783 to accepted norms (e.g., commitment to intensive training), and also the reinforcement of beliefs,  
784 values, and behaviors (e.g., links between body image and disordered eating). Further, although  
785 the autobiographies are written for public consumption, the private meanings interpreted during  
786 the analysis maybe beyond the scope of the disclosure intended by the authors (Harrison & Lyon,  
787 1993); as such we acknowledge the hazy divide between the public and the private in the stories  
788 told.

789         Future researchers investigating adversity and growth in sport should consider more  
790 sophisticated operationalizations of adversity that distinguish between acute and chronic stressor  
791 experiences, together with recognition of multiple and cumulative adversities. This is important  
792 because previous (nonsport) research has demonstrated differences between individuals'  
793 experiences growth following a discrete and ongoing trauma (Sumallo, Ochoa, & Blanco, 2009)  
794 and in response to varying histories of adversity (Seery, 2011). In terms of the growth  
795 experienced by sport performers, it is interesting to note that Wadey et al.'s (2013) study of  
796 coaches' perceptions of athletes' stress-related growth following an injury identified a wider  
797 range of growth indices than reported in the present study. This could be due to the different  
798 focus of the studies, the different methodological approaches adopted, and/or the different  
799 vantage points of the study participants. Whatever the reason, further research utilizing coaches'  
800 and others' perspectives of athlete adversity and growth experiences is required.

801         In conclusion, through the analysis of autobiographies this study has advanced  
802 understanding of how sport performers at the highest competitive level positively transform their  
803 experiences of adversity into growth. The findings resonate with the observation that "the way in  
804 which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails . . . gives him ample opportunity –  
805 even in the most difficult circumstances – to add a deeper meaning to life" (Frankl, 2006, p. 67).  
806 The Olympic champion swimmers studied in this research ultimately thrived in the face of

807 adversity by adopting transitional-related strategies that helped them not only overcome their  
808 experiences but also, they believed, flourish as both sport performers and human beings.  
809

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## 1 Table 1

2 *Swimmer and Autobiography Details*

<i>Swimmer</i>	<i>Country of Representation</i>	<i>Olympic Games (year, city)</i>	<i>Age (years)</i>	<i>Career Olympic Medals (color)</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Publication year</i>	<i>Co-Author</i>
Natalie Coughlin	USA	2004 Athens	21	3 Gold	Golden Girl	2006	Michael Silver
		2008 Beijing	25	4 Silver			
		2012 London	29	5 Bronze			
Mark Tewksbury	Canada	1988 Seoul	20	1 Gold	Inside Out: Straight Talk from a Gay Jock	2006	Not applicable
		1992 Barcelona	24	1 Silver 1 Bronze			
Ryk Neethling	South Africa	1996 Atlanta	17	1 Gold	Chasing the Dream	2008	Clinton Van der Berg
		2000 Sydney	22				
		2004 Athens	26				
		2008 Beijing	30				
Michael Phelps	USA	2004 Athens	19	18 Gold	No Limits: The Will to Succeed	2008	Alan Abrahamson
		2008 Beijing	23	2 Silver			
		2012 London	27	2 Bronze	Phelps: Beneath the Surface	2012	Brian Cazeneuve
Dara Torres	USA	1984 Los Angeles	17	4 Gold	Age Is Just a Number	2009	Elizabeth Weil
		1988 Seoul	21	4 Silver			
		1992 Barcelona	25	4 Bronze			
		2000 Sydney	33				
		2008 Beijing	41				
Amanda Beard	USA	1996 Atlanta	14	2 Gold	In the Water they can't See you Cry	2012	Rebecca Paley
		2000 Sydney	18	4 Silver			
		2004 Athens	22	1 Bronze			
		2008 Beijing	26				
Ian Thorpe	Australia	2000 Sydney	17	5 Gold	This is Me	2012	Robert Wainwright
		2004 Athens	21	3 Silver 2 Bronze			

