Sink or swim: adversity- and growth-related experiences in Olympic swimming champions

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

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

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

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

Keywords: autobiographies, elite, narrative, qualitative, sport, swimming
Sink or Swim: Adversity- and Growth-Related Experiences in Olympic Swimming Champions

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

Adversities clearly represent difficult periods in people’s lives; however, various religious and philosophical writing, anecdotal evidence, and psychosocial theory and research collectively point to the potential for individuals to experience growth following such experiences (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Within the psychology literature, various terms have been used to describe growth-related experiences, including perceived benefits (Affleck, Tenn, Croog, & Levine, 1987), positive changes in outlook (Joseph, Williams, & Yule, 1993), stress-related growth (SRG; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), posttraumatic growth (PTG; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), thriving
positive by-products (McMillen, Howard, Nower, & Chung, 2001), positive adaptation (Linley, 2003), and adversarial growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Although these terms all pertain to growth-related experiences, there are often subtle differences at a conceptual level. For example, Park (2009) identified four main differences between SRG and PTG relating to: (a) the severity of the event (with PTG involving a more severe occurrence), (b) the mechanism of growth (PTG assumes a restructuring of basic life assumptions whereas SRG involves making meaning out of stressor), (c) the commonality of the occurrence (with PTG being less common than SRG), and (d) the duration of change (PTG is assumed to involve an enduring and permanent change whereas SRG may involve a regression back to former thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors). Despite these differences, three areas of consensus in respect of growth following adversity have emerged: relationships are enhanced, individuals develop an altered view of themselves, and individuals re-evaluate and change their life philosophy (Joseph, Murphy, & Regel, 2012).

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

The most recent theoretical development in this area is Joseph et al.’s (2012) proposal of an affective-cognitive processing model (ACPM) of PTG. This model is based on the assumption that the relationship between PTG and post-traumatic stress is a function of the intensity of the stress experienced. More specifically, that there is there is a curvilinear
relationship between these concepts, whereby PTG occurs at an optimal point when there has been sufficient stress to challenge fundamental assumptions, yet not so much stress that an individual is unable to cognitively process and cope with the stress. The premise of the model is that following event stimuli, various event-related cognitions lead to cognitive appraisal activity, which in turn has a reciprocal relationship with an individual’s emotional state and coping strategies. This ongoing process is influenced by the social-environmental context and by levels of personality. Central processes in the model involve an individual maintaining (“assimilation”) or modifying (“accommodation”) their pre-traumatic assumptions. Critical to posttraumatic growth is the process of “positive accommodation” during which an individual changes his or her schema to realize congruence with the new trauma-related information and the expression of an intrinsic drive towards psychological well-being. Despite these theoretical advances, the growth-related literature has been critiqued for overemphasizing cognitive and affective characteristics rather than evidence of change demonstrated through action (cf. Hobfoll et al., 2007; Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). Only when the search for and the subsequent presence of meaning are translated into action can a more complete experience of growth be realized.

Within the sport psychology literature, theorists and researchers have recently begun to recognize the benefits of adversity. In a study of psychological resilience in Olympic champions, Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) found that “most of the participants argued that if they had not experienced certain types of stressors…, including highly demanding adversities such as parental divorce, serious illness, and career-threatening injuries, they would not have won their gold medals” (p. 672). In an opinion piece, Collins and MacNamara (2012) speculated that talented youth athletes can often benefit from, or even need, a variety of challenges to facilitate eventual adult performance; or, as they succinctly put it in the title of their article: “Talent Needs Trauma” (p. 907). From a sport injury perspective, research examining athletes’ responses to injury has identified a range of perceived benefits and underlying mechanisms (Wadey et al., 2011). Collectively, this work suggests that the role of adversity in sport performers’ lives warrants further research, particularly in respect of the processes that may facilitate positive outcomes.
Research in this area has begun to explicitly explore adversity and growth in sport performers. In 2012, Galli and Reel conducted two studies in this area. In their first study, they interviewed eleven intercollegiate athletes and developed a conceptual model of SRG that illustrates how, within a performer’s personal and social context, social support is used to work through the disruption caused by stressors and realize positive psychological outcomes (Galli & Reel, 2012a). For these athletes, growth was perceived in the form of a new life philosophy, self-changes, and interpersonal changes. In their second study, Galli and Reel (2012b) distributed the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) to intercollegiate athletes to further investigate experiences of adversarial growth. They found that athletes reported low to moderate levels of positive change following their most difficult adversity, that females reported greater spiritual growth than males, and that time demands are associated with growth in terms of an enhanced appreciation for life. The following year, Tamminen et al. (2013) interviewed five elite female performers about their experiences of adversity and their potential for growth. They found that as the athletes sought and found meaning in their experiences of adversity, they identified opportunities for growth associated with social support and as the performers realized the role of sport in their lives. Other studies in this area have explored coaches’ perceptions of athletes’ stress-related growth following an injury (Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullough, 2013), and posttraumatic growth in disability athletes (Crawford, Gayman, & Tracey 2014; Day, 2013).

Recent research points to the salience of adversity and growth-related experiences in sport performers’ lives. However, it has been acknowledged that this work has tended to provide a ‘snapshot’ of the phenomenon under investigation and a “somewhat narrow focus on a single stressor” (Galli & Reel, 2012a, p. 315). A need exists to examine “the temporal course of growth” (Galli & Reel, 2012a, p. 315) “over longer periods of time” (Tamminen et al., 2013, p. 35) that better capture the complexity of performers’ life stories (see also Galli & Reel, 2012b). Furthermore, given that certain trauma-related experiences appear to be associated with certain sports (cf. Collins & MacNamara, 2012), experiences of adversity and growth are likely to be idiosyncratic and contextually dependent at a sport-specific level. One sport that is particularly
demanding is competitive swimming which typically involves intensive training from a relatively early age, engagement in a conformist and disciplined environment, and a high risk of medical-related issues. Many swimmers begin training prior to the onset of puberty with this commitment involving increasing intensity and volumes of training (Lang & Light, 2010). This training occurs within an environment which demands adherence to normative social practices which can create a “climate of fear” (Lang, 2010, p. 29) that fosters a culture of non-disclosure of issues of concern. Given this intensive and conformist training environment, it is perhaps not surprising that swimmers are particularly susceptible to certain injuries, illnesses and overtraining (Chase, Caine, Goodwin, Whitehead, & Romanick, 2013; Kammer, Young, & Niedfeldt, 1999). In this study, we explored the adversity- and growth-related experiences of swimmers at the highest competitive level. Of particular interest was the transitional process that the swimmers progress through to positively transform their experiences.

**Method**

This study was grounded in a constructivist paradigm which assumes changing and sometimes conflicting social realities, and seeks to understand people’s constructions of their lived experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Within this paradigm, the researcher(s) acts as an active instrument in the constructivist process. As such, it is worth noting that we have a combined experience of 35 years as competitive swimmers, 20 years as swimming coaches, 18 years as swimming psychologists, and 15 years as swimming parents. We have therefore acquired insight and understanding of the competitive swimming community, nomenclature, and culture. In view of the assumptions underpinning the constructivist paradigm, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to investigate the research question because it is well suited to revealing the subjective meanings that individuals attribute to events in their lives and can be particularly useful for exploring “problematic moments and meanings” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 4). In their discussion about the value of qualitative approaches in the study of the related area of thriving, Massey, Cameron, Ouellette, and Fine (1998) highlighted a number of opportunities relevant to the study of growth (cf. Hussain, & Bhushan, 2012), including hearing how people
make meaning of their lives, understanding the idiosyncratic nature of people’s narratives, chronicling the process-related changes over time, and highlighting the meaningfulness of context and multiple discourses. The value of such an approach in growth research has also recently been recognized by sport psychology researchers who asserted that “qualitative investigations remain important due to the powerful narratives that often emerge from attempts to explore the lived experiences of those who perceive growth from adversity” (Galli & Reel, 2012a, p. 298). In addressing the future direction of growth research Galli and Reel proposed the use of grounded theory, phenomenology or narrative analysis to further inform our understanding of growth in sport.

**Autobiographical Research**

Human beings typically convey their socially constructed experiences through the act of storytelling (Bakhtin, 1981), an act which is epitomized in autobiographies. Autobiography is a genre of writing that provides a retrospective account of an individual’s experiences. With their origins in classical Greek writing, autobiographies became popular in the 20th century and provide a unique contribution to understanding the practices and behaviors of individuals within a given context (Bakhtin, 1981). From a research perspective, there is a long history of analyzing autobiographies within literary studies and life writing. In 1974, Howarth argued that autobiographies represent a “self-portrait” (p. 364) of the storyteller and proposed that they may be legitimately studied alongside other literary genres. More recently, autobiographies have become an established source of empirical data in a number of disciplines, such as criminology (Morgan, 1999), psychology (Suedfeld & Weiszbeck, 2004), sociology (Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, & Adler, 2005), accounting (Haynes, 2006), and nursing (Power, Jackson, Weaver, Wilkes, & Carter, 2012). In the past decade, sport researchers have also begun to use autobiographies to better understand the lives of athletes. For example, Butryn and Masucci (2003) analyzed the cyclist Lance Armstrong’s autobiography and constructed a parallel counternarrative based on his relationship with technology alongside his account of his life story. Sparkes’ (2004) study of the same book provided insights into the bodies, selves and narratives that circulate within the
autobiography and highlighted issues regarding the cultural shaping of the narratives. Most recently, Thing and Ronglan (2014) analyzed the cyclist Jesper Skibby’s autobiography focusing on social interactions, emotions, and personality constructions. In addition to examining single autobiographies, researchers have also begun to analyze multiple sport-related autobiographies. The selection of multiple autobiographies has the advantage of portraying diverse perspectives and voices that communicate “a more evocative force” (Frank, 2012, p. 36) than a single case. Drawing on six autobiographies of high altitude mountaineers, Burke and Sparkes (2009) explored the construction of the self in relation to cognitive dissonance. Stewart, Smith, and Sparkes (2011) analyzed the autobiographies of 12 elite sport performers and focused on the role of metaphors in shaping athletes’ experiences of illness. Collectively, this research points to the usefulness of autobiographies in understanding sport performers’ experiences, particularly when they involve significant adversity.

Sample

Eight autobiographies of Olympic swimming champions were sampled, a quantity which is broadly consistent with previous research that has studied multiple sport-related autobiographies (viz. Burke & Sparkes, 2009; Stewart et al., 2011). Olympic champions were selected because they epitomize competitive swimming at the highest level and typically encounter adversities and potential for growth during their careers (cf. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). We sampled all of the Olympic swimming champions’ autobiographies published between 2002 and 2012. The publication year rather than the year of Olympic Games took precedence because autobiographical accounts are reflective of the historical era in which they were written (Crossley, 2000) and are situated within the context of what is publishable and marketable at any given time (Smith & Watson, 2010). Autobiographies published during this decade are, to some extent, products of a post 9/11 era of heightened awareness and sensitivity to significant adversity. Indeed, during this period the “sports-consuming public” (Morgan, 2010, p. 1580) increasingly demanded accounts of star athletes’ personal struggles to overcome adversity (Schaffer & Smith, 2004). Given the psychosocial focus of this study, and the salience of world
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As Schaffer and Smith (2004) remarked: “stories of suffering and survival sell to readers” (p. 12). The autobiographies were written by four male and three female swimmers whose details are summarized in Table 1. Collectively, the swimmers represented four countries at seven Olympic Games, with each swimmer competing in at least two Olympic Games and winning at least one Olympic gold medal at either of the Games. Their ages at the time of their Olympic swims ranged from 14-41 years ($M = 23.39$, $SD = 6.04$). The swimmers used one of the following genres of writing: the swimmer as sole author written in the first person (viz. Mark Tewksbury), the swimmer as primary author (with a co-author) written in the first person (viz. Amanda Beard, Ryk Neethling, Michael Phelps (two autobiographies), Ian Thorpe, and Dara Torres), and the swimmer as co-author written in the third person (viz. Natalie Coughlin).

Data Analysis

The autobiographies provide multiple narratives of Olympic swimming champions’ experiences and are therefore appropriate for analysis informed by a narrative tradition (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Smith and Sparkes (2009) defined a narrative as “a complex genre that routinely contains a point and characters along with a plot connecting events that unfold sequentially over time and space to provide an overarching explanation or consequence” (p. 2). The autobiographies align well with this definition and were subjected to a holistic analysis whereby the text was interpreted within the context of the whole story (Lieblich et al., 1998). This analytical approach involves scrutinizing the plots of complete life stories, thus being particularly appropriate for providing insight into autobiographical accounts. Within this holistic approach, the form of the structure and style of the narrative was analyzed, and the content relating to the events and meanings described by the authors was analyzed (Lieblich et al., 1998). The holistic analysis was accompanied by Smith and Watson’s (2010) strategies for reading and engaging with life narratives and autobiographies. Among the strategies they suggested, narrative plottings and modes, voice, trauma, and embodiment were deemed particularly appropriate for addressing the purpose of this study.
During multiple readings of the autobiographies, two strategies (viz. narrative patterns and voice) were aligned with holistic-form analysis and two strategies (viz. trauma and embodiment) aligned with holistic-content analysis. In terms of the narrative pattern, Smith and Watson (2010) advocated the exploration of the plottings used to structure the narrative and, for example, reflecting on whether there are multiple plottings in the text or whether one pattern dominates. A performance narrative (cf. Douglas & Carless, 2006) was not surprisingly apparent in the readings; however, a quest narrative (cf. Frank, 1995) was also evident in the swimmers’ experiences and lives. Within the narrative patterns, Smith and Watson recommended exploring whether there is a dominant voice or whether there are multiple and/or conflicting voices.

Autobiographies are typically conceived to be the stories of one individual’s experiences, but these accounts are often delivered through multiple voices, either explicitly as when autobiographies are written collaboratively with ghost writers, or implicitly through structural writing strategies. For example, several of the swimmers used italics or quotation marks to portray internal ruminations about adversity, thus representing additional voices which are present alongside the narrative of the primary storytelling voice. Turning to the significant events and meanings within the autobiographies, Smith and Watson provided guidance on dealing with traumatic issues and advised a focus on how the author deals with trauma, suffering, and the resultant experience. Adversity-related trauma and negotiation of experience were consistent themes across the swimmers’ experiences. In addressing embodiment, Smith and Watson (2010) suggested that the role of the body in the narrative should be considered in relation to the cultural meanings attached to the body and what bodily processes are significant. In the autobiographies, the focus of the narratives was often on the performance and aesthetic meanings of the swimmers’ bodies and as such the embodied experience or, as Pipkin (2008) put it, the “body songs” (p. 44) recounted by the swimmers was a noteworthy aspect of their stories.

Within the constructivist paradigm, the notions of truthfulness and trustworthiness are important considerations in understanding people’s lived experiences. Autobiographical accounts do not constitute an exact – or ‘true’ – representation of events and will likely involve
inconsistent and shifting views of the narrator. Rather, they involve reconstruction from the
storyteller’s perspective relying on their personal memory within a cultural context, a process that
may be motivated by deceit or positive self-presentation (Smith & Watson, 2010). In reading
autobiographical accounts, Smith and Watson argued that the reader’s expectations of truth have
to be adjusted to acknowledge that it is impossible to fully verify or, conversely, fully discredit
the truth. Elite athletes are, however, in a position to provide valuable firsthand perspectives of
sport that are not normally accessible to the majority and “their stories” (Pipkin, 2008, p. 11)
provide a certain degree of trustworthiness to their interpretations. As Smith and Watson
elucidated, “any utterance … even if accurate or distorted, is a characterization of its writer” (p.
15). Thus, although at one level these accounts offer a privileged insight into the world of elite
sport, they also offer at another level opportunities for critical enlightenment that go beyond
many other forms of inquiry. The first author used a reflective journal to enhance her self-
awareness during the data analysis process, and the second author acted as a ‘critical friend’ to
constructively challenge the analytical decisions. As Stanley (1992) remarked: “we may be
textually persuaded, cajoled, led and misled; but we can… scrutinize and analyze, puzzle and
ponder, resist and reject” (p. 131).

Results and Discussion

Embedded Narratives

The analysis of the autobiographies revealed that all of the Olympic champion swimmers
experienced adversity during their lives, and that they progressed through a transitional process to
positively transform their experiences into growth. From a holistic perspective, it was evident
from the swimmers’ narratives and voices that adversity was typically a traumatic experience for
them. Initially, the swimmers often attempted to maintain normality through an embodied
relationship with water, which involved the non-disclosure of traumatic adversities and the
development of multiple identities. Although this proved to be a somewhat effective strategy in
the short-term, it became increasingly maladaptive in the longer term resulting in the swimmers
acknowledging the need to confront their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. In doing so, the
swimmers sought meaning in their experiences, accepted the support of others and, subsequently, they experienced growth. For these champion swimmers, growth was ultimately represented by superior performance, enhanced relationships, spiritual awareness, and prosocial behavior.

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

When their stories became incompatible with the dominant performance narrative, the
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swimmers experienced “narrative tension” (Carless & Douglas, 2013, p. 8) and were susceptible to mental health problems and experiencing further adversity. To avoid becoming a “narrative wreck” (Frank, 1995, p. 54), the swimmers shifted the focus of their stories and ascribed to a quest narrative. Quest narratives involve individuals confronting their suffering, accepting the consequences, and striving to gain something positive from the experience (Frank, 1995).

Neethling perceived a debilitating shoulder injury prior to the 2000 Olympic Trials as if “I had been sentenced to death” (Neethling & Van der Berg, 2008, p. 170), but he eventually perceived it as “a blessing in disguise” (p. 166) as it allowed him to focus on other aspects of his training and his “spirits were up again” (p. 167). Tewksbury reflected that homophobic graffiti on his school locker “sent me on a path that brought me to the height of Olympic sport, to being an advocate for human rights, to becoming who I am today” (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 249). Phelps revealed that “when I was in grade school, I was diagnosed with… ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder]. I had overcome that. When I was in school, a teacher said I’d never be successful. Things like that stick with you and motivate you” (Phelps & Abrahamson, 2008, pp. 4-5). The performance and quest narratives that were apparent in the swimmers’ autobiographies contained multiple themes pertaining to adversity-related experiences, transitional processes, and growth-related experiences.

Adversity-Related Experiences

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

Developmental stressors. Early adversity was not uncommon among the swimmers with Phelps suffering from ADHD, Neethling from a speech impediment, and Beard from dyslexia and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). These developmental stressors interfered with their academic and social lives. Neethling referred to his childhood stutter as “the most traumatic
thing in an otherwise perfect childhood” (Neethling & Van der Berg, 2008, p. 8). Beard’s dyslexia meant that her school years were characterized by failure and mortification, stating that “school made me cry out of frustration or humiliation on a daily basis. I felt like a complete idiot…” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 37).

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

A notable stressor that many of the swimmers encountered at some point in their career was their coach’s style of practice and communication. Coughlin reflected that “if gymnastics and figure skating were the gravest examples of sports whose coaches habitually inflicted physical, mental and emotional elite-level youth standouts… swimming was quite possibly the next worst” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, pp. 30-31). Thorpe referred to his coach’s style which was
“to flog swimmers in the belief that it was the way to get the best out of them” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 87). This style of coaching was evident in many of the autobiographies and is normalized behavior within the elite swimming culture (Stirling & Kerr, 2008). It was also common for the swimmers to become embroiled in conflict with their teammates. Coughlin found herself isolated from teammates who “resented her” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 128) and Torres had to leave her coach’s team in the buildup to the 2000 Olympics following a deterioration in her relationship with a competitor in the group: “my beating her in the 50-meter freestyle was more than our increasingly fragile relationship could bear” (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 61). As the most successful swimmers of their generation, the media was never far from their lives. Thorpe found himself subject to intense media scrutiny over his sexuality and drug allegations and ultimately led to his premature retirement from swimming: “the attention had become like a cancer” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 292).

Embodied states. Injury, often the impetus for growth (cf. Wadey et al., 2011), was common among the swimmers. Following the 2004 Olympics, Phelps was diagnosed with spondyloysis of the back which echoed back to his sister’s injury: “I tried not to think that my career might end prematurely, as hers did, but of course it entered my mind” (Phelps & Cazeneuve, 2012, p. 231). Coughlin, Neethling and Torres all suffered from debilitating shoulder injuries that at various times threatened to end their Olympic careers. The swimmers learned that overcoming physical pain was not only desirable, but necessary as both coaches and swimmers internalized the belief that injuries and illnesses are indicators of weakness. Coughlin explained that “coaches encourage their ailing athletes to ‘swim through it’ whenever possible, and those that can’t end up quitting the sport or being labeled malingerers” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 46). This was even the case when medical experts expressed concern. Coughlin recounted that one of her early coaches insisted that she swim despite a serious shoulder injury: “the doctor would say one thing… and [my coach] would walk out of the room and say I could swim through it” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 47). A bout of illness was perceived by Coughlin to be a “key moment” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006 p. xv) when, at the World Championships in 2003, she was...
felled by a flu-like virus that caused her “body [to] breakdown” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 10).

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

Several of the swimmers overtly referred to depression with Thorpe identifying that “I’ve spent a lot of my life battling what I can only describe as a crippling depression” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 272). Tewksbury stated that “my depression had been building for months, perhaps years” (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 86) and Beard was referred to a psychiatrist and prescribed medication for depression. Others used language that suggests depressive symptoms. Neethling referred to “my dark mood” (Neethling & Van der Berg, 2008, p. 64), Coughlin to “a hollow numbness that was equal parts depression and disbelief” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 173), and Torres to the difficulties dealing with her father’s death: “for the next year I’d cry at the drop of a hat” (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 96). Although depression was clearly a psychological state or outcome of an adversity (e.g., “there was a connection between my being gay and my being depressed” (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 90)), it was also evident that depression represented an adversity in its own right. For example, Thorpe reflected that his depression had no discernible environmental cause: “just as I believe sexuality to be a genetic disposition, so too is depression. It was something that I would have had to deal with whether I was a swimmer or not” (Thorpe,
2012, p. 274) and not the outcome of anything specific: “…it wasn’t a reaction to the high life of red carpets and speeches, neither can I blame the media intrusion” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 273).

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

**Externalized behaviors.** In an attempt to deal with trauma, the swimmers often externalized their emotions and turned on their bodies, abusing them in ways that created further adversity. Beard described her self-harm in detail and as “…my own revelation. Through it I could finally solve something” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 135). Both Beard and Torres experienced bouts of disordered eating throughout their careers with Torres admitting that “I’d been bulimic when I’d swum in college and at the 1988 Olympics” (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 29). She recalled experiences of weigh-ins and having to attend additional workouts – named “the breakfast club” – if swimmers did not make target weights: “I was desperate to please [my coach]… I would have done anything not to join the breakfast club. And I did” (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 31). She managed her weight through purging which is a practice often introduced by other swimmers to ensure conformity to swimming ideals and to retain an illusion of control over the body (McMahon, Penney, & Dinan-Thompson, 2012). Torres recounted that “three or four of us followed [one of the swimmers]. She stuck her fingers down her throat and she made herself throw up” (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 32). Beard used italicized writing to highlight her self-dialogue relating to her disordered eating alongside her narrating position: “I can’t have this food in me…. I need to get it out…. Get it out. Get it out…. I got that shit out of me” (Beard & Paley, 2012, pp. 91-2).
Several of the swimmers engaged in substance abuse which has been viewed as an adversity from which growth can occur (McMillen et al., 2001). After taking a recreational hallucinogenic drug, Beard remarked: “I was plagued by nightmarish visions and spent hours in the throes of the scariest experience of my life” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 123). In February 2000, allegations surfaced that Thorpe was taking performance-enhancing drugs and contributed to “…[one] of the saddest [moments of my career]” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 244). Phelps explained his driving under the influence charge following a back injury: “In November 2004… I drove after drinking [alcohol]… By way of explanation, not excuse: After the Athens Games ended, I was for the first time in my life, on my own” (Phelps & Abrahamson, 2008, p. 141).

The Transitional Process

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

Maintenance of normality. Following adversity-related experiences, the swimmers typically tried to maintain a state of normality. Torres stated that “swimming gives me a feeling – really the illusion – that life is orderly” (Torres & Weil, 2009, p. 186). The swimmers who experienced adversity early in their lives found solace in the protective solitude of swimming through the development of an emotional and embodied relationship with water. Following family breakdown, Beard reflected that the “water had become my getaway. The silent sanctuary was my biggest distraction away from the troubles of my family” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 22). Neethling explained that he swam to escape the humiliation of a childhood stutter: “in the pool, I’d be in my own world. I didn’t need to communicate very much. It was perfect for a shy, self-
conscious child. No talking – just me and the cool, smooth water” (Neethling & Van der Berg, 2008, p. 9). In reference to his ADHD, Phelps referred to the pool as “my safe haven” (Phelps & Abrahamson, 2008, p. 20). Thorpe talked of the importance of swimming in his battles with depression, suicidal thoughts, and the intense media glare: “the water gives me respite. It’s one of the few places I can be completely comfortable with myself; a place where I am truly happy” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 21). For many of the swimmers the protective solitude of the water echoed back to the prenatal experience and a time of safety and security (Strang, 2004). A coach remarked that Coughlin swam “like she’s in the womb” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 89).

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

In a further attempt to maintain normality, the swimmers often developed multiple identities to compartmentalize aspects of their lives (cf. Smith & Watson, 2010). For example, to avoid the potential stigma attached to disordered eating, some athletes opt to lead a “double life” (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010, p. 364) in preference to seeking professional support; a strategy evident in Torres and Beard’s accounts of their disordered eating. Thorpe described himself as being made up of many parts or “masks” (Thorpe, 2012, pp. 19-20) with few people having
access to, or knowing his true self. Tewksbury separated his sexual orientation from his swimming persona: “I would do whatever I could to hide it. It started simply by lying to myself... I was going to ignore this gay thing, hoping it was some strange phase that I would eventually outgrow” (Tewksbury 2006, pp. 36-37).

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

Questioning the performance narrative. As the swimmers began to realize that normality could not be sustained, many of them began to question the dominant performance narrative within the sport and their lives. The prioritization of performance and results in their lives had taken its toll on their health, well-being, and personal relationships. For most of the swimmers this led to them doubting their focus on success and to retiring from the sport.

Thorpe’s retirement as a result of the pressures inherent in top level swimming meant that he had to “walk away from the sport I loved before I was ready, simply because of [pressures] that destroyed my enjoyment” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 72). However, he did return to the sport four years later, not to recapture glory, but because he wanted to integrate competitive swimming back into his life and that “the truth is that it’s actually a process of self-discovery” (p. 18). Making a comeback represented a period of self-reflection for some of the swimmers and signified a shift towards a quest narrative and a change in life philosophy. After briefly giving-up swimming and abandoning the performance narrative following the 2000 Olympics when he became disillusioned with what he perceived to be extensive doping within the sport, Neethling reflected that “walking away gave me perspective... but for that fresh perspective, I may not have become an Olympic Champion” (Neethling & Van der Berg, 2008, p. 66). For Beard, a return to
competitive swimming following the birth of her son was not solely about performance and results: “I really didn’t worry too much about failing at swimming. Failing my son was my only serious concern now” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 232).

The search for meaning. The process of seeking meaning appears to be important for facilitating growth (Linley & Joseph, 2011). With the exception of Phelps, there was an explicit acknowledgement by all of the swimmers for the need to identify the meaning underlying specific adversities. After moving out from his parents’ home, Thorpe (2012) “finally decided to get some answers . . . the [depression] had become crushing and I knew I needed to seek out other ways of managing it” (p. 274). For Tewksbury (2006) “perhaps one of the greatest fringe benefits to being gay was that it forced me to constantly question, first myself, then the world around me” (p. 135). He found meaning in others’ allegations that he used drugs: “. . . it was one of the best things that happened to me. . . the strain that had developed . . . would continue to challenge me, eventually forcing me to change in ways I had never imagined” (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 196). Linley and Joseph (2011) have argued that although finding meaning is associated with positive change, the process through which this occurs often involves negative experiences.

Following an illness that derailed her performance at the 2003 World Championships, Coughlin highlighted the lessons she had learned in “perseverance and handling adversity by fighting through the discomfort” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 12).

Social support. Consistent with the findings of previous research exploring growth in sport performers (Galli & Reel, 2012a; Tamminen et al, 2013; Wadey et al., 2011, 2013), the swimmers cited the important role of family, friends and coaches in the transformational process. Having initially used strategies that involved the nondisclosure of their traumatic adversities, the swimmers began to seek social support and reveal their experiences. Thorpe acknowledged the importance of discussing his problems with his family: “I realize it is time to be open. I need to talk to them about [my depression]” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 273). Following Torres’s disclosure of her eating disorder, it was her mother who made her consult a psychiatrist. Tewksbury acknowledged that “what I needed was the support of a family unit” (Tewksbury, 2006, p. 90)
and, following the breakdown of a long-term relationship, he found support in friendship: “[my friend] helped me reconnect to community, but more importantly he showed me how to connect to myself” (p. 189). When Beard was confronted about self-harming by her boyfriend she recalled his reaction: “we’re going to do this together,’ he replies. ‘I will help you find a therapist. I will go with you to therapy. Whatever you need me to do, I will do’” (Beard & Paley, 2012, p. 198). It was her relationship with her most recent coach that allowed Coughlin to put her previous negative experiences behind her: “[after] the nightmarish clash with her club coach… it had taken 4 enlightening years with… [her current coach]…to make her feel free once more” (Silver & Coughlin, 2006, p. 284). The importance of the coach was identified by Phelps who remarked that “soon enough [my coach] would help me find myself through swimming” (Phelps & Cazeneuve, 2012, p. 28).

Growth-Related Experiences

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

Superior performance. In support of resilience research with Olympic champions that suggested that stressors provide opportunities to develop an edge over the competition (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012), the swimmers subscribed to the motivational and positive impact that adversity
had in their lives. In discussing the impact of his childhood adversities, Phelps explained: “I firmly believe these episodes taught me not just how to manage my emotions to my advantage. I also learned what was worth getting worked up about, what was meaningful and important in my life…” (Phelps & Abrahamson, 2008, p. 135) and, in doing so, “…I could accomplish anything” (p. 137). Tangible evidence of this superior performance is evidenced in the medal haul of the swimmers, a total of 67 Olympic medals of which 34 were gold, numerous world records, and international recognition and acclaim. Neethling referred to his Olympic victory as the result of a “journey that culminated in my dream of winning an Olympic gold medal” (Neethling & Van der Berg, 2008, p. 220).

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

**Spiritual outcomes.** Only Thorpe and Tewksbury explicitly mentioned increased spirituality as a consequence of their adversity-related experiences. Thorpe’s beliefs were reinforced through reflection of events both in and out of the pool, such as narrowly avoiding the 9/11 attacks in New York City. He stated his belief in “a greater being and there are things that happen that can never be explained. This is the foundation of my spirituality” (Thorpe, 2012, p. 208). Tewksbury (2006) stated that “my father’s illness coincided, probably not accidently, with a time in my life when I was doing a lot of reading and spiritual soul-searching” (p. 135). These
quotes provide support for FDM (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) which posits that increased spirituality may be identifiable in individuals who experience growth from adversity. Indeed, using the PTGI (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), Galli and Reel (2012b) found that female intercollegiate athletes experienced more spiritual growth than male intercollegiate athletes.

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

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

A pivotal phase in the transition and transformation to growth involved the majority of the swimmers questioning the performance narrative and shifting to a quest narrative of self-discovery. This change of outlook represents a “confidence in what is waiting to emerge from suffering” (Frank, 1995, p. 171). The questioning (and sometimes rejection of) the dominant (performance) narrative is a novel finding in the growth research. For these swimmers, it involved the search for meaning in their adversity-related experiences, the reframing of their myopic focus, and the illumination of other (non-performance) aspects of their lives. This is
consistent with the affective-cognitive processing model of posttraumatic growth (Joseph et al.,
2012) which illustrates a link between positive appraisal mechanisms, labeled as reflective
pondering, and an individual modifying their pre-traumatic assumptions, labeled as
accommodation. The enlistment of social networks was vital during this phase and supports the
findings of previous sport growth research (see Galli & Reel, 2012a; Tamminen et al., 2013).
In addition to superior performance, growth-related experiences in these Olympic gold
medalists were represented by enhanced relationships, spiritual awareness, and prosocial
behavior. As noted above, social support is reported in this study and in previous research as a
facilitator of growth but, in accepting social support, the swimmers found that their relationships
with family, friends and coaches were enhanced. Turning to spiritual awareness, two male
swimmers exhibited increased spiritually which, while lending support to previous general
psychology research (see, for a review, Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005), differs somewhat from
Galli and Reel’s (2012a) finding that female sport performers are more likely than males to
experience spiritual change during adversarial growth. Perhaps the ultimate indicator of growth
was the observable actions (cf. Hobfoll et al., 2007; Westphal & Bonanno, 2007) associated with
assisting and supporting others in the form of prosocial behavior. Galli and Reel (2012b)
reported similar findings with respect to altruistic acts which they suggested might be encouraged
by the team environment in collegiate sport. This hypothesis was not, however, supported in the
swimmers’ highly individualistic accounts but an alternative explanation may be that they
experienced an increased awareness of pain and suffering, which stimulated feelings of empathy
and responsibility, and resulted in a commitment to helping others (cf. Staub & Vollhardt, 2008).
The findings have potential application in the competitive swimming environment for
sport psychologists and coaches working with elite level swimmers and for the parents and
significant others involved with them. Although even the most severe adversity has the potential
to have a powerful positive impact on swimmers, it is important to highlight the difference
between unavoidable events and imposed difficulties. For unavoidable adversities, psychologists
and coaches should be aware that swimmers may initially attempt to maintain normality by
engaging with maladaptive coping strategies. These swimmers should be carefully and patiently observed, with an appropriate practitioner letting it be known that he or she is an available “empathetic expert companion” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2009, p. 215). When the swimmer is receptive to this or similar support, various counseling and supportive interventions can commence. Such strategies may include using role models, such as the Olympic champions quoted in this study, to help the swimmer find meaning in their adversity-related experiences. Arguably a more complex practical issue than unavoidable adversities is the imposition of difficulties. Psychologists and coaches should seek to create an environment with regular appropriate challenges that help swimmers to develop (cf. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012); however, there may come a point when these practices contribute to or become inappropriate adversities that have a negative impact on performance and/or well-being. Practitioners therefore need to maintain a reflective outlook that constantly reviews the consequence of their practices (cf. Knowles, Gilbourne, Cropley, & Dugdill, 2014) because, if they do become an active agent in an (inappropriate) adversity, it is likely to compromise their ability to facilitate growth.

A noteworthy strength of this study is the use of autobiographies that span top sport performers’ lives and provide valuable and privileged insights into psychosocial processes and changes. Notwithstanding this strength, these accounts are influenced by the writers’ motives and biases, their ability to recall events and experiences, and others’ expectations and potential judgments. For example, the production of the autobiographies as “a commercial commitment” (Thing & Ronglan, 2014, p. 1) may impact on their “unmediated authenticity” (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 69). Hence, commercial interests are likely to influence the length, depth and specific content of the narratives, which will dictate the inclusion and relevance of the psychosocial-related content. Another example, relates to in each of the autobiographies there being at least two individuals involved in the production of the narrative (including Tewksbury’s sole authored account where editorial input would have occurred). Smith and Watson (2010) noted that researchers should be mindful that collaborative texts represent cultural products with multiple voices, each vying for authority. Due to these and other potential influences, adopting a critical
analytical stance in relation to the multiple autobiographies was essential to gaining insight into both the depth and breadth of the participants’ experiences. At a deeper level of profundity, the narratives provide a cultural script of elite Olympic swimming that represents both an adherence to accepted norms (e.g., commitment to intensive training), and also the reinforcement of beliefs, values, and behaviors (e.g., links between body image and disordered eating). Further, although the autobiographies are written for public consumption, the private meanings interpreted during the analysis maybe beyond the scope of the disclosure intended by the authors (Harrison & Lyon, 1993); as such we acknowledge the hazy divide between the public and the private in the stories told.

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

In conclusion, through the analysis of autobiographies this study has advanced understanding of how sport performers at the highest competitive level positively transform their experiences of adversity into growth. The findings resonate with the observation that “the way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails . . . gives him ample opportunity – even in the most difficult circumstances – to add a deeper meaning to life” (Frankl, 2006, p. 67). The Olympic champion swimmers studied in this research ultimately thrived in the face of
adversity by adopting transitional-related strategies that helped them not only overcome their experiences but also, they believed, flourish as both sport performers and human beings.
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