



Narratives of trauma, recovery, and growth: The complex role of sport following permanent acquired disability



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to explore how participation in sport may assist an individual in working through experiences of physical trauma.

Design: An instrumental, collective case study was used to illustrate the experiences of two men with acquired disabilities.

Method: Both men participated in sport at a high level and suggested that participation was a central feature of their recovery from trauma. Interviews invited participants to describe their lives pre-trauma, the trauma experience, and the recovery process. A narrative analysis was used to focus on the progression of the plot outlined in each participant's story.

Results: Our results exemplify two narrative types: assimilation and positive accommodation. The narrative of positive accommodation demonstrates how sport provided mastery experiences, enhanced relationships, corporeal understanding and enhanced life philosophies. The alternative narrative of assimilation was associated with resilience to trauma. Our case illustrates that such a narrative may be focused on re-capturing previous life meanings and creating an athletic identity using past definitions of sport.

Conclusion: While the narrative of positive accommodation is most frequently associated with post-traumatic growth, our case outlines the occurrence of synchronous positive and negative experiences, even within the same dimensions of growth. The narrative of assimilation demonstrates the challenges presented by the rehabilitation and sporting environments for an individual who aimed to restore their pre-trauma self and pre-trauma beliefs.

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The immediate impacts of trauma have been shown to be widespread and devastating, often causing physical, psychological and emotional distress. For the trauma victim the most pressing need is that of survival, followed by the need to cope with the aftermath (Joseph, 2011) and the widespread repercussions beyond the trauma event itself (Sutton, 2002). Consequently, our understanding of trauma is often grounded in an illness ideology, focussing on the negative associated consequences, emphasising poor adjustment and barriers to recovery. Yet the past decade of research has prompted an alternative perspective. This perspective does not negate the devastating impacts of trauma, but proposes that positive psychological changes can result from an individual's struggle (Joseph & Linley, 2008). Thus, not only does this literature suggest that psychological recovery from trauma is possible, it

extends such propositions, suggesting that an individual experiencing growth can develop beyond their pre-trauma levels of adaptation, awareness, and psychological functioning.

Recent developments in posttraumatic growth research have sought to explain both *how* and *why* positive outcomes may be reported after traumatic experiences (Park & Ai, 2006). Yet in providing such explanations, it is important to first consider *what* is meant by the term 'posttraumatic growth'. This is an important initial step, particularly given that the recent wealth of literature using a positive psychological approach not only extends to trauma research but also encompasses stress and adversity. Thus it is emphasised that trauma is defined by the DSM-V as exposure (as a direct victim, witness, or indirect victim) to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violation. Following a traumatic event, posttraumatic growth involves the experience of significant beneficial cognitive and emotional changes, which may also lead to behavioural implications (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 2009). As Joseph (2011) emphasised, while recovery from trauma can be

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defined as a return to pre-trauma levels of functioning, post-traumatic growth encompasses changes that go beyond these previous levels of functioning.

The recent expanded research interest in posttraumatic growth has drawn upon a number of theoretical frameworks in order to explain the process of growth. One central theory is the organismic valuing theory (Joseph & Linley, 2005). This theory suggests that prior to trauma, in most situations, individuals will hold the assumption that the world is safe and relatively free from harm (Baird & Kracen, 2006). As Janoff-Bulman (1999) proposed, everyday experiences that support this assumptive world serve to reinforce and strengthen these beliefs. Yet the occurrence of trauma is most often discrepant with these existing assumptions, forcing an individual to question their beliefs and causing a 'shattering effect' (Joseph, 2011). In order to cope with the new information presented by trauma experiences, individuals will work through and search for new meanings in life (Joseph & Linley, 2008). As these new meanings are found, views of the self may change and new assumptions may emerge.

Joseph (2011) distinguished between three possible processes that may be used to work through tensions between pre-existing assumptions and new trauma related information. First, an individual may attempt to assimilate the trauma information into their existing models of the world. Thus rather than changing their assumptions, the individual who assimilates may often use strategies such as avoidance or self-blame to cope with the trauma information (Joseph & Linley, 2008). Alternatively, an individual may attempt to accommodate the trauma information, making changes in order to confront this new information either in a positive or negative direction (Payne, Joseph, & Tudway, 2007). Positive accommodation occurs when an individual is able to acknowledge the challenges they have experienced, revising their assumptive world in a positive way to account for new information presented by the trauma (Joseph, 2011). Negative accommodation, on the other hand, occurs when assumptions are modified to lead to negative changes in worldview.

It is positive accommodation that is proposed to lead to post-traumatic growth and beneficial changes. These beneficial changes have been suggested to occur across five broad dimensions (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004): perceived changes in self (e.g., becoming stronger, more confident, more empathetic, more special), improved relationships (e.g., feeling closer to others, recognising value in relationships), changes in life philosophy/existential awareness (e.g., finding meaning and purpose, reflecting on mortality), changed priorities (e.g., appearance, health, money, skills), and enhanced spiritual beliefs (e.g., return to faith, prayer). These five dimensions indicate that posttraumatic growth is associated with fundamental changes in both personality schema and in the assumptive world of the individual.

Over the last decade there has been an increased interest in how sport and physical activity may assist individuals in achieving psychological growth following trauma. This research has focused on a variety of populations including breast cancer survivors (Burke & Sabiston, 2010), combat veterans (Caddick, Smith, & Phoenix, 2014), injured military personnel (Carless, Sparkes, Douglas, & Cooke, 2014), and individuals with an acquired disability (Day, 2013). Commonly, this emerging body of research has used a narrative methodology to explore the role played by sport and physical activity in the stories told by trauma survivors. As a result we have gained an understanding that sport and physical activity may shape survival stories in many ways, including enhancing personal control, providing respite from symptoms, fostering relationships and camaraderie, allowing a sense of closure, and providing a physical challenge. This collection of recent work has underscored the need to further develop our understanding of how the sport or

physical activity environment may prompt such positive changes. In particular, while our understanding of the potential positive outcomes of sport/physical activity participation in trauma survivors has recently flourished, the process by which these positive outcomes are gained is less well understood. Consequently, our focus in the current study was to understand how participation in sport may assist an individual in working through their trauma experiences. Here, we look to further the existing literature in two ways. First, we have used an instrumental case study to illuminate the process of working through trauma, thereby affording an in-depth exploration. Second, we acknowledge that while previous research has focused on positive accommodation, alternative narrative types exist.

Method

This paper presents the stories of two athletes with acquired disabilities, using a narrative case study to focus on recovery and growth after trauma. The use of a narrative case study has been well advocated in sport, exercise, and health research (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Consequently we highlight two particular strengths that demonstrate the applicability of this approach for trauma research and the present study. First, as suggested by McLeod (2010) case studies are well placed in their ability to attain, describe and analyse evidence of complexity. Thus this methodology provides a useful way of representing the multitude of life changes that may occur in individuals who have experienced traumatic disability. Second, the use of a case study is advocated when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2003). In particular, this statement suggests that the use of a case study can allow the researcher to investigate phenomenon in a real-life context. For this study, the interaction between recovery experiences and the context in which they occur provides a central foci of the research question. In this study we use an instrumental case study Stake (2005), which has been extended to explore two cases and thus may also be defined as a collective case.

Participants

As Sparkes and Smith (2014) have highlighted, given the nature of case study research the selection of cases for study is of crucial importance. Our participants both responded to a research advertisement that sought to recruit individuals with an acquired disability, participating in high level competitive sport. Participants were not pre-selected based on narrative type; instead it was during interview that the researcher recognized that one participant storied their experiences of sport using an assimilated narrative. Consequently, this participant provided an unusual (or deviant) case and as Stake suggests, was a "case from which we feel we can learn the most" (p.451). In order to demonstrate how this case diverged from more traditionally presented growth narratives of positive accommodation we selected a second exemplar case from a number of potential participants whose narratives represented positive accommodation. In particular, this case stood out because it included numerous parallel experiences within disability sport (e.g., similar level of participation, use of same training venues, attendance at squad). The narrative of negative accommodation is not presented as no participant storied their experiences using this narrative.

To ensure confidentiality, the participants in this case study have been given pseudonyms. In order to protect their identities, a number of other identifiable details have also been omitted. In particular the sports which they play are not included.

Chris, now in his late 30's, had begun taking part in sport at a recreational level at school. While his initial sporting experiences were positive, he had always had difficulties "keeping up with the

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