



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



Karen Howells*, David Fletcher

School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, United Kingdom

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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: Eight autobiographies of Olympic swimming champions were sampled and analyzed.

Method: The books were written by four male and three female swimmers whose ages at the time of their Olympic swims ranged from 14 to 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: 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 dialog 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.

Conclusion: 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. We discuss a number of practical implications for psychologists and significant others involved with elite swimmers.

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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 (Papaioannou & Lavalley, 2010; Tamminen et al., 2013), and injury (Galli & Reel, 2012a; Wadey, Evans, Evans, & Mitchell, 2011).

* Corresponding author. School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Epinal Way, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 15 0922 8450.

E-mail address: K.Howells@lboro.ac.uk (K. Howells).

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, Tennen, 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 (Carver, 1998), 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; 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 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

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