



Defining and characterizing team resilience in elite sport

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The objectives of this study were to develop a definition of team resilience and to identify the resilient characteristics of elite sport teams.

Design and method: Focus groups consisting of a total of 31 participants were conducted with five elite teams from a range of sports. An interpretive thematic analysis using inductive and deductive reasoning was employed to analyze the data.

Results and conclusions: Team resilience was defined as a dynamic, psychosocial process which protects a group of individuals from the potential negative effect of the stressors they collectively encounter. It comprises of processes whereby team members use their individual and combined resources to positively adapt when experiencing adversity. Findings revealed four main resilient characteristics of elite sport teams: group structure, mastery approaches, social capital, and collective efficacy. This study extends resilience research in sport psychology by providing greater conceptual clarity of resilience at a team level. The implications of the findings for those conducting research in this area and for those consulting with elite sport teams are discussed.

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Resilience is recognized as an important psychological phenomenon for understanding the positive development of people who overcome a variety of difficulties during the course of their lives (Masten & O'Dougherty Wright, 2010). Within elite sport, teams frequently experience adversity, and being able to positively adapt to such situations represents a significant challenge for athletes and coaches. Indeed, research in sport psychology has revealed that specific stressors are encountered within elite team environments, including the quality of coach–player interactions, poor communication channels, letting teammates down, and negative aspects of organizational culture (see, e.g., Holt & Hogg, 2002; Nicholls, Polman, Levy, Taylor, & Cobley, 2007; Noblett & Gifford, 2002). Although such research has identified the types of stressors present within team environments, the exploration of how a team's collective resources can be harnessed to positively adapt to adversity has been largely overlooked in the sport psychology literature. Recently, however, team resilience has emerged as an important concept in business and health psychology and researchers have begun to elucidate how groups respond favorably to adverse events (see, e.g., Bennett, Aden, Broome, Mitchell, & Rigdon, 2010; West, Patera, & Carsten, 2009).

Resilience has been defined as, “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 435). Two conditions of resilience are understood to be inherent within this definition: firstly, that there is exposure to significant adversity (or risk) and secondly that positive adaptation (or competence) occurs (Masten, 2001). Early resilience research unearthed various factors that protect individuals from the potential negative effects of stressors (see, e.g., Garmezy, 1991). These characteristics, which are often referred to as protective factors in the resilience literature, have been identified at individual, family, and community levels and include qualities such as adaptability, a positive family climate, and positive attachment relationships (Werner & Smith, 1992). Since the early 1990s, the focus of resilience research has shifted away from identifying resilient qualities toward conceiving resilience as a dynamic process (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001; Richardson, 2002). When conceived as a dynamic process, it has been suggested that resilience is a capacity that develops over time in the context of person–environment interactions (Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993). That is, the extent to which an individual reacts positively to adversity depends on the nature of the demands encountered and how he or she adapts to the circumstances.

Despite advances in the conceptualization of resilience in general psychology (see, for a review, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013), the importance of this construct has only recently been recognized in sport psychology research. In 2004, Holt and Dunn employed a

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grounded theory approach to identify and examine psychosocial competencies among elite male adolescent soccer players. Interestingly, resilience emerged as one of the four major themes regarded as central to an individual's soccer success. Specifically, being able to thrive under pressure and respond positively to setbacks were considered to be important features of resilience. In the first study to specifically investigate resilience in sport, Galli and Vealey (2008) explored individual athlete's perceptions of resilience in relation to the adversities they had encountered. The major themes that emerged from this qualitative study were: breadth and duration of the resilience process, agitation (e.g., coping strategies), personal resources (e.g., determination), and sociocultural influences (e.g., social support). Using quantitative analyses, Gucciardi, Jackson, Coulter, and Mallett (2011) examined individual resilient qualities in a sport context. Examples of such qualities were adaptability, staying focused under pressure, and handling unpleasant feelings. Results provided partial support for the revised 10-item Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007; Connor & Davidson, 2003) across samples of adolescent and adult Australian cricketers. Most recently, Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) interviewed twelve Olympic champions to explore and explain the relationship between psychological resilience and optimal sport performance. They found that numerous psychological factors (relating to a positive personality, motivation, confidence, focus, and perceived social support) protect the world's best athletes from the potential negative effect of stressors by influencing their challenge appraisal and meta-cognitions. These constructive cognitive reactions promoted facilitative responses that appeared to be firmly embedded in taking personal responsibility for one's thoughts, feelings, and actions. In turn, positive responses led to the realization of optimal sport performance. Although this body of work provides an insight into resilience in sport, the focus to date has specifically been on individual resilience and, therefore, questions remain about the nature of team resilience in sport.

Recent resilience research in community psychology and organizational behavior has shifted away from individuals toward the study of groups and teams (Brodsky et al., 2011; Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008). Resilience at the group level has been characterized by psychosocial factors such as caring relationships and effective teamwork generated through trust, cohesion, creativity, collective efficacy, and relational reserves (Blatt, 2009; Gittell, Cameron, Lim, & Rivas, 2006; Lengnick-Hall, Beck, & Lengnick-Hall, 2011; Norris et al., 2008). Furthermore, groups that retain a broader perspective when faced with stressors are able to positively adapt to demanding situations by embracing challenging experiences and adopting a learning orientation (Bennett et al., 2010; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003; West et al., 2009). Reinforcing the need for group level resilience research, Bennett et al. (2010) remarked that, "resilience may be viewed as much a social factor existing in teams as an individual trait" (p. 225). This statement suggests that team members do not exist in isolation and that they may have the capacity to adapt positively to their environment through facilitative collective interactions. Most recently, Brodsky et al. (2011) asserted that, "...a focus on the individual is not enough" (p. 233). Specifically, they described a number of resilience processes operating at the organizational level including: creating a culture that strengthens a sense of community, reframing of organizational stressors, taking action based on the organization's mission and ideology, developing shared value systems, and enhancing adaptability through flexible team structures (see also Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012). These processes support Chan's (1998) contention that constructs in the same content domain (e.g., resilience) are manifested in different ways at different levels of analysis (e.g., individual or

team). Based on this notion, we propose that the development of a robust conceptual scaffold for team level resilience research will provide greater clarity about how resilience is defined and characterized in teams. Indeed, team resilience has a critical and distinctive role to play for those functioning in groups, as suggested by West et al. (2009):

Team resilience may prove to be an important positive team level capacity that aids in the repair and rebound of teams when facing potentially stressful situations. Teams which display the ability to either thrive under high liability situations, improvise and adapt to significant change or stress, or simply recover from a negative experience are less likely to experience the potentially damaging effects of threatening situations. (p. 254)

Although sport psychology research is beginning to shed light on the resilience-related characteristics and processes at the individual level, the nature of resilience at the team level requires specific examination in the sport context. Team level resilience research in elite sport may not only provide important knowledge about how resilient teams manage the unique stressors they collectively encounter but also about their ability to sustain high performance despite the ever-changing, complex environment of elite sport. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore team resilience in elite sport. Specifically, the objectives are to develop a definition of team resilience and to identify the resilient characteristics of elite sport teams. It is hoped that this study will provide practitioners with a framework to profile resilient characteristics of teams when encountering adversity. In turn, this could facilitate the design of team-based resilience interventions for athletes and coaches operating in elite sport.

Method

Research design

In accordance with exploratory studies that seek to collect rich data to portray complex human experiences (cf. Silverman, 2006), a qualitative design was adopted in this study. Moreover, given that qualitative research emphasizes the exploration of social and interactive explanations arising from human behavior (King & Horrocks, 2010), a qualitative investigation was deemed to be particularly appropriate for the exploration of a group level concept, such as team resilience in this case (cf. Ungar, 2003). Focus groups were adopted to elicit a collective conversation about team resilience. Indeed, Liamputtong (2011) has suggested that, "focus group interviews allow group dynamics and help the researcher capture shared...experiences, accessing elements that other methods may not be able to reach" (p. 4).

Participants

The sample in this study included a total of 31 participants (17 female, 14 male) who ranged in age from 18 to 36 years ($M = 25.7$, $SD = 5.2$). The participants had been competing in their respective teams for between 1 and 12 years ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 3.28$). Participants represented the following sports: rowing (six female participants), field hockey (five female participants), soccer (six male participants), handball (six female participants), and futsal (eight male participants). The rowing team members had won eight Olympic medals and 10 world titles, and the field hockey team members were ranked in the top five sides in the world with three world championship medals. The soccer team members competed professionally in the English Championship division, the handball team members participated in Olympic and European competition,

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