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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Method

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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

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

196 **Autobiographical Research**

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

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

226 **Sample**

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

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

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

252 **Data Analysis**

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

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

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

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

311 **Results and Discussion**

312 **Embedded Narratives**

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

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

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

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

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

366 **Adversity-Related Experiences**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

493 **The Transitional Process**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

603 **Growth-Related Experiences**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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General Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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1 Table 1

2 *Swimmer and Autobiography Details*

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

