

Exploring Adversity And The Potential For Growth Among Female Ironman Competitors

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to Mom and Grama. I would no be here today with your constant support, prayers, and encouragement.

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the help of many incredible people. First, I would like to thank my committee members for your willingness to work with me during this thesis experience. Dr. Fisher, thank you for taking a chance on me, and believing in me as we have embarked on this journey together. I have been able to open up to you and share many of my past experiences, which have led to continued healing and growth. I am also so appreciative of the time and care you have taken to help push me to become a better academic. Dr. Waller, thank you for your openness, encouragement, and wisdom as I have struggled to actualize my faith within my research. Dr. Anderson, thank you for providing great insight into qualitative inquiry and for your encouragement as I navigated my positionality. All of you have uniquely helped me develop into a better writer, researcher, and individual.

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accountable for my faith and my integrity. I am a stronger Christian woman as a result of your prayers and your support.

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Finally, I want to give all the glory Jesus, who is the true foundation of my life. He has sustained me, called me, and showered me in grace and mercy throughout my life. I have been blessed with experiences that have molded and refined me and made me stronger (Isaiah 48:10). This process has instilled hope in my soul, “because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail” (Lamentations 3:22). I also hope that the Lord continues to use me as a vessel to share His Gospel with others.

Abstract

Over the years, only a handful of researchers have systematically examined the experiences of female triathletes (e.g. Cronan & Scott, 2008). Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to explore adversity and the potential for growth among female Ironman competitors. By looking at empowerment, athletic potential, and growth through adversity, the goal was to gain a clearer understanding of how female athletes utilize adversity to grow into empowered athletes and achieve their athletic potential. Seven female Ironman athletes were interviewed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); IPA is centered on exploring peoples' lived experiences, the meaning of their experiences, and how they make sense of their experiences (Smith, 2011). Participants averaged 49.8 years of age and had been involved in triathlons for roughly 13 years. All participants self-identified as middle- to upper-class and Christian; in addition, six self-identified as Caucasian and one as Asian. Six participants were married, six had children, and one was widowed. Results revealed three main themes (a) *experiences of adversity*; (b) *lessons learned*; and (c) *warrior spirit*. As more women enter the Ironman world, continued discussion pertaining to what growth through adversity means as well as what empowerment means is important (Lewis & Ridge, 2005; McGannon, Curtin, Schinke, & Schweinbenz, 2012; Miller & Brown, 2005).

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this document, I first describe my story related to physical activity, academia, and sport. I next review the existing literature encompassing a description of Ironman triathlon, women and sport, the constructs related to growth through adversity, and spirituality. I, then, outline my methodology including my procedures, worldview, and data analysis.

The purpose of the current study was to explore adversity and the potential for growth among female Ironman competitors. By looking at empowerment, athletic potential, and growth through adversity, the goal was to gain a clearer understanding of how women utilize adversity to grow into empowered athletes and achieve their athletic potential.

This thesis document concludes with a completed manuscript and an outlined manuscript. The results revealed three main themes (1) *experiences of adversity*; (2) *lessons learned*; and (3) *warrior spirit*. The first manuscript details the first two themes, *experiences of adversity* and *lessons learned*. The second manuscript will unpack the third theme, *warrior spirit* in addition to providing suggestions for future research and considerations for sport psychology consultants working with this population.

My Story

I grew up in a “traditional”, upper-middle class Caucasian family. My parents remained married throughout my childhood. I have two younger sisters, and we have a family dog. We lived in an affluent suburb of Denver, Colorado. Growing up in this area, I didn’t experience much diversity. The majority of my classmates, neighbors, and friends were Caucasian; in addition, both they and myself observed all of the Christian holidays. It wasn’t until I went to

Baylor University that I started realizing how much bigger the world is than just Littleton, Colorado.

Despite my parents being married, it was my mom and my grandma who raised my sisters and I in a Christian environment. For example, they taught us about the redeeming love of Jesus Christ. During those younger years, I had an understanding of the Bible stories and the character of God; however, my faith wasn't my own. It wasn't until college that my personal and intentional relationship with God took shape. My mom and grandma continue to display sacrificial, unconditional love for us. I believe it is because of the truths they instilled in us that we survived the dark situation we experienced at home.

For example, as the oldest child, I was able to experience all the "firsts." This was both positive and negative. I was the first one to get my ears pierced, the first one to ride a bike, and the first one to assert my independence. With this natural development of independence came an unnatural backlash of control from my dad. I remember Dad not allowing me to have sleepovers with my friends or read certain books. I remember not being allowed to know the computer password or wifi information. I remember being told to "shut up" when I was upset and not being comforted when I cried. I remember the cold, mean look he gave me just before he yelled. It was as if his piercing blue eyes were able to see into my soul. Every time he gave us a gift he expected something in return - "You have to spend all day with Dad because he bought you those jeans three weeks ago." (Dad always referred to himself in the third person). He would say, "Half of you is mine. I can touch your face because it's mine. I can say what I want because you're mine. You will respect me because I am your father and you are mine." His tyranny went so far as I could never order off of a restaurant menu without consulting him first.

Most of all, I remember Dad's distrust of me. Specifically, at the dinner table, he never believed me when I excitedly shared an athletic feat that I achieved earlier that day. He couldn't wrap his head around the idea that his daughter was able to ski a double-black diamond run, or achieve a personal best in a 5k. I remember one such conversation unfolding like this [Me]: "Guess what I did today? I skied down that black diamond slope that runs along the Continental Divide (in Breckenridge, Colorado)! It was really hard, but I did it!" Dad replied with laughter, "You didn't do that. There's no way you could have skied that slope." I recall experiencing that halting feeling deep in my gut as if my core turned to stone, which was followed by heat rushing to my face, threatening my head to explode. I was in complete shock. How could he say that to me?

It was at that point a seed was planted: "I will show him". I was fifteen. I trained harder for high school cross-country. I hiked the tallest mountains, and I embarked on a journey that would ultimately lead me to Ironman Texas. The more I pushed my body, the better I felt. It was in those moments of suffering during a strenuous endurance activity that I was able to grieve over the kind of dad I wanted but could never have. It was also during those moments that God began wooing me. He was gently drawing me out of the darkness. For so long, I needed to prove myself to everyone. I desperately wanted Dad to see me as special and important – my value was misplaced and it was devastating. God brought peace to my soul when there was none, and He soothed my aching heart. This transformation can be attributed to the relationship between spirituality and sport. According to Pengelley (2008), participating in sport can drive us toward God through the powerful effect of symbolic rituals. Sport builds character, and highlights the need for a relationship with God (Pengelley, 2008). When Watson (2007) discussed spirituality in extreme sport, he came from the biblical position that "all humans are made in the image of

God and comprise soul, body, and spirit” (p. 97). He summarized that Christian tradition comes from Jesus Christ, inner transformation, and unity with God (Watson, 2007). Furthermore, the experience of God is that of “awe” and Jonathan Edwards described such experience as “ineffably excellent” and kept him “in a flood of tears and weeping aloud” (see Watson, 2007, p. 102). Many of my sport experiences mirror my beliefs of Christian tradition and feeling in awe of God. As a result of my sporting experiences, I am finally (10 years later) able to see myself more clearly and my value is secure in Christ.

It wasn’t until I was a junior in college that my parents got divorced. My mom saved us from the never-ending downward spiral of Dad’s control, and Grandma supported us along the way. Yet, ever since, our world has been turned upside down. We are no longer upper-middle class. Instead, we live paycheck to paycheck, praying that ends will meet. However, for me, the divorce was a good thing – something I had prayed about for several years. We are no longer living in the midst of intense upset. Unfortunately, despite the divorce, my dad still lingers in the background. He has yet to take responsibility for his actions; so, I have put myself in a position of protection. I no longer engage with him in any way. I have spent the last 10 years redefining myself and actualizing my value. I am not only confident in who I am, but who’s I am. I am the daughter of the one true King. God showers me with his loving kindness every day, showing me that, while my earthly father is a broken human, He (God) is the perfect father.

Despite the turmoil of the past several years, I have been academically successful. I graduated from Baylor University in Waco, Texas in May of 2014 with a Bachelor of Science in Education (BSED) degree in Health Science Studies with honors distinction. While at Baylor, I competed for the Baylor Triathlon Club Team for three years. I also was a student in the Honors College. My undergraduate honors thesis was a study pertaining to endurance athletes’ spiritual

experiences while participating in a strenuous endurance event. This topic mirrored my own experiences of meeting God in the midst of an endurance activity. With the help of my advisor, Dr. Andrew Meyer, I conducted surveys and interviews after a Baylor-sanctioned running relay race. We have taken the findings from that research project and prepared a manuscript that is currently in review. I learned a lot about the research process and developed a passion for sport psychology.

After graduating from Baylor, I decided to stay at the university and pursue a Master of Public Health (MPH) degree in the fall of 2014. I had spent my entire undergraduate career hoping to attend physical therapy school. When that plan didn't come to fruition, I wasn't sure what to do. I knew I was interested in sport psychology as a result of my honors thesis, but I didn't know where to attend graduate school. I was determined not to have a gap year because I was scared about becoming stuck in an entry-level job that I disliked. I was also scared to leave Baylor because Waco had become my safe haven. I had a support system of faculty, staff, and friends that encouraged and protected me. I couldn't imagine anywhere else to be like Baylor. At the last minute, I applied and was accepted into Baylor's MPH program. I hoped that the MPH degree would stretch to encompass sport psychology. In my mind, public health translated to mental and physical health, which translated to sport psychology. I learned a lot during that year, but found it challenging to actualize my love for sport psychology through my public health coursework.

Simultaneously, during that school year, I decided to train for Ironman Texas. For me, it was a big step toward feeling free from Dad. I trained, paid, and suffered for that race all by myself. I was the one who moved my body for 140.6 miles. Each step toward the finish line was a step away from the past. It was also a symbolic journey because Ironman represented all of the

suffering my family felt for so long. I raced for me, but I also raced for my family. I feel I culminated my time in Texas with this special experience while also solidifying my desire to learn more about sport psychology and endurance sport.

I applied and was accepted into the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's (UTK) Master of Science (MS) degree program in Kinesiology with a concentration in Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior for the fall of 2015. My first semester opened my eyes to the possibilities of studying sport psychology and endurance athletes. In the *Psychology of Sport* course I took at UTK, I was able to craft a mental skills training manual for endurance athletes. I included information pertaining to a variety of mental skills including *mental toughness* (Connaughton, Hanton, & Jones, 2010). Connaughton, Hanton, and Jones (2010) discussed the different ways mental toughness is developed. They found that critical incidents (positive or negative) have a profound effect on the development of mental toughness. For me, the concept of *negative critical incidents* served as a catalyst toward my participation in sport, and the development of mental toughness. As Connaughton and colleagues (2010) wrote, "Negative critical incidents, such as parental divorce...resulted in reappraisal of priorities....sport was viewed as 'an escape' from such negative experiences and resulted in increased focus and prioritization of training and competition goals" (p. 190). For me, I utilized triathlon as "an escape" from the terrible situation at home. As a result of learning about sport psychology, mental toughness, and my experiences with triathlon, I became intrigued with the potential ways that other women might also utilize sport to escape their own negative experiences.

In the spring of 2016, I took the *Women, Sport, and Culture* course taught by Dr. Leslee Fisher. I found myself being influenced by the topics and assigned readings we discussed in

class. It was in this class on February 23, 2016 that I first shared my black diamond ski story – I hadn't spoken about this experience to anyone before that day.

Continued reading about women and sport throughout the spring and the summer of 2016 allowed me to critically reflect on my own endurance sport experiences. I have thought about my personal history a great deal, and I also think about the reasons why I continue to participate in endurance sport. I know my participation has been more than just autotelic (e.g., defined as doing an activity solely for the purpose of the activity itself, where there is no expectation for a reward or benefit; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). I truly enjoy the act of running, biking, swimming, etc.; however, I have always felt that there is something more. For example, I know that I participate in endurance sports as a way to regain control over my life; this is because for so many years, I never felt like my body was my own. Dad controlled every aspect of my life. So, upon being freed from his tyranny, I set out to prove to myself and anyone who would listen how strong I really am. Upon reflection, I believe this is why I competed in Ironman Texas in May 2015. It was the ultimate endurance event and I was finally empowered.

Since my time at UTK, I have grown as an academic as well as a woman. For example, I have been given the opportunity to provide sport psychology consulting services to local endurance athletes ranging from elementary school children to adults. Matt Bejar (now Dr. Matt Bejar, one of Dr. Fisher's former doctoral students) and Dr. Rebecca Zakrajsek have mentored me through those consulting experiences. I have learned more about myself and the biases I bring to these interactions, such as my spirituality, family dynamic, and triathlon experiences. Drs. Fisher and Bejar have also mentored me through research experiences. I helped Dr. Bejar transcribe his dissertation data. Now, Dr. Fisher is mentoring me through my thesis and the three of us are also working to analyze and write up Dr. Bejar's data from a running study. Finally, my

experiences in Dr. Fisher's *Women, Sport, and Culture* course encouraged me to confidently talk about my personal story and discover a way to merge my story with the stories of other female endurance athletes.

Upon graduation, I intend to pursue a PhD after some time spent doing sport psychology consulting. During this short time away from school, I plan on maintaining a presence in research and academia by participating in research projects in sport psychology and women in sport with Dr. Fisher.

Brief Literature Review

Ironman triathlon consists of 3.8 km of swimming, 180.2 km of cycling, and 42.2 km of running. The first Ironman triathlon was organized by John Collins, a commander in the U.S. Navy, in 1978 (World Triathlon Corporation, 2016). Since the start of this race, Ironman triathlon has continued to grow in participation for men and women. "Current participation in the event demonstrates not only that people can survive the race, but also they can enjoy the challenge" (McCarville, 2007, p. 160). In fact, a US woman recently won the triathlon in the Rio Olympic Games (summer 2016) this may be due in part to the USA Triathlon collegiate feeder system begun in 2009. The Collegiate Recruitment Program (CRP), the National Team Program, and the Elite Athlete Development Program are all designed by USA Triathlon; the goal is to develop and support young athletes to the Olympic level (USA Triathlon, 2016).

Over the years, only a handful of researchers have systematically examined the experiences of female triathletes to explore how their sporting experiences can be empowering for them (e.g. Cronan & Scott, 2008). Therefore, there is still much to learn about women and how they experience triathlon as a means to be empowered, achieve their potential and overcome adversity.

Women, empowerment, and triathlon. Throughout the literature, there are only a few studies focusing on women and their empowerment through sport and triathlon. For example, in 2008, Cronan and Scott set out to complete a case study that examined training group experiences of female triathletes. The researchers found that a community with other participants was essential to the training experience. According to Cronan and Scott, participation in the training group also provided opportunities for women to reinvent the female body and athlete, athletic competition, and the sport. Opffer discussed similar findings in 2010. She conducted a case study of a female training group. This group, the Rocky Mountain Women (RMW), were a group of outdoor adventurers who were tired of feeling marginalized in sport. As Opffer stated, “These women continually create and re(create) alternative spaces to resist and transform the patriarchal rhetoric and social practices of outdoor sports arenas” (p. 277). After interviewing RMW women, Opffer found that the women were caring, patient, and kind to one another in a female-only environment. One of the women spoke of outdoor sport being a source of empowerment. Another woman spoke about how the encouraging environment of this women’s group helped her discover her own athletic potential. It appears, therefore, that the women of RMW were taking control of their athletic selves in an all-female space.

In 2010, Lloyd and Little explored self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) and women’s experiences within the context of leisure-time physical activity. SDT focuses on the need to satisfy three basic human needs: Competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In order to capture the women’s personal experiences, the researchers used an interpretive paradigm. Lloyd and Little conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 participants, and these interviews included topics related to the relationship between participation in leisure activity and their sense of well-being. The researchers found that all three basic human

needs were reported as satisfied through leisure-time physical activity for these women. For example, competence was evidenced in how the women stepped out of their comfort zone and gained confidence as they learned new leisure skills. Relatedness was evidenced when, during the leisure experiences, the women were creating connections and learning from each other. Autonomy was evidenced when the women were able to make decisions about their participation, goals, and time for themselves. The women seemed to value the change to do something that was intentionally focused on themselves and made them feel good. Through the fulfillment of these three basic human needs, the women appeared to feel an increase in self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Sport-related adversity and growth. In many sport-related adversity and growth discussions, researchers focus on sport-specific incidents that athletes must overcome to continue to develop into, and perform as, elite athletes. These sport-specific incidents followed by growth include injuries, setbacks, etc. (see Galli & Reel, 2010; Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013; Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullough, 2012).

For example, in 2010, Connaughton, Hanton, and Jones were interested in exploring how mental toughness in elite athletes is developed and maintained. The researchers interviewed 11 participants asking them to reflect on their athletic career. Athletes reported becoming more self-aware and empowered when they experienced situations in which they had to learn how to cope with challenges. Experiences of critical incidents (positive or negative) appeared to act as catalysts for the development of mental toughness. Therefore, it appears that there is the potential for one-time events to initiate a process of growth and development in athletes as they overcome adversity.

Statement of the Problem

After reviewing the literature pertaining to triathlon (Cronan & Scott, 2008; Lloyd & Little, 2010) and the literature pertaining to growth through adversity (Galli & Reel, 2010; Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013; Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullough, 2012), it was evident that there is still a gap in the research pertaining specifically to women's experiences in Ironman triathlon. The studies reviewed above have initiated the first steps to systematically exploring the empowerment of women through endurance sport in addition to how athletes utilize adversity to develop into better performers. Now, we must address female athletes who compete in Ironman so their voices are heard regarding their experience of participation.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the current study was to explore adversity and the potential for growth among female Ironman competitors. By looking at empowerment, athletic potential, and growth through adversity, the goal was to gain a clearer understanding of how women utilize adversity to grow into empowered athletes and achieve their athletic potential.

Guiding Research Question

1. What is the positive impact of negative events on female Ironmen in three broad categories: (a) changes in self-perception; (b) changes in interpersonal relationships; and (c) a changed life philosophy (e.g. are spiritual beliefs either strengthened or weakened)?

Definitions

The following definitions were used to guide the current study:

- Critical incident: A specific experience through which the participants learned from and changed their behavior (Hanton et al., 2007).

- Endurance training (Aerobic Exercise): Refers to activities that improve aerobic capacity, which is the amount of oxygen consumed during maximal exercise. Endurance training is beneficial for skeletal muscle strength and function because it increases muscle fiber size and the number of capillaries supplying blood to the muscle tissue. Examples of endurance sport include swimming, cycling, running, rock climbing, cross country skiing (Mechanick, 2015).
- Ironman: An ultra-endurance triathlon consisting of 3.8 km of swimming, 180.2 km of cycling, and 42.2 km of running (World Triathlon Corporation, 2016).
- Ironwomen: How the researcher is referring to women who have completed an Ironman triathlon (Prouty, 1998).
- Religion: “System of beliefs and practices observed by a community, supported by rituals that acknowledge, worship, and communicate with, or approach the Sacred, the Divine, God (in Western cultures), or Ultimate Truth, Reality, or nirvana (in Eastern cultures)” (Koenig, 2008, p. 11).
- Self-determination theory (SDT): Defined by Deci and Ryan (2000) as “a critical issue in the effects of goal pursuit and attainment concerns the degree to which people are able to satisfy their basic psychological needs as they pursue and attain their valued outcomes” (p. 227). These psychological needs include autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
- Spirituality: “The practice and outworking of the spirit and the ways which it is developed, with its different aspects and relationships connected, sustained, and understood” (Robinson, 2007, p. 24).
- Stress-related growth: The positive changes that follow the lived experiences of stressful events (Kesmici et al., 2005).

Delimitations

The study was delimited to the following participants:

1. Ironman female athletes (Ironwomen) over the age of 18 years who had competed in an Ironman competition.

The study is delimited to the following instruments:

1. Interview guide adapted from Tamminen, Holt, and Neely (2013).

Limitations

The limitations of this study were as follows:

1. Participation in an Ironman event is a one-time and/or once-a-year event, so I did not interview the participants immediately after more than one Ironman race or Ironman training cycle due to time constraints for this project.
2. Results from this study are not generalizable to other females who participate in endurance events.
3. Despite the bracketing interview process, some interviewer biases may always be present within the data analysis. However, I did my best to keep my biases in check with the help of Dr. Fisher throughout the research process.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Seventeen hours is the cut-off time for one of the toughest endurance races in the world, the Ironman. Ironman triathlon consists of 3.8 km of swimming, 180.2 km of cycling, and 42.2 km of running. The time required to complete an Ironman triathlon race is between 8 hours and 17 hours. Beginning in 1978, John Collins, a commander in the U.S. Navy, founded Ironman as a result of a disagreement over which endurance athlete (e.g., swimmer, cyclist, or runner) was the fittest (Bridel, 2013; Lamont & Kennelly, 2012). There was only one woman who participated in the inaugural Ironman triathlon. Since this first Ironman race, the Ironman triathlon has continued to grow in participation for both men and women: “Current participation in the event demonstrates not only that people can survive the race, but also they can enjoy the challenge” (McCarville, 2007, p. 160).

Over the years, a handful of researchers have examined the experiences of female triathletes to study how sporting environments can be empowering (e.g., Cronan & Scott; Jones & Aitchison, 2007). As McCarville (2007) wrote: “Is triathlon a gendered activity? It is one of the few sporting activities in which male and female participants all compete on the same course at the same time. The miles to be covered are the same for all participants” (p. 160). In a related vein, other researchers have studied growth after adversity (see Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004; Park et al., 1996). While growth after adversity can happen in a variety of settings, sport researchers have applied these concepts to sport-specific adversity (e.g. injury, failure); they have found that in the face of adversity, many athletes are able to persevere, grow, and be

successful in their sport (Galli & Reel, 2010; Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013; Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullough, 2012).

Using the following literature review, I highlight the empowering benefits of participation in triathlon and of growth through adversity for female athletes. I conclude this section with a rationale for why female Ironman athletes and their experiences with growth through adversity and empowerment should be studied in more detail.

Women in Triathlon

Since its inception, Ironman triathlon has continued to grow in participation for both men and women. In fact, as previously stated, a US woman recently won the triathlon in the Rio Olympic Games due in part to the USA Triathlon feeder system begun in 2009 (USA Triathlon, 2016). Titled the Collegiate Recruitment Program (CRP), USA Triathlon exposes collegiate swimmers and runners who have a background in the other sport to the possibility of making an Olympic team. First, the program identifies talent from the NCAA rankings. Identified athletes are nurtured and trained to become elite triathletes with the high potential for going to the Olympic Games. Additionally, USA Triathlon identifies talented early triathletes through the USA Triathlon National Team Program and the Elite Athlete Development Program. These programs support Juniors (16-19 years old), Junior Elites (18-19 years old), Collegiate Elites, Under 23s (18-23 years old), and other athletes meeting the appropriate criteria (USA Triathlon, 2016). In order to qualify for the USA Triathlon National Team an athlete must meet specific criteria. For example, achieving top 30 in the Olympic rankings or top 30 on the International Triathlon Union (ITU) points list. An athlete can also qualify with a top 5 finish at an ITU World Cup event and a top 20 finish at the ITU World Triathlon Series Final (for a complete list of qualification criteria see USA Triathlon National Team Program Criteria, 2016). In order to

qualify for the Elite Athlete Development Program an athlete must also meet specific criteria. For example, earning three top 3 finishes in ITU Continental Cups in a 12-month period (for a complete list of qualification criteria see USA Triathlon Elite Athlete Development Support Criteria (Pre-National Team), 2016). The goal of both programs listed above is to identify, develop and support young male and female athletes on their way to the Olympic level.

Empowerment Theory

In terms of the empowerment literature, Busch and Valentine (2000) looked at empowerment practice with a focus on battered women. They discussed the four psychological changes that occur through empowering individuals. These include self-efficacy, the development of group consciousness, reduced self-blame, and assumption of personal responsibility. For example, when self-efficacy and competence are developed, a person gains self-confidence (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; & Carpentier & Mageau, 2016). Group consciousness is the awareness that the woman is not alone – that she is part of a bigger group of individuals with “shared feelings and experiences” (Busch & Valentine, 2000, p. 90). Reduced self-blame and assumption of personal responsibility are important for empowerment because battered women need to believe that the abuse is not their fault and that they can do something to change their situation (Busch & Valentine, 2000). While not all women who participate in triathlon are “battered,” the concepts brought forth by Busch and Valentine (2000) appear valuable when discussing female triathletes because triathlon can provide an environment in which women can experience these four psychological changes.

Results from additional empowerment studies point to three other categories of empowerment, which include psychological empowerment, interactional empowerment, and community empowerment (Nikkhah, Redzunan, & Abu-Samah, 2012). These three

empowerment categories could also be important in the context of triathlon because the self, the environment, and the community are all factors in training for and racing triathlons. For example, psychological empowerment or “power within” refers to self-esteem and self-confidence (Nikkhah et al., 2012). This power has the potential to enhance confidence, so individuals can change their situation for the better. Interactional empowerment or “power to” refers to having the ability to make decisions and solve problems. This power creates opportunities for individuals without taking opportunities away from others. Community empowerment or “power with” refers to the power found in a support system, where people are united for a common purpose.

Empowerment in Triathlon

These three categories of empowerment can be easily applied to women’s participation in triathlon. This is because participation in triathlon has been shown to increase self-efficacy and competence (Lloyd & Little, 2010) while also providing a community of others who have shared feelings and experiences (Cronan & Scott, 2008). In 2010, Lloyd and Little explored women’s experiences in leisure-time physical activity utilizing self-determination theory (SDT). As previously stated, SDT focuses on the need to satisfy three basic human needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the context of leisure activities, social environments aid in the satisfaction of these three basic human needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In order to capture the women’s personal experiences, the researchers used an interpretive paradigm. Lloyd and Little conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 participants focused on the relationship between participation in leisure activity and one’s sense of well-being. Lloyd and Little found six themes that described how the women’s participation in triathlon helped enhance their well-being: stepping out of the comfort zone, confidence and success through structured

learning, individual goals and choices, choosing me, learning from other women, and creating connections. Lloyd and Little described how each of the six themes reflected SDT. For example, Competence was evidenced in how the women stepped out of their comfort zone and gained confidence as they learned new leisure skills. Relatedness was evidenced when during the leisure experiences, the women were creating connections and learning from each other. Autonomy was evidenced when the women were able to make decisions about their participation, goals, and time for themselves; they reported valuing the change to do something that was intentionally focused on themselves because it made them feel good. Through the fulfillment of the three basic human needs, participants appeared to feel an increase in self-confidence and self-efficacy.

As previously referenced in Chapter 1, in 2008, Cronan and Scott set out to complete a case study that examined training group experiences of female triathletes. The researchers found that a community with other participants was essential to the training experience. According to them, participation in the training group also provided opportunities for women to reinvent the female body and athlete, athletic competition, and the sport. Opffer discussed similar findings in 2010. She also conducted a case study of a female training group. This group, the Rocky Mountain Women (RMW), were a group of outdoor adventurers who were tired of feeling marginalized in sport. As Opffer stated, “These women continually create and re(create) alternative spaces to resist and transform the patriarchal rhetoric and social practices of outdoor sports arenas” (p. 277). After interviewing RMW women, Opffer found that they were caring, patient, and kind to one another in a female-only environment. One of the women spoke of outdoor sport being a source of empowerment; another woman spoke about how the encouraging environment of this women’s group helped her discover her own athletic potential. It appears,

therefore, that the women of RMW were taking control of their athletic selves and getting great benefit from a female-only space.

Growth After Adversity

The concept of growth following adversity is an important piece in many theoretical models. Before proceeding with a review of related literature, it is important to note the different terms used by researchers to describe the relationship between growth and adversity. *Post-traumatic growth* (PTG; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004) and *stress-related growth* (SRG; Park et al., 1996) are the two main terms used by researchers. When deciding which terminology to use, researchers should, first, consider the event under study. Park et al. (1996) believed that PTG should be used in situations in which individuals have actually experienced a serious, traumatic event (e.g. severe event threatening life or limb). For other events that are not considered to have that level of trauma (e.g. divorce, failure) the researchers should use the term SRG.

In 1995 and 2004, Tedeschi and Calhoun presented conceptual papers on the functional-descriptive model of post-traumatic growth. This model suggests that a traumatic event destroys an individual's schema about the self, the world, and the future. It is through the experience of coping with trauma that growth may occur. The areas of growth include a greater appreciation of life, a change in priorities, closer relationships, enhanced personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, and spiritual development. Through this growth, there is cognitive rebuilding where the individual takes into account his/her changed reality and creates new schemas that incorporate the trauma information. These new schemas are more resistant to being destroyed if/when the individual is faced with another traumatic event in the future.

Growth after adversity is also prevalent in organismic valuing theory (OVT) (Joseph & Linley, 2005). According to OVT, individuals are naturally growth-oriented and aim to make their existing mental models match the current stressful situation through assimilation or accommodation. Assimilation is when the individual takes the information about the stressful situation and blends it into his/her current worldview. In some cases, individuals may blame themselves for the stressful event in order for the experience to make sense within their worldview. In contrast, accommodation is when the individual takes the information about the stressful situation and develops a new worldview because the stressful experience was perceived as random. By developing a new worldview, growth can occur.

Joseph and Linley (2005) have also addressed the concepts of *meaning as comprehensibility* versus *meaning as significance*. For example, as an individual processes a stressful event, her/his initial thoughts are concerned with comprehending the situation. However, over time, the individual begins to ask questions about the significance of the event, which is necessary for growth to occur. Joseph and Linley (2005) assert that accommodation processes requires changes in *meaning as significance*, which can result in negative or positive changes. If the accommodation is negative, the individual may experience depressive-life symptoms and psychopathy; conversely, if the accommodation is positive, the individual may be optimistic and experience positive changes in worldview and growth.

In 2005, Kesimci, Goral, and Gencoz were interested in the stress-related growth model (SRG). By using the *Ways of Coping Inventory* (WCI; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) and the *Stress-Related Growth Scale* (SRGS; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), the researchers aimed to establish the determinants of stress-related growth. Folkman and Lazarus (1985) developed the WCI, which assesses cognitive and behavioral coping strategies people use in stressful situations. Park,

Cohen, and Murch (1996) developed the SRGS which is a 50-item scale designed to assess stress-related growth. During the development of the SRGS, the researchers determined that the significant predictors of SRG included stressfulness of the negative event, positive reinterpretation of the event, intrinsic religion, and social support. Previously mentioned, the stressful event and the positive reinterpretation of that event are necessary for growth (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004). Intrinsic religiousness reflects how much the individual utilizes their religion as a framework of meaning. By having a salient belief system, individuals are able to find positive meaning in negative experiences (Pargement et al., 2000). Finally, Park et al. (1996) claimed that a social support network aids the individual in feeling worthwhile and capable through positive feedback.

According to Kesmici et al. (2005), stress-related growth can be defined as the positive changes that follow the lived experiences of stressful events. By referring back to the post-traumatic growth model proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), they proposed that a stressful event invalidates a person's pre-existing schema (e.g. beliefs about self, the world, and the future). The stressful event destabilizes these beliefs, which requires the individual to rebuild a new set of schemas in light of the negative event; this process of rebuilding and coping with stress may lead to increased efficacy. In addition, a reconstructed schema may produce a positive outlook on the stressful event and individuals may develop coping behaviors to view the stress as beneficial (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). According to the findings by Kesimci et al, there was a positive association between severity of the stressful experience and the level of stress-related growth; for example, they found that the stressful experience needs to be severe enough to invalidate the person's pre-existing schema, which forces the person to rebuild a new schema with greater efficacy. Furthermore, Kesimci et al. suggested that females tend to report more

stress-related growth than males. Not only has this finding about women been suggested by other researchers (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), it has also been argued that women can have higher levels of distress after a stressful experience. Higher levels of stress may lead to higher experiences of SRG. Social support and religiousness were identified as significant predictors of SRG, which aligned with assumptions of the SRGS (Park et al., 1996).

Sport-Related Adversity and Growth

In many sport-related adversity and growth discussions, researchers focus on sport-specific incidents athletes must overcome to continue to develop into, and perform as, elite athletes. These sport-specific incidents followed by growth include injuries, setbacks, etc. (Galli & Reel, 2010; Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013; Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullough, 2012). Similar to non-sport-related research, it is necessary to note the different terms used by sport researchers when discussing sport-related adversity. Two major terms include *critical incidents* (Connaughton, Hanton, & Jones, 2010; Hanton et al., 2007) and *stress-related growth* (SRG; Park et al., 1996). *Critical incidents* is a new term introduced in this section of the literature review. Hanton et al. (2007) defined critical incidents as a specific experience through which the participants learned from and changed their behavior.

In 2007, Hanton, Cropley, Neil, Mellalieu, and Miles investigated the influence of experience on the interpretation of anxiety-related symptoms in elite athletes. Their study was divided into two phases: in Phase one, they explored anxiety-related symptoms and the definition of experience through the use of a focus group interview. As a result, “the definition of experience was based on the belief that experience is related to the generation of knowledge through learning by being exposed to particular incidents” (Hanton et al., 2007). In Phase two, they utilized the definition of experience in semi-structured interviews with six elite athletes

from a variety of sports. The interviews focused on specific critical incidents that the participants experienced and how those experiences influenced their sport participation. Ultimately, the researchers were interested in how and why critical incidents create a process of reflection and learning within sport. They found that the type of incident and post-incident profile influenced the reflective and learning process (e.g. positive experiences led to positive psychological profiles and negative experiences led to negative psychological profiles). However, the findings also indicated that negative incidents might create high levels of reflection immediately after the event. The researchers suggested the possibility that negative psychological profiles may increase the desire to improve and create a deeper process of learning.

In 2010, critical incidents were also explored by Connaughton, Hanton, and Jones as they were interested in how mental toughness is developed in elite athletes. The researchers interviewed 11 participants asking them to reflect on their athletic career. The purpose of the study was to examine how mental toughness is developed and maintained. The researchers found that mental toughness began developing as a result of sport enjoyment and skill development. Over time, mental toughness was influenced by a high sense of achievement, increased focus, and an intense desire to win. When the athletes experienced situations in which they had to learn how to cope with challenges, they became more self-aware and empowered. Therefore, experiences of critical incidents (positive or negative) may act as catalysts for the development of mental toughness. A positive critical incident may involve a situation in which an athlete is recognized and encouraged by a respected sportsperson; this positive critical incident may aid in enhancing belief and motivation. Negative critical incidents may also enhance mental toughness; a negative experience such as a divorce can result in a reappraisal of priorities. The sport may be

viewed as “an escape” or as a way to increase control and focus over long-term goals; this may be due to the development of new perspectives necessary to cope with negative experiences.

In 2015, Sarkar, Fletcher, and Brown were also interested in how elite athletes utilized their experiences of adversity to enhance their sport development. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 Olympic champions (6 male and 4 female). Among the 10 participants, there were 11 Olympic gold medals. Similar to many of the previously mentioned studies (e.g. Connaughton, Hanton, & Jones, 2010; Galli & Reel, 2012; Hanton, Cropley, Neil, Mellalieu, & Miles, 2007), participants shared adversities including significant sporting failure and serious injury. However, two participants spoke about adversity outside of sport. Based on the previous discussion of negative critical incidents (Connaughton, Hanton, & Jones, 2010), these major life events seemed to be motivating factors in the participants’ desire to grow and achieve. In fact, one participant experienced political unrest and described the experience of travelling into a city while bombs were going off. This participant acknowledged that this negative critical incident ignited their motivation to perform at a high level; s/he wanted to encourage his/her fellow countrymen and women through the terrible times. The other participant experienced the death of a close family member – his/her mother died suddenly which was followed by family conflict. Through his/her anger, hurt, and disappointment, this participant’s escape was to get out and continue through sport. He/she wanted to achieve for the mother’s sake and prove that his/her mother created a strong child.

Sarkar et al. claimed that adversity-related experiences are essential in the performance and psychological development of Olympic champions. By referring back to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995, 2004), Sarkar et al. claimed that some emotional distress is necessary for growth: “...’why’ focus on emotions from a self-distanced viewpoint served to attenuate emotional

reactivity by directing the individual's attention to a less concrete and more abstract analysis of his or her experience" (p. 477). Essentially, this reflective processing of the negative experience helped the participants make sense of their experience without initiating negative affect.

Positive Coping Strategies and Growth

Galli and Reel (2012) also explored how sport-related adversity affects high performing athletes. The researchers utilized Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) *Posttraumatic Growth Inventory* (PTGI) and conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 (8 females and 3 males) National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I athletes. Galli and Reel supported their use of the PTGI assessment because the scale was originally validated for college students, and not all participants in the original validation experienced traumatic events. The researchers were interested in addressing the athlete's most difficult source of stress during a 3-year period. All of the athletes cited injury and/or performance expectations as being the most stressful. The results indicated stress-related growth (SRG) among the athletes; they experienced the occurrence of the stressor, which caused an upheaval of their biopsychosocial identity. After the stressful event happened, they experienced a period of struggle as they tried to work through their stress. Finally, optimism, social support, and religion and spirituality played important roles in facilitating SRG; many of the athletes identified as being optimistic. This attitude has been related to SGR because optimists may appraise a stressful event as a challenge and engage in positive coping strategies, which include seeking social support, and religious-based coping (Nes & Sergerstrom, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). According to Galli and Reel's results, athletes commonly used religious practices to cope with their stress; religion can provide a social support network as well as the intrinsic sense of purpose and meaning (Krause et al., 2001). Athletes

were able to find meaning in their stressful experience through their relationship with God knowing that a higher power was watching over them.

SGR places emphasis on a person's sociocultural context, so an individual's race, ethnicity, gender, social class, etc. also seem important to consider when assessing growth and adversity. Further, Galli and Reel suggested that other sport researchers interested in spirituality and sport experiences might benefit from considering SRG as an outcome of a stressful experience.

Social Support

In the previous studies, social support was identified as an important component of growth through adversity (e.g. SRG, critical incidents). In the context of sport-related adversity, Arvinen-Barrow and Pack (2013) presented a conceptual paper discussing the benefits of social support for an athlete overcoming an injury. Arvinen-Barrow and Pack described how social support is an emotionally satisfying aspect of life, which enables individuals to better cope with adversity; it is through a network of people that an individual may feel connected, encouraged, and assisted through adversity. Within the injury context, social support can aid in overcoming adversity as it can act as a buffer by directly influencing the effects of the stressor (e.g. injury; see Rees' 2007 stress-buffering model). This model suggests that social support is a shield against the stressor and the potential negative effects of the stressor. Applied to a broader spectrum of adversity, a social support network may "step in" after the negative experience and walk alongside the individual as they overcome the adverse situation.

Religion and Spirituality

Similarly, in previous studies, religion and spirituality were also identified as important aspects of growth through adversity. Before moving forward, it is important to define the

difference between religion and spirituality. Religion is defined by Koenig (2008) as a “system of beliefs and practices observed by a community, supported by rituals that acknowledge, worship, and communicate with, or approach the Sacred, the Divine, God (in Western cultures), or Ultimate Truth, Reality, or nirvana (in Eastern cultures)” (p. 11). While spirituality is a component of religion, it is not limited to religion. Spirituality has been defined as “the practice and outworking of the spirit and the ways which it is developed, with its different aspects and relationships connected, sustained, and understood” (Robinson, 2007, p. 24).

In Pargement, Koenig, and Perez (2000)’s study, the researchers wanted to highlight the importance of measuring religious coping independently. They asserted that religious coping is obscured in the general coping literature, even though many people make mention of religion when asked about their coping strategies. Thus, the researchers created a comprehensive *Religious Coping* (RCOPE) scale. They surveyed 540 college students (69% female) and 551 elderly hospital patients. According to Pargement et al., religion serves several purposes in living and in adversity: this includes meaning and control. In the face of adversity, religion provides a framework for finding meaning through understanding and interpretation (e.g., Geertz, 1966); religion might also provide a sense of control when adversity pushes an individual outside their comfort zone (e.g., Fromm, 1950).

Additionally, religion and social support are closely linked. Krause, Ellison, Shaw, Marcum, and Boardman (2001) explored the importance of church-based social support and religious coping. Through the dissemination of 2,550 surveys, the researchers found that people who received church-based social support were more likely to use positive religious coping. The researchers asserted that the social networks within churches strive to create a welcoming

atmosphere, which may lead to the adoption of religious values. By infusing religion into daily life, religious coping may be more likely to happen.

Additional Positive Coping Strategies

Nes and Sergerstrom (2006) discussed the role of optimism in overcoming adversity. They conducted a meta-analytic review of 169 articles that employed an optimism measure and a coping measure. These researchers suggested that optimism is positively associated with coping strategies aiming to eliminate, reduce, or manage adversity. More specifically, optimism was found to be positively correlated with approach and problem-focused coping rather than avoidance or emotion-focused coping. Nes and Sergerstrom also found that optimism appears to be flexible in that the individual can better modify his/her response to adversity or adversity itself. Essentially, by acquiring an optimistic outlook, it may be easier for an individual to assess his/her adverse situation and move forward with an appropriate way to deal with it.

Summary

Moving forward from this review of literature, I have taken into consideration the suggestions by other researchers for future study related to the experience of stress-related growth (SRG) following non-sport related critical incidents (Wadey, 2013). I am also interested in addressing the religious/spirituality impact and/or relationship with SRG and critical incidents (Galli & Reel, 2012). Finally, I am interested in focusing on one population – female Ironman athletes. Many of the studies to date have looked at a variety of athletes and their experiences with SRG; however, not much attention has been given specifically to ultra-endurance female athletes.

As I proceed forward, I want to highlight a specific study that I feel serves as a great model after which to craft my own study, and also serves as a model for a larger study that Dr.

Fisher is conducting. In 2013, Tamminen, Holt, and Neely explored how sport-related adversity affected the potential for growth among elite female athletes. By using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researchers were able to conduct a small sample study focusing on a specific and significant question for the participants. Tamminen et al. asked five female athletes to discuss the most negative experiences that impacted their sporting career. After analyzing these semi-structured interviews, the researchers heard the athletes speak about how the adversity was emotionally challenging and caused them to question their identity. However, the athletes also found meaning in their experiences when they thought about the role sport played in their lives and the significance of their social support. Through the participants' experiences of adversity within sport, the athletes reflected changes to their identities and found meaning through their experiences.

I was interested in replicating this study with a different population of athletes. While Tamminen et al. interviewed a variety of female athletes, I focused my study specifically on female Ironman athletes and how adversity has impacted their Ironman experience and empowerment. In the next chapter, I describe the methodology used in the current study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Participants

In this study, I interviewed 7 female Ironman athletes (at least 18 years old) who had competed in at least one Ironman competition. Each met the following criteria: (1) have participated in at least one Ironman, (2) are at least 18 years old, and (3) identify as a female. For example, this study was delimited to athletes who had participated in at least one Ironman triathlon. Considering the potential for personal and relational sacrifice, the lengthy training process, and the distance of the race, the athletes are assumed to have intense emotional experiences. According to Raglin (2007), athletes participating in ultra-endurance events experience significant emotions before, during, and after the event. Additionally, completing an ultra-endurance event requires overcoming emotional barriers (e.g. intense fatigue and unpleasant emotions) (Buman et al., 2009; Micklewright et al., 2009; & Stevinson & Biddle, 1998). In other words, the purpose of this study was to explore the empowering, emotional, and stressful experiences that Ironwomen may have had before, during, or after an Ironman triathlon (an ultra-endurance event). Secondly, the study was delimited to participants at least 18 years old. This is due primarily to the age restriction of the event. Finally, this study was delimited to participants who identified as female because the purpose of this project was to examine the specific experiences of female Ironman athletes.

Worldview/Ontology/Epistemology

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), “qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 4). This study was situated within a social constructivism paradigm.

Creswell (2013) defines social constructivism as the way individuals seek understanding of their world and develop subjective meanings of their experiences. Furthermore, social constructivism focuses on a specific context of an individual's life (e.g. triathlon) (Creswell, 2013). I situate myself within Lee's (2012) description of social constructivism. He discussed how constructivism could be looked at in two ways. One interpretation is the idea that there are, literally, multiple realities. The other interpretation is that:

There is just one reality 'out there' and we live in it. Therefore, there are no 'multiple realities' in a literal 'multiple universes' sense. However, although we all live in the same world, there is not any set of categories into which the 'raw stuff' of the world falls naturally. These categories are but conventional. We create them in the sense not of changing the world but just in the sense of changing how we think about the world. (Lee, 2012, p. 406-407)

Procedure

Approval was first obtained from the University of Tennessee's IRB; Dr. Fisher had already applied for IRB approval for the larger study. The participants were obtained through convenience and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) through an informant that Dr. Fisher knows who is located in Louisville, Kentucky. Potential female Ironman athletes were initially identified by the informant and then contacted via email (see Appendix A). Interested participants were asked to reply to the email to schedule an interview. The participants were also asked to sign an informed consent at the beginning of the interview (see Appendix B). After participants sign the informed consent, a 30-60 minute audio-recorded semi-structured interview (average length of interviews was 58 minutes) was conducted. All documents (e.g. informed consent form, audio-recording) were then kept confidential in a secure place.

More specifically, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 2010) was utilized in the current study. According to Smith (2010), IPA is one of the best known and commonly used qualitative methodologies in psychological studies. Staying true to IPA, detailed personal accounts were gathered from a small number of participants. This is because those utilizing IPA focus on the detailed examination of an individual's lived experience, the meaning of the experience, and how the individual makes sense of the experience. The most common method of data collection is in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Smith, 2010).

A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C) allowed me to ask questions related to the purpose of the study while allowing the participants to share additional information I hadn't yet considered. By asking open-ended questions, I hoped to understand the participant's point-of-view (Creswell, 2013). Participants were asked about their previous sport and triathlon experience, why they got involved in triathlon, significant stressful events, and their Ironman journey. I conducted all the interviews. Following the interviews, I transcribed the audio-recordings verbatim.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed based on the process described by Smith, Jarman, and Osborn (1999). For example, each interview transcript was independently read many times by Dr. Fisher and myself so that we could become familiar with participants' lived experiences. I also made notes on the transcripts of interesting comments, connections, and thoughts. However, IPA also allows unanticipated topics or themes to emerge during analysis, so I did not attempt to verify or negate my research questions (Smith, 2004). Then, I began listing emerging themes and looking for connections between them (Smith et al., 1999), as did Dr. Fisher. Once those connections were made, a master list or table of themes was constructed. Smith et al. (1999)

noted the importance of ensuring that the themes are present verbatim in the transcripts and not to let one's own bias distort the selective process. This process continued until a final understanding of the themes across all interview transcripts was established. Then, Dr. Fisher and I met multiple times to come to consensus about the unique as well as common themes throughout interviews.

Academic Rigor

In qualitative research, the researcher is always a situated researcher. "It is openly acknowledged that the researcher's background and situation influence the research process and shape the research results" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 4). It is important for the researcher to understand her positionality and potential biases through self-reflexive practices. According to McGannon and Johnson (2009), researchers need to acknowledge their own biases and social categories in addition to acknowledging the biases and categories of the participant. As previously mentioned, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the data collection process. This journal helped document my thoughts, feelings, reactions, and biases and assumptions that I had during the research process (see Appendix D).

In addition, before completing the interviews, I underwent a bracketing interview (Patton, 2002) with Dr. Fisher. She asked me the questions from my interview guide (see Appendix C) so that I could identify any potential biases based on my responses to this interview. What I discovered about my own biases was that I need to be careful not to assume that all of my participants have experienced adversity in sport. The potential for a critical moment can appear before, during, or after an Ironman triathlon. Furthermore, adversity does not always come in the form of relationship struggles, interactions with male coaches, or practicing sport in a male-driven and hostile environment. I also need to be aware of my definitions of passion, suffering,

weakness, and joy. For me, I am spiritual and I tie my relationship with Jesus in to everything I do, but not everyone thinks this way. Finally, I need to remember that everyone trains similarly, but not everyone has the same support system (e.g. family, triathlon community), relationships, and experiences.

CHAPTER 4

MANUSCRIPT #1: EXPLORING ADVERSITY AND THE POTENTIAL FOR GROWTH AMONG FEMALE IRONMAN COMPETITORS

Abstract

Over the years, only a handful of researchers have examined the experiences of female triathletes (e.g. Cronan & Scott, 2008). Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to explore adversity and the potential for growth among female Ironman competitors. By looking at growth through adversity, empowerment, and athletic potential the goal was to gain a clearer understanding of how female athletes utilize adversity to achieve their potential and grow into empowered athletes. Seven female Ironman athletes were interviewed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); IPA is centered on exploring peoples' lived experiences, the meaning of their experiences, and how they make sense of their experiences (Smith, 2011). Participants averaged 49.8 years of age and had been involved in triathlons for roughly 13 years. All participants self-identified as middle- to upper-class and Christian; in addition, six self-identified as Caucasian and one as Asian. Six participants were married, six had children, and one was widowed. Results revealed three main themes (a) *experiences of adversity*; (b) *lessons learned*; and (c) *warrior spirit*. The current manuscript focuses on the *experiences of adversity* and *lessons learned*. As more women enter the Ironman world, continued discussion pertaining to what growth through adversity means as well as what empowerment means is important (Lewis & Ridge, 2005; McGannon, Curtin, Schinke, & Schweinbenz, 2012; Miller & Brown, 2005).

Introduction

Seventeen hours is the cut-off time for one of the toughest endurance races in the world, the Ironman. Ironman triathlon consists of 3.8 km of swimming, 180.2 km of cycling, and 42.2 km of running. The time required to complete an Ironman triathlon race is between 8 hours and 17 hours. Beginning in 1978, John Collins, a commander in the U.S. Navy, founded Ironman as a result of a disagreement over which endurance athlete (e.g., swimmer, cyclist, or runner) was the fittest (Bridel, 2013; Lamont & Kennelly, 2012). There was only one woman who participated in the inaugural Ironman triathlon. Since this first Ironman race, the Ironman triathlon has continued to grow in participation for both men and women: “Current participation in the event demonstrates not only that people can survive the race, but also they can enjoy the challenge” (McCarville, 2007, p. 160). In fact, a US woman recently won the triathlon in the Rio Olympic Games (summer 2016). This may be due in part to the USA Triathlon collegiate feeder system begun in 2009. The Collegiate Recruitment Program (CRP), the National Team Program, and the Elite Athlete Development Program are all designed by USA Triathlon; the goal is to develop and support young athletes to the Olympic level (USA Triathlon, 2016).

However, only a handful of researchers have systematically examined the experiences of female triathletes to explore how sporting experiences can be empowering for them (e.g. Cronan & Scott, 2008). Therefore, there is still much to learn about women and how they experience triathlon as a means to be empowered, achieve their potential and overcome adversity.

Women, Empowerment, and Triathlon

Throughout the literature, there are only a few studies focusing on women and their empowerment through sport and triathlon. For example, in 2008, Cronan and Scott set out to complete a case study that examined training group experiences of female triathletes. The

researchers found that a community with other participants was essential to the training experience. According to Cronan and Scott, participation in the training group also provided opportunities for women to reinvent the female body and athlete, athletic competition, and the sport. Opffer discussed similar findings in 2010. She conducted a case study of a female training group. This group, the Rocky Mountain Women (RMW), were a group of outdoor adventurers who were tired of feeling marginalized in sport. As Opffer stated, “These women continually create and re(create) alternative spaces to resist and transform the patriarchal rhetoric and social practices of outdoor sports arenas” (p. 277). After interviewing RMW women, Opffer found that they were caring, patient, and kind to one another in a female-only environment. One of the women spoke of outdoor sport being a source of empowerment. Another spoke about how the encouraging environment of this women’s group helped her discover her own athletic potential. It appears, therefore, that the women of RMW were taking control of their athletic selves in a female-only space. While in the process of taking control of their athletic selves, some women have also found the added challenge of navigating motherhood with their athletic endeavors.

Athlete mother. Finding the balance between motherhood and sport has been discussed by several researchers over the years (see Appleby & Fisher, 2009; McGannon, McMahon, & Gonsalves, 2017; McGannon & Schinke, 2012; Miller & Brown, 2005; & Palmer & Leberman, 2009). For example, Palmer and Leberman (2009) conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of nine elite female athletes who were also mothers. They found three main themes including motherhood and athlete identity, negotiating multiple identities and roles, and support systems. Embedded also in their results was the notion of woman having to manage guilt; Guilt manifested itself as related to the social expectations of an ethic of care connected with motherhood. The participants felt guilty for missing out on their children’s milestones or

leaving their partners to go train. Similarly, McGannon and Schinke (2012) conducted a case study of an active mother with two children. She also discussed the guilt involved with leaving children to go train. Additionally, McGannon and Schinke discovered that the participant opted to train in a narrower time frame in order to put the family's needs above her own. In each of these cases and in many others, this guilt and juggling of family needs reflects the societal idea that leisure is a privilege for women but a right for men (Thompson, 1999).

Sport-Related Adversity and Growth

In many sport-related adversity and growth discussions, researchers focus on sport-specific incidents athletes must overcome to continue to develop into, and perform as, elite athletes. These sport-specific incidents followed by growth include injuries and setbacks to name a few (Galli & Reel, 2010; Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013; Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullough, 2012). For example, in 2010, Connaughton, Hanton, and Jones were interested in exploring how mental toughness (including critical incidents) is developed and maintained in elite athletes. A positive critical incident may involve a situation in which an athlete is recognized and encouraged by a respected sportsperson; this positive critical incident may aid in enhancing belief and motivation. Negative critical incidents may also enhance mental toughness; a negative experience such as a divorce can result in a reappraisal of priorities. The sport may be viewed as “an escape” or as a way to increase control and focus over long-term goals; this may be due to the development of new perspectives necessary to cope with negative experiences (Connaughton, Hanton, & Jones, 2010).

Connaughton et al. (2010) interviewed 11 participants asking them to reflect on their athletic careers. They found that mental toughness began to develop as a result of athletes experiencing sport enjoyment and skill development. Over time, however, athletes experienced

mental toughness as influenced by a high sense of achievement, increased focus, and an intense desire to win. When the athletes experienced situations in which they had to learn how to cope with challenges, they became more self-aware and empowered. Therefore, experiences of critical incidents (positive or negative) may act as catalysts for the development of mental toughness.

Positive coping strategies and growth. Galli and Reel (2012) also explored how sport-related adversity affects high performing athletes. The researchers utilized Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) *Posttraumatic Growth Inventory* (PTGI) and conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 (8 females and 3 males) National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I athletes. Galli and Reel supported their use of the PTGI assessment because the scale was originally validated for college students, and not all participants in the original validation experienced traumatic events. The researchers were interested in addressing athletes' most difficult source of stress during a 3-year period. All of the athletes cited injury and/or performance expectations as being the most stressful. The results indicated stress-related growth (SRG) among the athletes; they reported experiencing the occurrence of the stressor, which caused an upheaval of their biopsychosocial identity. After the stressful event happened, however, they experienced a period of struggle as they tried to work through their stress. Finally, optimism, social support, religion and spirituality played important roles in facilitating SRG; in fact, many of the athletes identified as being optimistic. This attitude has been related to SGR because optimists may appraise a stressful event as a challenge and engage in positive coping strategies, which include seeking social support and religious-based coping (Nes & Sergerstrom, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). According to Galli and Reel's results, athletes commonly used religious practices to cope with their stress; religion can provide a social support network as well as the intrinsic sense of purpose and meaning (Krause et al., 2001). In fact, athletes reported

finding meaning in their stressful experience through their relationship with God because they knew that a higher power was watching over them.

SGR theorists also place emphasis on a person's sociocultural context including his/her race, ethnicity, gender, social class, etc. These identity components also seem important to consider when assessing growth and adversity. Further, Galli and Reel suggested that other sport researchers interested in spirituality and sport experiences might benefit from considering SRG as an outcome of a stressful experience.

Social support. In the previous studies, social support was identified as an important component of growth through adversity (e.g. SRG, critical incidents). In the context of sport-related adversity, Arvinen-Barrow and Pack (2013) presented a conceptual paper discussing the benefits of social support for an athlete overcoming an injury. Arvinen-Barrow and Pack described how social support is an emotionally satisfying aspect of life, which enables individuals to better cope with adversity; it is through a network of people that individuals may feel connected, encouraged, and assisted through adversity. Within the injury context, social support can aid in overcoming adversity as it can act as a buffer by directly influencing the effects of the stressor (e.g. injury; see Rees' 2007 stress-buffering model). This model suggests that social support is a shield against the stressor and the potential negative effects of the stressor. Applied to a broader spectrum of adversity, a social support network may "step in" after the negative experience and walk alongside individuals as they overcome the adverse situation.

Purpose

The purpose of the current study was to explore adversity and the potential for growth among female Ironman competitors. By looking at empowerment, athletic potential, and growth

through adversity, the goal was to gain a clearer understanding of how women utilize adversity to grow into empowered athletes and achieve their athletic potential.

Method

Participants

Seven female Ironman athletes that met the following criteria were interviewed for the current study: (1) had participated in at least one Ironman, (2) were at least 18 years old, and (3) identified as a female (see Table 1). Each also selected a pseudonym to represent herself. Considering the potential for personal and relational sacrifice, the lengthy training process, and the distance of the race, these athletes were also assumed to have had intense emotional experiences. According to Raglin (2007), athletes participating in ultra-endurance events experience significant emotions before, during, and after the event. Additionally, completing an ultra-endurance event requires overcoming emotional barriers (e.g. intense fatigue and unpleasant emotions) (Buman et al., 2009; Micklewright et al., 2009; & Stevinson & Biddle, 1998). In other words, the purpose of this study was to explore the empowering, emotional, and stressful experiences that Ironwomen may have before, during, or after an Ironman triathlon (an ultra-endurance event). Secondly, the study was delimited to participants at least 18 years old. This was due primarily to the age restriction of the event. Finally, this study was delimited to participants who identified as female because the purpose of this project to examine the specific experiences of female Ironman athletes.

All of the participants in the current study were amateur or age-group female Ironman competitors. In triathlon, competitors who are not professional are grouped by age-group and are thus considered age-group athletes. Participants were holding full-time jobs either outside (e.g., a place of employment) or inside the home (e.g., stay-at-home moms). Furthermore, none of the

participants were monetarily rewarded for their participation in Ironman triathlon. In fact, in order to participate in Ironman, each of these women had to pay the entry fee (about \$700 - \$800), provide their own gear (about \$600 - \$15,000), hire a coach (about \$100 - \$400 per month), become members of fitness clubs (about \$20 - \$60 per month), etc. Participating in Ironman is a very expensive and time-consuming hobby or leisure activity (about \$2,400 - \$20,000).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 2010) was utilized for this study. According to Smith (2010), IPA is one of the best known and commonly used qualitative methodologies in psychological studies. Staying true to IPA, detailed personal accounts were gathered from a small number of participants. Those utilizing IPA focus on the detailed examination of an individual's lived experience, the meaning of the experience, and how the individual makes sense of the experience. The most common method of data collection is in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Smith, 2010).

Interview guide. A semi-structured interview guide adapted from Tamminen, Holt, and Neely (2013) allowed the researchers to ask questions related to the purpose of the study while allowing the participants to share additional information the researchers had not considered. The interview guide contained questions about previous sport and triathlon experience, why participants got involved in triathlon, significant stressful events, and their Ironman journey (see Appendix). Also included were some open-ended questions allowing the researchers to understand the participants' points of view more fully (Creswell, 2013).

Procedures

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the first author underwent a bracketing interview with the second author (Patton, 2002) utilizing the adapted interview guide. A bracketing interview serves as a way to not only reveal potential interviewer bias, but also to double-check the flow and sequence of the interview guide questions (Patton, 2002). From the analysis of the bracketing interview, the first author determined that biases to watch out for were: (a) s/he was an Ironman competitor as well; so, the goal was to keep her/his experience out of the way of the participants' descriptions of their experiences; (b) her/his Ironman experience had been very spiritual in nature; so, s/he was careful to not impose any views on spirituality in the interview process; (c) s/he was careful not to impose his/her definitions of suffering, joy, and passion. As a way to keep track of potential biases throughout the entire research process, the first author then kept a reflexive journal (see Appendix D) detailing her/his thoughts, feelings, reactions, and observations related to the interviews (Smith et al., 2009); s/he and the first author then kept checking these biases against themes that were emerging in the data.

The first and second authors then contacted an informant to develop a list of 18 female Ironman competitors who could be interviewed regarding growth through adversity. These 18 participants were then contacted via email. Fifty percent of the contact list ($N = 9$) responded to the initial email, agreeing to participate. The first author then sent follow-up emails to those nine competitors to schedule specific times for the interviews. Seven of the nine officially agreed to participate in the study and were emailed an informed consent form. While the number of participants seems low, the number of female Ironman competitors who participated in the current study is actually higher than the methodological guidelines set for an IPA study; Smith et al. (2009) recommended that the sample size be "between three and six participants" (p. 51). As

previously stated, all competitors chose a pseudonym to represent themselves in the data.

Interviews averaged 58 minutes in length.

After the interviews were audio-recorded, the first author transcribed them word for word. The female Ironman competitors were then emailed their transcripts and asked if their stories were represented accurately (Patton, 2002). Only one of the participants requested changes to her transcript in terms of grammatical corrections, personal location clarifications, and a request to keep specific information confidential. Therefore, that transcript was amended to reflect those changes.

Data Analysis

There are six major steps involved in IPA data analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Step 1, *Reading and re-reading*, involved both the first and second authors independently reading and re-reading each transcript to understand the participant's whole story. For step 2, *initial noting*, the authors made notes about thoughts and impressions they had related to the information in each transcript. These notes were developed into emerging themes (*developing emerging themes*) and connections (*searching for connections*) in steps 3 and 4. For step 5, moving to the next case, this process was repeated for each participant's transcript. Finally, in step 6, looking for patterns across cases, the first and second authors compared across participant themes in multiple meetings looking for similarities and differences in the participants' experiences. The themes were then organized into a table (see Table 2). This table was shared with the participants, and none of the participants requested any changes to the themes.

Results and Discussion

As previously stated, the purpose of the current study was to explore adversity and the potential for growth among female Ironman competitors. By looking at empowerment, athletic

potential, and growth through adversity, the goal was to gain a clearer understanding of how women utilize adversity to grow into empowered athletes and achieve their athletic potential. In comparison with the participants in Tamminen et al's (2013) study on female athletes, the participants from the current study were older and all from the same sport (Ironman triathlon) at the time of the interviews. Tamminen et al (2013) interviewed five female athletes while seven female Ironman competitors were interviewed in the current study.

Specific results from the interviews with female Ironman competitors demonstrated three main themes: (1) *experiences of adversity* specific to their Ironman involvement; (2) *lessons learned*; and (3) *warrior spirit*. Of these major findings, the focus of this manuscript is on the first two themes, *experiences of adversity* and *lessons learned*. These two themes are presented using the female Ironman competitors' own stories through the use of quotes and compared with previous literature. The third theme, *warrior spirit*, was so rich with data that it will be presented as a second manuscript.

Theme #1: Experiences of Adversity

In Theme #1, *experiences of adversity*, female Ironman competitors described three major subthemes when talking about how they experienced adversity: (a) *the mothering/athlete moral dilemma*; (b) *the experience of injury*; and (c) *the continuum of social support*. While Tamminen et al's (2013) study also found that female athletes experienced adversity through injury and social support, the moral dilemma of balancing being a mother against being an athlete – and specifically, the long hours of training - was unique to the current Ironman participants.

Subtheme (a): The mothering/athlete moral dilemma. When asked about the various stresses experienced in relation to their Ironman participation, participants in the current study

indicated the challenges of balancing between family needs and training. The experience of athlete mothers and the challenges they face have been studied by several researchers (see Appleby & Fisher, 2009; McGannon, McMahon, & Gonsalves, 2017; McGannon & Schinke, 2012; Miller & Brown, 2005; & Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Primarily, this balance for Ironman competitors in the current study consisted of configuring their responsibilities as mothers and wives in addition to their training requirements. As Rachel said, “the family felt a little bit isolated from my training...I felt guilty when things didn’t involve the family.” To counteract this guilt, she expressed:

I spent more time getting my family involved and that required time. The focus is a little less on myself; it’s still *my race*, but I focus more on the family and how they feel about it. Make sure I’m with them, I’m mentally with them.

Rachel was not unique in her views about this moral dilemma. Her views were supported by previous literature as well as all the other female Ironman competitors in the current study. For example, Alice linked the moral dilemma of being a mother with the potential for a training accident. She said:

I’m more of a caretaker in my family, so that’s my role. So, trying to take care of everyone while training can be a challenge. You, on some level, feel a little bit selfish for wanting to do this because it is all about you.

Rachel also voiced a concern about training and being a mom: “Biking...tends to be the longest leg in the triathlon, which can make it a little more inconvenient for stay-at-home moms ‘cause...you need to be out for a long time, and there are always the roads that are dangerous...”. Each of the Ironman participants had something to say about trying to maintain being an athlete with being a mom. The experience of guilt was apparent in the current study as well as in both

Palmer and Leberman's and McGannon and Schinke's (2012) studies. For example, Palmer and Leberman (2009) identified a major theme in their research regarding elite athletes as mothers as managing guilt; their participants mentioned they felt "guilty at times" (p. 246) in their process of negotiating their multiple roles and identities. In the case study conducted by McGannon and Schinke (2012), they found that the participant opted to structure her training to take place in a narrower time frame and put the family's needs before her own. In the current study, Alice explained her work-around so that she would not experience the guilt in the following quote:

You're up when it's still dark and you're hitting the pool at 9 pm trying to get in there before they close the doors; so, you find out where you can train that's open early or 24 hours. You work it out so you can still fulfill those other roles during the normal waking hours.

According to Palmer and Leberman (2009), positive experiences in sport can negate the feelings of guilt in a lot of ways, including being a positive female role model and feeling like a better mother. This was true for Suzie in the current study, as she stated, "I do think it makes me a better mom, to have this outlet for myself of competition. Sally also believed that she was "setting an example for other women to encourage them that they could do these things." Finally, Gigi expressed, "I'm really hoping that I'm setting an example for my grandchildren." Despite the challenges of navigating guilt, roles, identities, and responsibilities, many of the Ironman competitors felt their Ironman participation was a benefit to those within their sphere of influence.

Subtheme (b): The experience of injury. The second subtheme under Theme #1: *The Experience of Adversity* involved injury. Injury experiences were a common topic of discussion for the participants when asked about how they became involved in triathlons and also when they

described stressful experiences in triathlon. In fact, four of the seven referenced an injury as a catalyst toward their triathlon participation (e.g. Alice, Sam, Gigi, and Rachel), three shared stories of bike accidents that resulted in significant injuries (e.g. Suzie, Sam, and Gigi), two described overuse injuries as a result of increasing training load too quickly (e.g. Leira and Rachel), and one suffered an injury outside of triathlon that led to significant recovery time (e.g. Sally). In each case, participants put a positive spin on their injury experience; while they did not “sugarcoat” the magnitude of their injuries, they seemed proud of how they overcame them.

For example, Suzie’s injury derailed her from training for Ironman. She had to start from scratch and build herself back up, and in the process, she learned what staying focused and setting small goals for herself really meant:

I got in a bad bike accident one time and I broke my sacrum. That was just very difficult as far as the injury was painful and also coming back. It took me back to being grateful just to walk. It was a bike crash, that’s how it happened, so that was a really tough time. You know, I just stayed focused on getting better and then slowly built my way back up again. It was difficult, but I would also say the hardest things always turn into the most positive things. I really learned that value again of taking small goals to get to the big goal, and that I was able to then do my first Ironman. To rebound from that and then do the biggest physical event I’ve ever done was pretty, was humbling and very exciting.

Sam spoke about her experiences of getting seriously injured in the middle of an Ironman, yet persevering until the end of the race:

I had a wreck on a bike once. I got hit by another cyclist. It happened during Ironman, and I got hit at mile 60 on the bike. I didn’t know how badly I was injured, so I got back on the bike and I rode, and I finished it. I had to walk the marathon. Thought my ribs

were broken, wasn't sure, thought maybe I broke my scapula, wasn't sure. Anyway, took 2 days, finally went to the doctor. Had 7 broken ribs, cracked sternum, lacerated liver, punctured lung, collapsed lung. Spent 12 days on a chest tube. Everybody, every doctor said I should have died. That happened to me 4 years ago, and it has had a tremendous impact on me. For one thing, you never know how strong you are until you go do something like that. I just got back on the bike and kept riding. Who the hell does that? But it told me a lot about myself in a good way because it taught me that I'm stronger than I thought I ever was.

Leira was another participant who had an experience with an injury that caused her to question whether or not she was going to finish the race. Her calf muscle started spasming during an intense race, which led her to fall over in the middle of the race and become emotional. Upon being found by a race official, Leira was asked whether or not she wanted to quit the race. Her response was, "No, I've come this far, I've got to at least finish this." When faced with this challenge, Leira had learned how to cope with the circumstances (Connaughton, Hanton, & Jones, 2010). She became more self-aware and empowered, which enhanced her performance in later races as she stated: "It simultaneously taught me that it humbled me in a way and showed me that I'm not invincible, but it also showed me that at the same time you're stronger than you think." In every injury experience reported in the current study, female Ironman competitors used their experiences to fuel their desire to continue pushing forward and pursuing their goals; this is a reflection of sport-related growth through adversity (see Galli & Reel, 2010; Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013; Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullough, 2012). In fact, they reported coming back from injury stronger and more determined than ever.

Subtheme (c): The continuum of social support. The third subtheme under experiences of adversity centered on *the continuum of social support*. The types of social support described were both positive and negative. In fact, some participants described aspects of social support that were complicated, lacking, or non-existent.

For example, consistent with previous literature (Galli & Reel, 2012), participants stated that social support at its best was one of the many components of growth through adversity. This was particularly experienced in training groups and in race day support. Many talked about how much they enjoyed their training and racing groups (e.g. Sam, Leira, Sally, Gigi, Alice, and Suzie). Sam especially enjoyed the bonding experience she felt while training:

When you are on the bike or running, there are no distractions....You have nothing to do but talk to each other and it's really good quality time...you talk and you communicate and you suffer together. It's an enormous opportunity to really develop a strong relationship with someone.

For Sam, the bond that developed between training partners was based on the time spent together, but also the experiences of adversity or suffering. Later in the interview, Sam defined suffering as both physical and mental:

You're either sick or just plain mentally tired, and you go through all this emotional of being angry... because you should have trained harder than you did, or at the elements because the wind is blowing like a bat outta hell.

More about how participants described adversity as “suffering” is taken up in Manuscript #2.

However, Suzie was more critical of training group social support than the majority of participants in the current study. While she felt there was “much benefit to having others and support,” Suzie also claimed that there was “a dark side” to depending on other people. As she

said, “You’re depending on them for that the whole time. There is a point where you’ve got to find your motivation deep down, it can’t be all about other people.” Lloyd and Little (2010) discussed women’s experiences in leisure-time physical activity within the context of self-determination theory (SDT). SDT focuses on the need to satisfy three basic human needs: Competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Perhaps Suzie was expressing the need to balance her sense of relatedness to her training group against her need for autonomy and having personal motivation to succeed.

On the other hand, Leira enjoyed sharing her experiences with fellow competitors during her races. As she stated:

When you line up with your age group, there are tons of really strong girls your age. You’d think you’d get up there and be all competitive and have some animosity, or whatever. And it’s not like that at all. You get up there and you just have these casual conversations where you’re like, “oh my gosh, I’m so nervous” and she’ll be like, “oh my gosh, I’m so nervous too.” And you just encourage each other.... When I’m out there racing every time I pass anyone or anyone passes me I almost always say “good job.”... I just think it’s so important to acknowledge that either when you’re getting passed or when someone is passing you, you’re still doing a good job. I’ve had a lot of people do the same to me as well...you’re...going to feel this closeness to the people around you.

Sally also experienced a significant amount of social support during her time as a competitor but it came from her family as well as the triathlon community. For example, her family went with her to Ironman Hawaii and her community raised money so she could travel around the world. Sally is now giving back to this community through social support of her own. “I’ve made my

garage into a gym with trainers for our bikes...so they don't have to pay money to belong to a gym. We can do the training right here, so it's a bond with some real special people."

For Gigi and Alice, the social support from their families was priceless during actual Ironman races. For example, it was motivating for Gigi to see her family waiting for her in the transition areas between the swim and the bike as well as the bike and the run; as she said, "My grandchildren made signs." Social support appeared especially significant for Gigi's first Ironman experience because it was less than ideal. She stated that it was very hot outside and the bike course ran out of water while the run course ran out of cups. It was her family and a fellow competitor that encouraged her to keep going: "One of the things that got me through that crazy marathon was [also that] I found someone that I knew....we were going to get through it and we were going to do it together" (Gigi). When Alice described the familial social support she experienced during her race, she got very emotional. Her family and friends sacrificed their entire Saturday to support her on Ironman race day:

It was just phenomenal that...it really shows you how much people care about you. That they are willing to be there from dark to dark; I mean essentially they were there all day for me, and that's just huge that anybody would have one person in their life, and I had a whole crew of them that were there all day.

It appears, therefore, that social support can aid in overcoming adversity as it can act as a buffer by directly influencing the effects of the stressor (see Rees' 2007 stress-buffering model). This model suggests that social support is a shield against the stressor and the potential negative effects of the stressor. Applied to a broader spectrum of adversity, a social support network may "step in" after the negative experience and walk alongside the individual as she overcomes the adverse situation; people pursue the comfort of others in their times of need.

On the flip side, Rachel experienced a lack of social support for being a triathlete, especially from her husband. As she stated, “My husband is not supportive...the amount of stress and time, and he thinks it’s a very selfish sport.” This lack of social support created a lot of stress for her during her training. In fact, Rachel reported continually trying to create buy-in for her training from her family:

I tried to make it meaningful to my family. I don’t know if I accomplished it (laughing). It’s a mommy’s thing, so I made sure they were involved. I made t-shirts for them. It would be nice if they made t-shirts for themselves as my team...I don’t know if they felt it in their hearts but I made them a part of my cheer team. I try to involve them as best as I can.

Rachel also spoke about the constant comparing she experienced between female training partners:

You’re comparing, not competing, comparing each other during training. By not being an athlete before, I find it interesting that for them to be your friends in some way, you have to beat them. You really have to beat them (laughing). You have to be stronger than your friends.

However, she continued: “[You have to be] careful of what you say. Not too competitive and at the same time supportive.... like being a woman still, but not too much aggression.”

Unfortunately, Rachel’s comments about her experience appear to reify stereotypes about how women behave when they are together and also how they are supposed to behave in general. As Adichie (2012) wrote:

What struck me is how invested [women] are in being “liked.” How they have been raised to believe that their being likable is very important and that this “likable” trait is a

specific thing. And that specific thing does not include showing anger or being aggressive or disagreeing too loudly (p. 23-24).

Leira- the youngest competitor – was the only woman to challenge stereotypic notions of how a woman should behave in the sporting world. As Bridel (2015) suggested, there is the idea that women need to be careful with how they present themselves in sport; they can only be successful within the bounds of heteronormative femininity. Yet, Deem and Gilroy (1998) asserted that leisure activities like triathlon provide women with a way of resisting pressure to behave in certain, socially acceptable ways. In fact, Leira spent several minutes of her interview expressing her views on women in sport:

I guess I just really think in general that women are told that they can only do so much. They're given so many limitations, explicitly and implicitly like we're just completely torn apart through media and through just.... Males are always of the forefront of sports attention too, and I just think like there's.... I just think women are constantly told that their value is less than men. To come together as women and say, 'That's not true, we know that's not true, and we're going to prove to ourselves and to each other and to the community as a whole that it's not true' is something that is really awesome and powerful. I think, not only are we told we're not good enough when it comes to like our weight and the way we look.... We're completely scrutinized for how we appear on the outside. But we're also told that we're weak and we can't be as strong as men, that there are certain sports we can't participate in because we're women, or whatever.... And I think those limitations really speak to the bigger issue that we're just not respected in the same way as men. And especially I think there are a lot of men who don't want women to be as good as them 'cause then it hurts their macho ego or something. So I think just

being, being a woman and being in this sport is actually really empowering for me to just kind of, in a way, stick it to ‘em, and say ‘No, women are capable of doing this, and there are some really badass women out there that are killing this sport.’

Leira has made a call to sportswomen everywhere to come together and build each other up rather than tear each other down. This is in line with Cronan and Scott’s case study (2008) results where community with other participants was essential to a positive training experience; a positive training group experience provided women with opportunities to reinvent their bodies, themselves as athletes, the process of athletic competition, and their sport overall. Opffer (2010) found similar results in her case study of a female training group, the Rocky Mountain Women (RMW); they were an outdoor adventurer group who had previously felt – and were tired of - feeling marginalized in sport. As Opffer offered, “These women continually create and re(create) alternative spaces to resist and transform the patriarchal rhetoric and social practices of outdoor sports arenas” (p. 277). Included in the RMW female-only environment were experiences of caring, patience, kindness, empowerment, encouragement, and the belief in all women’s athletic potential. It is this idea that Leira is expressing to the female triathlon community: Let’s come together, build one another up to success, and continue creating a triathlon culture of empowerment for women.

Theme #2: Lessons Learned

In the final theme included in this manuscript – *Lessons Learned* - participants described the three subthemes of: (a) *growth through adversity*; (b) *transfer of life skills*; and (c) *self-evolution*. For example, they expressed that their experiences of triathlon adversity had turned into positive growth (e.g. Suzie, Alice, Sam, Leira, and Gigi).

Subtheme (a): Growth through adversity. Their life lessons are supported by previous literature focused on sport-related adversity and growth (see Galli & Reel, 2010; Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013; Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullough, 2012). According to Connaughton et al. (2010), when athletes experience situations in which they have to learn how to cope with challenges, they become more self-aware and empowered; this is often how mental toughness is developed in elite athletes. Mental toughness is also the by-product of enjoyment, skill development, sense of achievement, focus, and a desire to win. Connaughton et al. (2010) asserted further that the experience of a critical incident may act as a catalyst for the development of mental toughness. This was true for participants in the current study as well; through many of the Ironman experiences, mental toughness was fostered. They displayed grit and determination to succeed in a sport that requires great courage to prove to oneself that anything is possible.

Alice demonstrated this life lesson by stating, “Any setback makes me want to succeed that much more.” As a result of Ironman, she learned about her own strength: “It really does teach you so much about yourself and what you can do, push through.” For example, reflecting back about when she was just a spectator of the sport, Alice didn’t see herself as an Ironman athlete. She “just thought it was so amazing what these people were doing.” However, as she trained with a group of women preparing for an Ironman, she started to see herself differently; Alice believed that if *they* could train and participate in an Ironman triathlon, so could she.

Subtheme (b): Transfer of life skills. As stated previously, Suzie and Sam both experienced serious bike accidents while preparing for, or racing in, an Ironman. Suzie was able to reframe this challenge and apply it to other areas of her life as she explained:

It was difficult, but I would also say the hardest things always turn into the most positive

things. I really learned the value of taking small goals to get to the big goal, and that I was able to then do my first Ironman. To rebound from that and then do the biggest physical event I've ever done was pretty, was humbling and very exciting.

Suzie's experience also demonstrated being impacted in a lifelong way by a critical incident. As a result of her accident, she was able to increase control and focus over long-term goals and successfully complete her first Ironman triathlon less than a year after her bike accident (Connaughton et al., 2010).

Subtheme (c): Self-evolution. For Sam, adversity also made her grow stronger and evolve as a person. As she stated, "You learn so much about yourself when you go through something like that.... It's like you've come to another level mentally. You just, adversity makes you really strong." Sam learned that her mind was stronger than her body. In the end, she said, it came down to, "How much are you willing to gut it out and suffer?" As a result of becoming more self-aware and empowered, Sam described being more "self-assured" and was more likely to take chances in life, in terms of "saying what's on your mind, and speaking up when you think something needs to be said."

Similar to Suzie and Sam, Leira also experienced an injury where she kept going and demonstrated to herself that she was stronger than she thought:

It simultaneously taught me that it humbled me in a way and showed me that I'm not invincible, but it also showed me that at the same time you're stronger than you think.

Even when you are on the verge of giving up you can keep going.

In order for Leira to finish this particular race, she had to cope with challenges, facilitating her self-awareness of being both humble yet strong. Leira was also the only participant who referenced her evolving spirituality as a positive coping strategy as a result of her experiences of

adversity. According to Galli and Reel (2012), athletes commonly use religious practices to cope with their adversity. Leira spoke about how she in fact, never felt closer to God than when she was in pain and praying in the middle of a race: “I don’t feel that closeness to myself or to God at any other time, to that degree at least, as I do when I’m out there.” She described being able to pull through adverse experiences with the support of her relationship with God.

Finally, for Gigi, her experiences of adversity were those of heat and dehydration rather than injury during her first Ironman. She said, “The thing I proved to myself was that I am stronger mentally than I thought I would or could be.” She learned how to better control negative self-talk and focus on things that reminded her of what is important. Again, Gigi’s story, like Alice, Suzie, Sam, and Leira’s, demonstrated self-evolution; without the experience of her first Ironman, she may not have had the desire to grow and achieve several other important life events including additional Ironman triathlon finishes.

Conclusions, Limitations, Future Directions, and Recommendations for Sport Psychology

Consultants

As stated earlier, the purpose of the current study was to explore adversity and the potential for growth among female Ironman competitors. By looking at empowerment, athletic potential, and growth through adversity, the goal was to gain a clearer understanding of how women utilize adversity to grow into empowered athletes and achieve their athletic potential. It was determined that as a result of participants’ Ironman experiences, they not only experienced adversity in a variety of ways (e.g. moral dilemma, injuries, and both positive and negative social support), but they grew as a result, learning many life lessons and applying these across life contexts.

For example, every participant expressed the moral dilemma associated with participating in triathlon while also having several other roles within their families. This moral dilemma and the concept of the “athlete mother” have been studied in recent years by other feminist scholars (see Appleby & Fisher, 2009; McGannon, McMahon, & Gonsalves, 2017; McGannon & Schinke, 2012; Miller & Brown, 2005; & Palmer & Leberman, 2009). The feeling of guilt as well as having to sacrifice training plans appear to be common occurrences among athlete mothers (Palmer & Leberman, 2009) as well as female Ironman participants in the current study (e.g. “We always tend to feel guilty about not giving enough time to our kids or husband”). However, only one participant – the youngest participant, Leira – questioned the stereotypic norms associated with these ideas.

In addition, most of the Ironman participants felt greatly supported during their experience, especially in training and on race day (e.g. “It really shows you how much people care”), while others felt a lack of support, primarily from their husbands (e.g. “My husband is not super supportive”). Arvinen-Barrow and Pack (2013) described how social support is an emotionally satisfying aspect of life, which enables individuals to better cope with adversity; it is through a network of people that an individual may feel connected, encouraged, and assisted through adversity. However, women may have to find social support in each other if their partners or spouses are not willing to understand their desire to better themselves through sport.

It also appears that injury seems nearly inevitable when discussing athletic experiences of female Ironman competitors. All participants discussed experiencing an injury – some very severe - during their training or racing. However, in all cases, these injuries facilitated more determined participation and a furthering of self-growth. As Sam stated:

For one thing, you never know how strong you are until you go do something like that. I

just got back on the bike and kept riding. Who the hell does that? But it told me a lot about myself in a good way because it taught me that I'm stronger than I thought I ever was.

As a result of these various experiences of adversity, each of the Ironman participants expressed deep and valuable lessons learned. Some discovered a strength they didn't know they had (e.g. "It really does teach you so much about yourself and what you can do") while others had a shift in how they viewed themselves and women in sport (e.g. "I love that it became about having energy to do all three sports;" and "They (women) are a lot more assertive, they seem to enjoy life more and have more fun with it"). In each case, the Ironman participants gained life perspective and grew through adversity. Based on the current sport-related growth through adversity literature (see Galli & Reel, 2010; Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013; Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullough, 2012), adversity creates a situation in which the athlete must learn to cope with circumstances that are presented to her. According to Connaughton, Hanton, and Jones (2010), this facilitates the development of mental toughness, and the athlete is better able to handle adverse experiences in the future. One particular quote summarizes the lessons that arose for Ironman participants in the current study:

I think that's why...triathlon is just a great life metaphor. The stronger friendships, the stronger families, the stronger relationships all come from those moments when nobody is looking. That you're there for someone or you work hard or you rise early to prepare something (Susie).

Limitations

While there are many strengths of the current study, it is not without some limitations that must be addressed. For example, when examining participant demographics, it is clear that the

majority were Caucasian, Christian, and middle- to upper-middle-class. This may be a result of the nature (e.g., cost, time, etc.) of the sport of triathlon; however, there is still limited diversity within the participant pool.

Future Directions

The results from the current study created as many questions as it did answers. Moving forward, further research could be conducted focusing on interviews with female Ironmen of color. In addition, relational resiliency and how it could be fostered among female Ironman competitors should be explored. Relational resiliency has to do with one's ability to overcome adversity and be successful within a social experience consisting of trust, support, and encouragement (see for example Barto, Lambert, & Brott, 2015; Greene, Galambos, & Lee, 2004). Helping female Ironman athletes develop critical consciousness about their views on motherhood, women's and men's roles, etc., may also prove to be important as more women enter the triathlon culture. As Adichie (2012) posited, "we spend too much time telling girls that they cannot be angry or aggressive or tough, which is bad enough, but then we turn around and either praise or excuse men for the same reasons" (p. 24).

Recommendations for Sport Psychology Consultants

Sport psychology consultants can also utilize this information while working with female Ironman athletes. By becoming aware of the types of adversity these athletes encounter, they could develop mental skills training programs that target these adversities – working through the moral dilemma of the athlete mother, injury rehabilitation, and navigating social support. To work with female Ironman athletes means understanding the commitments to whatever additional roles they hold as well as the unwavering commitment to succeed despite being sidelined by adversity.

Finally, not quoted to this point but expressed by several of the Ironman participants in the current study, it is hard to put a finger on why Ironman triathlon is so special to those who compete in it. Suzie suggested to us that it was a “life metaphor” while Gigi explained how she craved the feeling of being “totally exhausted” that she could only get through her triathlon experience. Ultimately, as Sam stated:

I think that’s the draw. I think that’s the draw of the event itself. I think that, I like that, I guess I should say, I’m drawn to the path of kind of breaking yourself down to where you’re just really kind of raw, but you keep going.

Sport psychology consultants could focus on helping female Ironman competitors harness their drive to succeed and to experience life on the edge. We will describe in greater detail the mental toughness of female Ironman competitors in Manuscript II.

Appendix

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Age	Years of Triathlon Experience	Race and Ethnicity	Spirituality/Religion	Family Structure	SES
Suzie	Female	44	17	Caucasian	Protestant	Married with 2 kids	Upper middle class
Rachel	Female	44	6	Asian American	Christian	Married with 3 kids	Upper middle class
Sam	Female	50	7	Caucasian	Episcopalian	Married with 4 kids	Upper class
Alice	Female	46	4	Caucasian	Catholic	Married and 2 grown sons	Upper middle class
Leira	Female	24	5	Caucasian	Universalist	Married	Middle class
Sally	Female	79	42	Caucasian	Episcopalian	Widowed w/ kids and grandkids (#?)	Middle class
Gigi	Female	62	10	Caucasian	Christian	Married w/ kids and grandkids (#?)	Upper middle class

Table 2: Examples of Raw Data Themes, Subthemes, and Major Themes

Raw Data Themes	Subthemes	Major Themes
I felt guilty when things didn't involve the family.	Mothering/Athlete Moral Dilemma	Theme #1 Experiences of Adversity
So trying to take care of everyone while training can be a challenge. You on some level feel a little bit selfish for wanting to do this because it is all about you.		
My husband is not super supportive.... He thinks it's a very selfish sport.		
I got in a bad bike accident one time and I broke my sacrum	Experience of Injury	
I had a wreck on a bike once. A big, bad one. I got hit by another cyclist.		
When I got injured from running too much too soon		
I like to swim with a group. I have a small group that I like to ride with.	Continuum of Social Support	
The most stressful would be when I get push back from my husband because he's the closest to me and I value his opinion the most.		
It really shows you how much people care about you. That they are willing to be there from dark to dark.		
I really learned that value again of taking small goals to get to the big goal	Transfer of Life Skills	Theme #2 Lessons Learned
I think for me there's something about the meaning of life that is in there. It's really about your personal perseverance		
It's brought out a lot of my personality and a lot of strengths I just didn't know I had.		
I love that it became about having energy to do all three sports, so it took out a lot of the superficial focus for me	Self-Evolution	
And it really does teach you so much about yourself and what you can do, push through		
But you do start to see yourself differently, and that I can do these things.		
Well I think any setback makes me want to succeed that much more	Growth Through Adversity	
You just, adversity makes you really strong. I think.		
It simultaneously taught me that it humbled me in a way and showed me that I'm not invincible, but it also showed me that at the same time you're stronger than you think.		

Table 2 Continued

Raw Data Themes	Subthemes	Major Themes
I was wanting to fall over, but you just have to gut it out and keep going. That to me is suffering.	Suffering Well	Theme #3 Warrior Spirit
If I’ve committed myself to do something, I’ll want to finish it.		
I thrive on total exhaustion and satisfaction that I get from having done it		
During the run it had started to hurt, at like mile 4. And I’m like, “Okay, alright.” So I just plowed through it, I was able to finish.	Fighter Mentality	
It’s moments like that where you really need to dig deep. It wasn’t pretty, it wasn’t like I was going along. I was crying. It was horrible.		
I don’t know how I honestly was able to keep swimming. It was like something in my snapped, I put my goggles back on. I started out pretty slow and just telling my mind, “it’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay.”		
Self-confidence is probably the best term. It makes me, I’m a lot more self-confident than I was before I crossed the finish line. I’m more self-assured.	Empowerment	
I think that’s really empowering for a lot of women.		
It’s amazing what women have accomplished. I’m just. It really thrills me.		

Interview Guide

Exploring Adversity and the Potential for Growth among Female Athletes

(adapted from Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2012)

We are interested in learning about female athlete growth and adversity in their sport experiences. These types of experiences may be different for different athletes. We are interested in your opinions and thoughts, and there are no right or wrong answers to any questions. If you don't know how to answer a question or you choose not to answer, that is ok. You are free to stop the interview at any time. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time and there will not be any consequences for withdrawing. Your information will be completely confidential, and a "fake name" will be used so that you cannot be identified in the future. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Question	Probe/Notes
Sport Involvement	
How did you come to be involved in your sport?	How old were you when you started playing [sport]?
What level of competition have you participated at in your sport?	Tracking the athletic career: Probe for details about competitive level (i.e. national? International?) and how they got there.
Timeline	
(refer to written timeline)	
Can you identify the most important events that occurred during your career as an athlete so far?	
Of these events, which would you consider to be the most beneficial for you as an athlete?	<i>Probe: Can you tell me what made this event beneficial for you?</i>
Of these events, which would you consider to be the most stressful for you?	<i>Probe: Can you tell me what made it/them the most stressful event(s)?</i>
Were there any events in your sport career where you thought about quitting?	<i>Probe: Can you tell me more about that?</i>
Stressful Sport Events	

As you know, we're interested in finding out how athletes think about adversity in their sport. Now I'd like to focus on those events you identified as the "most stressful" in your sport. *If the participant identified more than one stressful event, repeat the following questions for each event.*

Tell me, in your own words, what happened leading up to and during that event?

Probe: Can you tell me how that event unfolded for you?

Can you tell me what happened after that event?

How did you react to that event?

Probe: How did you feel? or How did you react emotionally?

What did you do to try and deal with that event?

Probe: What did you do/say/think?

Did you talk to anyone about the event?
(at the time/after the event had passed?)

Probe: Can you tell me about the person you talked to? What made you talk to them about it?

What was it like talking to different people about the event?

Identity

Can you tell me how you thought of yourself as an athlete before this event?

Probe: how would you describe yourself before this event happened?

Can you tell me how you thought of yourself as an athlete after this event?

Probe: how would you describe yourself after this event happened?

Did the event change the way you thought about yourself as an athlete?

Or: Did it change the way you felt about yourself as an athlete?

At the time, what did that event mean to you?

Looking back, what does that event mean to you?

Some athletes who may have faced this type of event might not have continued to play sports or they may have dropped out of sport because of this type of event. In your opinion, can you tell me how you stayed in your sport after this event?

Domains of Stress-Related Growth

Looking back, what do you know now that you didn't know before the event happened?

Probe: Do you think you have learned anything from experiencing this event?

Did your priorities as an athlete or as a person change as a result of this event?

Did any of your relationships with people change as a result of this event?

What negative outcomes resulted from this event?

What positive outcomes resulted from this event?

Wrap-up

From your perspective, is there anything else you think I should know about this topic?

Is there anything I didn't ask that I should have?

Thank you!

CHAPTER 5**MANUSCRIPT #2: MENTAL TOUGHNESS IN FEMALE IRONMAN COMPETITORS**

Abstract

Over the years, only a few researchers have systematically explored the experiences of female triathletes (e.g. Cronan & Scott, 2008). The purpose of the current study was to assess the potential for growth through adversity among female Ironman competitors. By focusing on growth through adversity, empowerment, and athletic potential, the objective was to gain a clearer understanding of how female athletes capitalize on adversity to experience empowerment and achieve their potential. Seven female Ironman competitors were interviewed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 2011); IPA researchers explore peoples' lived experiences, how they make sense of their experiences, and the meaning of their experiences (Smith, 2011). Participants averaged 49.8 years of age and had been involved in triathlons for about 13 years. All participants self-identified as Christian and middle- to upper-class; additionally, six self-identified as Caucasian and one as Asian. One participant was widowed, six participants were married, and six had children. Results revealed that participants embodied a warrior spirit. This spirit consisted of the mental qualities of perseverance, commitment, internal motivation, and intensity. Through triathlon participation, participants demonstrated mental toughness in the face of adversity. As one participant stated, "I'm drawn to the path of breaking yourself down to where you're just really raw, but you keep going." As more women enter the Ironman world, continued discussion pertaining to what growth through adversity means for women as well as what empowerment and mental toughness means is important (Connaughton, Hanton, & Jones, 2010; Galli & Reel, 2010; Galli & Vealy, 2008; Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013; Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullough, 2012). Suggestions for application within sport psychology consulting are also given.

Theme #3: Warrior Spirit

a) Suffering Well

- i. I was wanting to fall over, but you just have to gut it out and keep going. That to me is suffering.
- ii. If I've committed myself to do something, I'll want to finish it.
- iii. I thrive on total exhaustion and satisfaction that I get from having done it

b) Fighter Mentality

- i. During the run it had started to hurt, at like mile 4. And I'm like, "Okay, alright." So I just plowed through it, I was able to finish.
- ii. It's moments like that where you really need to dig deep. It wasn't pretty; it wasn't like I was going along. I was crying. It was horrible.
- iii. I don't know how I honestly was able to keep swimming. It was like something in my snapped, I put my goggles back on. I started out pretty slow and just telling my mind, "it's okay, it's okay, it's okay."

c) Empowerment

- i. Self-confidence is probably the best term. It makes me, I'm a lot more self-confident than I was before I crossed the finish line. I'm more self-assured.
- ii. I think that's really empowering for a lot of women.
- iii. It's amazing what women have accomplished. I'm just. It really thrills me.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the current study was to explore adversity and the potential for growth among female Ironman competitors. By looking at empowerment, athletic potential, and growth through adversity, the goal was to gain a clearer understanding of how women utilize adversity to grow into empowered athletes and achieve their athletic potential. The results revealed three main themes (1) experiences of adversity; (2) lessons learned; and (3) warrior spirit. Each theme was divided into three subthemes. It was determined that the female Ironman competitors experienced adversity through moral dilemma, experiences of injury, and social support. As a result of the participant's Ironman experiences, the female Ironman competitors identified lessons learned according to transfer of life skills, self-evolution, and growth through adversity. The final theme highlights the strength of the female Ironman competitors through suffering well, fighter mentality, and empowerment. The researchers determined that in order to best represent the data, the results should be divided into two separate manuscripts. The first manuscript focused on experiences of adversity and lessons learned. The second manuscript unpacked the warrior spirit. Future directions for research and considerations for sport psychology consultants working with this population were also given.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Email Invitation to Participate in the study entitled Exploring Adversity and the Potential for Growth Among Female Ironmen Competitors

Dear Female Ironman,

In order to gain a better understanding of the experience of adversity and growth that elite-level female athletes go through, I am inviting you to participate in an interview with myself or Ms. Emily Johnson, a second-year Masters student in our Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior Program at UT. .

The interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes and will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Your participation is greatly appreciated and your responses will be held in strict confidence. Any publications or presentations resulting from this project will be reported using “fake names” and no identifying information.

Please email either myself or Emily Johnson at your earliest convenience to set up a time to meet. Thank you in advance for your thoughtful consideration of this request. I would greatly appreciate your getting back to us so that we can set up a time to meet before the October 9th Louisville, KY Ironman event.

Very best,
Leslee

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Appendix B

Informed Consent Statement

Exploring Adversity and the Potential for Growth among Female Ironmen Competitors

INTRODUCTION

My name is Leslee Fisher and I am an Associate Professor specializing in Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior at the University of Tennessee. Emily Johnson (a master's degree student in our program) and I are conducting 30-60 minute audio-recorded interviews with female Ironmen who live in the Louisville, KY area over the October 9th, 2016 weekend.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this research project is to explore adversity and the potential for growth among female Ironmen competitors. Elite-level female athletes are often under-represented in research projects.

As stated earlier, your participation will involve a 30-60 minute interview about your experience as an elite-level female Ironman competitor. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions from a semi-structured interview guide. You will also be asked to provide a “fake name” so that your identity will not be revealed in transcripts. It is our goal to explore with you times when you have faced adversity as well as times when you have grown through your sport experience. The interview will be audio recorded, transcribed, and then sent to you for your feedback.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information discussed within the interview will be kept confidential. Only myself, Emily, and two research team members will have access to your information. The data will be stored on a secure password-protected computer that is owned by me, the principal investigator. All identifiers will be removed from the data. All data will be destroyed on May 10th, 2017.

RISKS

The level of risk associated with the current study is minimal. You may feel uncomfortable remembering certain events when you experienced adversity. However, please know that all responses will be kept confidential, and that you may choose not to answer any question or terminate the interview at any time.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to participate without penalty. If you agree to participate, you may withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty and without any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before the data collection is completed, your data will be destroyed.

BENEFITS

The levels of direct benefits associated with participating in this current study are minimal. However, your participation may help both researchers and practitioners understand female athlete experience so that we can better support female athletes in the future.

_____ Initials

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions about the interview, or you experience adverse effects as a result of your participation you may contact me, Emily, or the UT IRB Compliance Office:

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(865) 974-9973

Emily Johnson, BS
Masters degree candidate
Ejohn112@utk.edu
(865) 974-9045

University of Tennessee
IRB Compliance Office
(865) 974-7697

CONSENT

I agree to participate in this study; I have been given a copy of this form:

_____	_____	_____
Participant's Name (<i>please print</i>)	Participant Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Researcher's Name (<i>please print</i>)	Researcher Signature	Date

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Exploring Adversity and the Potential for Growth among Female Athletes

(adapted from Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2012)

We are interested in learning about female athlete growth and adversity in their sport experiences. These types of experiences may be different for different athletes. We are interested in your opinions and thoughts, and there are no right or wrong answers to any questions. If you don't know how to answer a question or you choose not to answer, that is ok. You are free to stop the interview at any time. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time and there will not be any consequences for withdrawing. Your information will be completely confidential, and a "fake name" will be used so that you cannot be identified in the future. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Question	Probe/Notes
Sport Involvement	
How did you come to be involved in your sport?	How old were you when you started playing [sport]?
What level of competition have you participated at in your sport?	Tracking the athletic career: Probe for details about competitive level (i.e. national? International?) and how they got there.
Timeline (refer to written timeline)	
Can you identify the most important events that occurred during your career as an athlete so far?	
Of these events, which would you consider to be the most beneficial for you as an athlete?	<i>Probe: Can you tell me what made this event beneficial for you?</i>
Of these events, which would you consider to be the most stressful for you?	<i>Probe: Can you tell me what made it/them the most stressful event(s)?</i>
Were there any events in your sport career where you thought about quitting?	<i>Probe: Can you tell me more about that?</i>
Stressful Sport Events	

As you know, we're interested in finding out how athletes think about adversity in their sport. Now I'd like to focus on those events you identified as the "most stressful" in your sport. *If the participant identified more than one stressful event, repeat the following questions for each*

event.

Tell me, in your own words, what happened leading up to and during that event?

Probe: Can you tell me how that event unfolded for you?

Can you tell me what happened after that event?

How did you react to that event?

Probe: How did you feel? or How did you react emotionally?

What did you do to try and deal with that event?

Probe: What did you do/say/think?

Did you talk to anyone about the event?
(at the time/after the event had passed?)

Probe: Can you tell me about the person you talked to? What made you talk to them about it?

What was it like talking to different people about the event?

Identity

Can you tell me how you thought of yourself as an athlete before this event?

Probe: how would you describe yourself before this event happened?

Can you tell me how you thought of yourself as an athlete after this event?

Probe: how would you describe yourself after this event happened?

Did the event change the way you thought about yourself as an athlete?

Or: Did it change the way you felt about yourself as an athlete?

At the time, what did that event mean to you?

Looking back, what does that event mean to you?

Some athletes who may have faced this type of event might not have continued to play sports or they may have dropped out of sport because of this type of event. In your opinion, can you tell me how you stayed in your sport after this event?

Domains of Stress-Related Growth

Looking back, what do you know now that you didn't know before the event happened?

Probe: Do you think you have learned anything from experiencing this event?

Did your priorities as an athlete or as a person change as a

result of this event?

Did any of your relationships with people change as a result of this event?

What negative outcomes resulted from this event?

What positive outcomes resulted from this event?

Wrap-up

From your perspective, is there anything else you think I should know about this topic?

Is there anything I didn't ask that I should have?

Thank you!

Appendix D

Reflexive Journal Example

My Notes on Interview:

- Wasn't athletic as a child, EMPOWERED
- Mental energy – really in your head, dig deep. Strong
- Quality time with family on the bike (I want that when I'm a parent!)
- Wreck on the bike (x2!)
 - Dig deep, crying, horrible, worst ever.
 - Never know how strong you really are until something like that (ADVERSITY)
- The art of breaking yourself down (I know the feeling! – wait...bias)
- The temptation is so strong to want to bias the responses. I wan to fish for answers. I know some of the details about this woman through a friend (only a couple details though...word travels through a community quickly).
- She wants to work with women, which is neat! Wants to give back to the community (assumption).
- I keep feeling like I was interviewing wrong! I was working to check myself and not ask leading questions.
- I'm listening back →. I talk too much. I can't give positive or negative responses.
- I know she's a pillar in the triathlon community. It was hard for me to stay focused on the questions at hand.
 - I started hearing strength, empower, grit, SUFFER (bias – can't assume our definitions are the same).

- There was a one moment where I mention empowering in which I may have swayed some of her thoughts.
- Talked about one of her IM experiences. Her experiences are pretty incredible. The temptation is to want to engage in conversation.
 - “Adversity makes you strong,” she said.
- I was working to not read into what she was saying. There were things that she mentioned that I connected with, but I had to remember that her experiences are way different than mine..
- I kept hearing “on the edge.” That moment is so hard to describe. I thought to myself the image of insanity that makes you “super human” (bias)

VITA

Emily JoAnn Johnson was born in Anaheim, California on August 19, 1991 and was raised in Denver, Colorado. She is the daughter of Jenny Maxwell and has two younger sisters, Katie and Becky Johnson. Emily received her Bachelor's of Science in Health Science Studies from Baylor University in Waco, Texas in 2014. In 2015, Emily began her masters studies in Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior at the University of Tennessee. Emily completed her Masters of Science from the University of Tennessee under the supervision of her advisor, Dr. Leslee Fisher in May 2017.