

1 Running head: DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

2

3

4

5 Female athletes' experiences of positive growth following deselection in sport

Kacey C. Neely, University of Stirling

John G.H. Dunn, University of Alberta

Tara-Leigh F. McHugh, University of Alberta

Nicholas L. Holt, University of Alberta

As accepted for publication in *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, ©Human Kinetics DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.2017-0136>

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

2

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore female athletes' experiences of positive growth following deselection from provincial sport teams. Interviews were conducted with 18 females (M age = 22.45 years, SD = 1.38) who were deselected from provincial soccer, ice-hockey, and volleyball teams as adolescents. Interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) was used. Analysis was guided by Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) model of posttraumatic growth. Results showed that participants questioned their identity and ability as an athlete following deselection. Growth was a gradual process that unfolded over several years, experienced through a greater appreciation of the role of sport in their lives and sport becoming a priority, an enhanced sense of personal strength, developing closer social relationships, and a recognition of new and other opportunities. These findings show that cognitive processes and social relationships are critical components in the process of positive growth.

Keywords: youth sport, posttraumatic growth, phenomenology

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

3

22 Traumatic and adverse events can cause people significant distress, yet individuals can
23 experience positive growth from their struggle with such events (Baker, Kelly, Calhoun, Cann, &
24 Tedeschi, 2008). Studies have shown, for instance, that some survivors of natural disasters and
25 serious illnesses report positive growth in the aftermath of their experiences (e.g., Cryder,
26 Kilmer, Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 2004; Hefferon, Greal, & Mutrie, 2009). Positive growth
27 typically includes changes in perceptions of self (e.g., enhanced self-efficacy, personal strength),
28 relationships with others (e.g., renewed appreciation of family and friends), and one's philosophy
29 about life (e.g., seeing new possibilities in life; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun,
30 2004).

31 Researchers have highlighted the need for further study of the different social contexts in
32 which positive growth may occur (Lepore & Revenson, 2006). Sport is one such context that has
33 received relatively little attention in the literature until recently (e.g., Howells, Sarkar, &
34 Fletcher, 2017; Tamminen & Neely, 2016). Positive growth in sport has been associated with a
35 range of highly stressful and potentially traumatic events, such as injury, performance issues,
36 physical abuse, and sexual abuse (Galli & Reel, 2012; Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Sarkar,
37 Fletcher, & Brown, 2015; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013; Wade, Evans, Evans, & Mitchell,
38 2011). The current study was designed to add to the literature by exploring female athletes'
39 experiences of positive growth following deselection ('getting cut' from a competitive sport team
40 based on the decisions of a coach; Neely, Dunn, McHugh, & Holt, 2016).

41 From a clinical perspective, trauma is defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of
42 Mental Disorders (DSM) as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual
43 violence through: directly experiencing the event; witnessing, in person, the event occurring to
44 others; learning that such an event happened to a close family member or friend; or experiencing
45 repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of such events that causes recurrent, involuntary

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

4

and intrusive distressing memories and/or recurrent distressing dreams in which the content/affect of the dream are related to the traumatic event (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In contrast, in the psychological research literature, the conceptualization of trauma is often “broader and less restrictive” than the DSM criteria, “describing sets of circumstances that represent significant challenges to the adaptive resources of the individual, and that represent significant challenges to the individuals’ ways of understanding the world and their place in it” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). Here, Tedeschi and Calhoun draw from Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) ‘shattered assumptions’ conceptualization of trauma, whereby traumatic events are described as those that cause psychological crisis and challenge the fundamental components of individuals’ assumptive world. The assumptions that are challenged include beliefs in a just, benevolent, and predictable world in which individuals possess competence and worth. When individuals experience an event that damages their worldview, they no longer perceive the world as benevolent and predictable or themselves as competent and invulnerable. Hence, a central premise is that “trauma symptoms are caused by shattering of worldviews” (Edmondson et al., 2013, p. 358).

On a superficial level, deselection may not appear to be ‘as traumatic’ as events that involve the sudden onset of a serious illness or injury, death of a loved one, or natural disaster. In fact, sport and exercise psychology researchers have argued that the term *posttraumatic* growth should only be used for individuals who have “truly suffered traumatic experiences” (Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullough, 2013, p. 216) -- which reflects a clinical-type of interpretation -- and that the term *adversity* should be used for ‘less traumatic’ experiences (Day & Wadey, 2017). However, trauma is based on a person’s subjective interpretation of an event rather than the objective characteristics or consequences of the event (Joseph, 2011). Indeed, Janoff-Bulman (1992) argued that “it is not the recognizable, readily apparent external losses—of one’s health,

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

5

home, community, or a loved one—that define an experience as traumatic, but rather the internal disorganization and disintegration that follows from our psychological unpreparedness. Traumas are shocks to our inner worlds” (p. 83). Hence, a defining aspect of trauma is that the event causes physical or emotional harm and leads people to challenge assumptions about themselves and the world in which they live (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

In designing the current study, we made the assumption that deselection has the *potential* to be perceived and experienced as a traumatic event that challenges athletes’ views of themselves and the social (i.e., sporting) world in which they operate. This assumption was based upon research showing that following deselection athletes have reported clinical levels of psychological distress (Blakelock, Chen, & Prescott, 2016), heightened depression, anxiety, anger, and humiliation, as well as a loss of self-esteem, reduced friendships, and a lowered sense of connectedness (Barnett, 2007; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Munroe, Albinson, & Hall, 1999). Studies have also shown that athletes can experience a loss of athletic identity (i.e., the degree to which an individual identifies with an athletic role; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) and a reduced sense of self following deselection (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Grove, Fish, & Eklund, 2004). For instance, Grove et al. (2004) found that athletic identity significantly decreased among female adolescent athletes from the United States who failed to make state all-star teams. On the basis of this evidence, it seems reasonable to propose that deselection can be appraised and experienced as a traumatic event that may lead some athletes to seriously question assumptions about themselves, their ability, their identity, and their place in the social world of competitive sport.

Given the apparent potential for deselection to be appraised and experienced as a traumatic event, we return to the question of determining whether deselection may precipitate positive growth for athletes. Recent research conducted by Neely, McHugh, Dunn, and Holt

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

6

(2017) examined how female adolescent athletes (M age = 15.0 years) and their parents coped with deselection from provincial level soccer, basketball, volleyball, and ice hockey teams. Results showed that athletes and parents shared the responsibility and some cooperative coping actions (such as parents helping their children with positive reframing) and individual coping strategies (such as athletes increasing effort) appeared to provide ways to view deselection as an opportunity for personal growth. However, the short time-frame covered within Neely et al.'s study (participants were interviewed 10-12 weeks following deselection) did not allow for analysis of how positive growth may occur because growth can take several years to be realized following a traumatic event (Frazier, Conlon, & Glaser, 2001; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Meyerson, Grant, Carter, & Kilmer, 2011).

The current study focused on Canadian female athletes who had been deselected from provincial teams during adolescence. Provincial teams are extremely important in many sports in the Canadian youth sport system. They are created through rigorous and extensive selection processes where athletes are invited to attend competitive 'try-out' camps that are evaluated by experienced coaches and their staff (Neely et al., 2016). These teams then compete at national (and sometimes international) competitions, and include athletes deemed to be the best in their age group in the province. Provincial teams are important stepping stones toward gaining lucrative college scholarships and for some athletes provide a pathway to national teams. We focused on the deselection during adolescence because this is typically a period when individuals are highly invested in sport and have a strong athletic identity (Brewer et al., 1993). Female athletes were sampled because they may have fewer coping resources than males (Lewis & Frydenberg, 2004), and may be particularly vulnerable to the stress of deselection because they tend to place high value on social relationships (Neely et al., 2017; Smith, 2007). Furthermore, research in the psychology literature has shown that females experience greater levels of positive

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

7

growth than males due to their increased likelihood to seek social support (Kesimci, Göral, & Gençöz, 2005). Thus, we chose to sample in a context where there appeared to be a strong possibility that deselection could be subjectively appraised as a traumatic event that could precipitate positive growth.

Howells et al. (2017) recently called for more precise definitions of terms and theories used to study positive growth in sport in order to enhance the conceptual clarity of the literature. As noted earlier, we used Janoff-Bulman's (1992) definition of a traumatic event (i.e., a highly stressful event that causes physical or emotional harm that significantly challenges the adaptive resources of an individual and an individual's way of understanding one's self, the world, and their place in it). Several theories and models describe the notion of positive growth. These include the functional-descriptive model of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004), stress-related growth (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), organismic valuing theory (Linley & Joseph, 2004), thriving (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995), and perceived benefits (McMillen & Fisher, 1998). Although these theories and models have specific definitions and conceptualizations, they are generally complementary (Joseph & Linley, 2006) and propose that the process of struggling and coping can result in positive changes that propel an individual to a higher level of psychological and emotional functioning than that which existed prior to the adverse event (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

We used the functional-descriptive model of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004) to examine if/how positive growth may have occurred in response to deselection during adolescence. This model is "the most comprehensive theoretical description of growth" (Joseph & Linley, 2006, p. 1044). As such, we posited that the functional-descriptive model of posttraumatic growth *may* be useful for understanding and accounting for ways in which athletes may experience positive growth following deselection, while acknowledging that the model has

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

8

not been used previously to study growth in the context of deselection. Given that we used a phenomenological approach with an exploratory focus, the functional-descriptive model of posttraumatic growth was appealing because it is an ‘experiential’ model and, as Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) explained, the five domains of posttraumatic growth are “a good representation of the breadth of growth that people can experience” (p. 14). Hence, we decided this model would be useful in guiding our analysis of the types of positive growth experiences individuals may accrue while maintaining the exploratory and phenomenological aspects of the study.

In the functional-descriptive model of posttraumatic growth, a traumatic event serves as a ‘seismic challenge’ that shatters individuals’ pre-existing schemas about the self, their goals, and their beliefs about the world (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004). According to this model, the ensuing struggle individuals have with the aftermath of trauma can result in five domains of growth: greater appreciation of life, personal strength, relating to others, new possibilities, and spiritual change. Greater appreciation of life includes an increased appreciation of what is important, recognition of the value of things formerly taken for granted, and a change in priorities. Personal strength refers to positive changes in perceptions of self and an enhanced sense of personal strength, especially in terms of ‘if I got through that, I can get through anything.’ Relating to others involves closer, more intimate and more meaningful relationships with others, an enhanced valuing of family and friends, and an increased sense of compassion towards others. New possibilities reflect an awareness and acknowledgment of previously unrecognized opportunities and/or taking a new and different path in life. Spiritual change involves religious or spiritual growth, either through a deepening of faith or a significant change in beliefs.

A traumatic event in and of itself does not lead to positive growth in these five domains; rather, it is the cognitive processing, coping, social support, and affective engagement that occur

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

9

in the aftermath of the event that are thought to lead to growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). For example, cognitive processing and the reappraisal of one’s circumstances help people deal with their emotional reactions to the trauma as they try to make sense of what has happened. Although distressing, a rebuilding of views and beliefs often occurs through ruminative processes. Rumination is repeated thinking that can include intrusive thoughts as well as reminiscing, problem solving, and trying to make sense of the trauma (Martin & Tesser, 1996). Another ruminative process involving cognitive engagement is regret and counterfactual thinking (e.g., repeated consideration of how the trauma could have potentially been avoided). These thoughts often occur when the cause of trauma is certain and other people are responsible for causing the trauma.

Researchers who study positive growth in sport and physical activity contexts have also highlighted the importance of cognitive processes and social support in the growth process. For example, in the context of competitive sport, Tamminen et al. (2013) explored experiences of adversity and perceptions of positive growth via interviews with five elite female athletes. These athletes had represented Canada at international competitions in individual (long-distance running, track and field, and swimming) and team (basketball) sports. Adverse experiences cited by athletes were performance slumps, coach conflicts, bullying, eating disorders, sexual abuse, and injuries. Shared features of participants’ experiences of adversity included isolation/withdrawal, emotional disruption, and questioning one’s identity as an athlete. Participants sought and found meaning in their experiences by identifying opportunities for growth, using social support, and reappraising the importance of sport in their lives. Aspects of positive growth included athletes realizing previously unrecognized strength, gaining perspective of their problems in the wider scope of their lives, and a newfound desire to help others. While Tamminen et al.’s study describes experiences of growth following multiple and different types

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

10

of stressful and adverse events, the negative events were experienced during childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood. It may be possible to shed more light on the process of positive growth, and perhaps specific coping processes that lead to positive growth for female athletes, by exploring the growth experiences of individuals who have coped with the same type of negative event (i.e., deselection) during a similar developmental period (i.e., adolescence). Indeed, our decision to focus on the same type of negative event is consistent with the well-established methodological advice that researchers should “study one stress or trauma at a time” (Roth & Cohen, 1986, p. 818) and focus on responses specific to each particular stressful context (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Somerfield & McRae, 2000).

Posttraumatic growth among breast cancer survivors who were involved in dragon boat teams has been examined, albeit from a physical activity rather than competitive sport perspective (McDonough, Sabiston, & Ullrich-French, 2011; Sabiston, McDonough, & Crocker, 2007). Results from this research revealed that dragon boating provided opportunities for participants to gain personal control, develop new identities as athletes, and overcome physical challenges. It also enabled participants to self-disclose, expand their social network, and to give and receive informational and emotional social support. These experiences contributed to closer and more meaningful relationships with other survivors, enhanced physical and mental strength, recognition of new opportunities to enjoy life, and a renewed appreciation for personal health and life in general (Sabiston et al., 2007). Findings also demonstrated the prominence of positive social relationships and that support through multiple pathways, including self-disclosure, facilitated enhanced posttraumatic growth (McDonough et al., 2011). Whereas there are some promising findings with regard to posttraumatic growth in physical activity settings, there remains a need to understand more about the growth experiences, cognitive appraisal processes, and social interactions that may facilitate positive growth in athletes (Tamminen & Neely, 2016),

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

11

particularly in response to trauma that is caused by and experienced within the sport context. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to explore female athletes’ experiences of positive growth following deselection from provincial sport teams.

Method

We adopted interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which is a methodology that can be used to understand how individuals make sense of significant life experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA can be particularly useful “when one is concerned with complexity, process, or novelty” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 53). Deselection was conceptualized as a significant, and potentially traumatic, life experience (Neely et al., 2017) and positive growth is a process (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), therefore IPA was deemed to be a suitable methodological approach. When using IPA, “the researcher has to interpret people’s mental and emotional state from what they say” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 54). There are multiple levels of interpretation in IPA, including participants interpreting and articulating their own experiences, researchers interpreting the participants’ accounts via the analytic process, and using theory to help make sense of the common themes in the participants’ accounts (Smith et al., 2009). With regard to the use of theory, the functional-descriptive model of posttraumatic growth was a useful framework for analyzing and interpreting participants’ experiences because it is an ‘experiential’ theory in that the domains of growth refer to the types of growth *experiences* individuals encounter (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

IPA research is underpinned by three main concepts: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology is concerned with first-person accounts of lived experience, which were captured via individual interviews during which participants were asked to recount their experiences of, and following, deselection. Hermeneutics deals with interpretation and IPA involves a double hermeneutic approach whereby the researcher is trying

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

12

to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their own experience. We used the analytic process to interpret commonalities in the participants' experiences (searching for such commonalities is an appropriate approach in IPA studies that include a relatively large sample size as was the case in the current study; Smith et al., 2009), and used a suitable theory to further advance our interpretation of these themes (Landridge, 2007). Ideography refers to an in-depth analysis of single cases before producing any general statements (Smith et al., 2009). Our analysis began at the individual level before moving toward the identification and interpretation of shared commonalties across the participants' experiences. These principles align with the interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on understanding individuals' unique perceptions of their experiences and assumes knowledge is co-constructed through researcher-participant interactions (Sparkes, 1992). That is, participants reconstruct their experiences via the interviews and the researchers engage with these data to interpret and co-construct the accounts presented in the results.

Participant Recruitment

A homogeneous sampling strategy was used (as recommended by Smith, 2017), which is appropriate when the purpose of a study is to address issues relevant to a particular group of interest (in this case, female athletes who may have experienced positive growth following deselection). The sampling criteria were that participants must (a) have been deselected from a provincial level sport team in the U-15 to U-18 age categories, (b) be aged 21-25 years old at the time of data collection, and (c) responded to a call for athletes that have experienced positive growth following deselection. Participants aged 21-25 years at the time of data collection were recruited because this ensured a minimum of three years since deselection (if participants were deselected at U18), which provides a time-frame consistent with findings in the general positive

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

13

growth literature that have shown growth remains stable three years after a traumatic event (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

Participants were recruited through two main strategies. In the first strategy, head coaches of university and college female soccer, basketball, volleyball, and ice hockey teams in a western Canadian city were contacted via email and asked to forward the study information letter to the athletes on their teams. The information letter provided the purpose of the study, sampling criteria (including the statement that we wished to recruit “athletes who have experienced positive growth after being cut”), and described what would be required of participants. Athletes who fit the sample criteria were instructed to contact the researcher if they wished to participate. The second recruitment strategy was snowball sampling (Patton, 2015), whereby participants were asked to share the details of the study with friends they knew who fit the sampling criteria. All but three participants who expressed interest in the study met the sampling criteria (two participants did not meet the age criterion, and one participant was not deselected from a provincial team).

Typically IPA studies involve 3-6 participants, but Smith et al. (2009) explained that a good IPA study can still be done with larger samples. We estimated, a priori, that at least 10 participants (interviewed on two occasions) would be necessary to attain adequate data saturation based on sample sizes that have been used in previous studies of positive growth following adversity in the sport psychology literature (e.g., Galli & Reel, 2012, Wadey et al., 2011). Furthermore, given that positive growth following deselection has not been specifically examined previously, we anticipated a larger-than-normal sample would be necessary in order to obtain a comprehensive account of the phenomenon. Our recruitment protocols were, in fact, more successful than we anticipated and a total of 18 individuals volunteered for, and were eligible to participate in, this study. We included all those who volunteered because we did not

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

14

want to turn away a person who wanted to share a potentially traumatic event with us.

Institutional research ethics board approval was obtained and participants provided written informed consent prior to the onset of their interview.

Participants

Participants were 18 females (M age = 22.45 years, SD = 1.38) who had competed in competitive youth sport as adolescents and were deselected from a provincial soccer (n = 9), ice hockey (n = 8), or volleyball (n = 1) team between the ages of 14 and 18 years (M age when participants were deselected = 16 years, SD = 1.14). All participants were either completing or had completed a post-secondary degree at the time of data collection. Eight participants had been deselected from a provincial team on more than one occasion, and seven of the participants were subsequently successful in making an older age-group provincial team. In instances where athletes experienced deselection from a provincial team on more than one occasion, they initially described all of their experiences but our conversations focused on the particular experience of deselection that they deemed traumatic and had the greatest impact on them.

On average, participants began involvement in their sport recreationally at the age of seven years (SD = 1.86, range = 4-11) and began playing more competitively on a club team at 10.5 years of age (SD = 1.58, range = 7-13). All participants continued to play their sport on a club team at the competitive level until the end of youth sport (i.e., U18). Fourteen of the participants competed in their sport at the college/university level, two participants competed in a different sport at the college/university level, and two participants played their sport at a recreational level while attending university. All participants self-identified as Caucasian-Canadian.

Data Collection

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

15

Data were collected through two individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted by the first author and audio-recorded. All eighteen participants completed the first ‘main’ interview that lasted, on average, 42 minutes ($SD = 11.1$, range = 32-72). Three days before the interview participants were emailed a copy of the interview guide and asked to think about their experience of deselection to help stimulate recall and enable them to provide detailed examples during the interview. The interview guide was developed based on IPA recommendations by Smith et al. (2009) and qualitative interviewing guidelines by Rubin and Rubin (2012). The interview guide included introductory, main, and summary questions, starting with general questions and becoming more specific as the interview progressed. Follow-up questions and probes were used throughout the interview to maintain the flow of conversation and encourage participants to expand on their ideas which provided clarity, depth, and more detail about their experiences of positive growth (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Introductory questions were used to gain demographic information and develop rapport with participants. The main questions were broad and open-ended and were designed to encourage participants to talk about their experience and to facilitate the discussion of relevant topics (Smith et al., 2009). The first set of these broad and open-ended questions invited participants to reflect on their experiences. For instance, they were asked about deselection (e.g., ‘Can you tell me about your experience of being cut?’), coping (e.g., ‘What did you do to try and deal with being cut?’), and identity (e.g., ‘Can you tell me how you thought/felt about yourself after being cut?’).

The next main section of the interview guide, again using broad and open-ended questions, was guided by domains of growth from Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) model of posttraumatic growth—namely, appreciation of life, personal strength, relationships with others, recognition of new possibilities, and spiritual change. In posing the questions we took care not to

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

16

unduly 'force' the model onto the participants' experiences. For example, in the growth domain of appreciation of life we asked questions like, 'In what ways did your priorities as an athlete or a person change after being cut?', 'How do you think being cut has personally impacted you?' (personal strength), 'In what ways did relationships with people change as a result of being cut?' (relationships with others), 'What do you think influenced your decision to quit/continue to play?' (recognition of new opportunities), and 'Can you tell me if or how religion or spirituality has changed because of your deselection experience?' (spiritual change). Finally, participants were asked summary questions to further reflect on the deselection process, which also provided them with an opportunity to discuss any other aspects of their deselection experience not covered by the main questions.

Seventeen participants completed a second 'follow-up' interview (one participant failed to respond to repeated attempts to organize a second interview). The second interviews lasted, on average, 22 minutes ($SD = 4.7$, range = 15-29) and took place approximately two months after the first interviews, thereby providing sufficient time to analyze each participant's first interview. The second interviews focused on understanding more about participants' experiences of positive growth following deselection and offered participants opportunities for reflexive elaboration on recollections they discussed in the first interviews. The second interview was therefore an opportunity to re-engage the participants and allow them to further elaborate on some themes. There was no formal interview guide for the second interviews because these interviews were based on the themes that arose from the first interviews. For instance, the researcher would explain a theme and ask the participants about how it may have resonated with their own experience. Participants were also asked other broad questions like, 'Other than your parents, were there any other relationships that changed for you after being cut?'

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

17

Participants were also given a written summary of the initial results from the first interviews and asked to comment on our interpretations. This feature of the second interview served a type of representative member-checking function. For instance, participants were asked questions such as ‘How do these themes fit with your growth in terms of personal strength?’ and ‘Overall, how does this interpretation compare with your experience of deselection and growth?’ Data from the second interviews were transcribed and included in the analysis (and treated in the same way as data from the first interviews). Therefore the second interviews were an opportunity for the participants to further engage in the co-construction of knowledge and assist in our interpretation of their stories about trauma and growth.

Data Analysis

Audio-recordings from both interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcribing service, which produced a total of 435 pages of single-spaced data (179,915 words). Athletes were given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity and all other identifying information (e.g., coaches’ names, names of teams) was removed. Prior to beginning analysis, transcripts were checked with audio-recordings to ensure accuracy of transcription and to re-familiarize the lead researcher with the interviews. Data analysis began as soon as the first data from the first interviews were collected and transcribed; this continued in an iterative process throughout the study, including during the second interviews phase which enabled the researcher to become immersed in the data (Smith et al., 2009). The first author conducted the data analysis, and presented her interpretations of the data and discussed emerging results with co-authors on a regular basis.

Data analysis followed IPA guidelines outlined by Smith et al. (2009). The steps in IPA are designed to identify themes, beginning with a focus on the individual before moving to establishing themes that represent shared experiences across the group. However, IPA is not

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

18

prescriptive; rather it is a process that allows for flexibility in terms of the detailed analysis emphasized at the individual and group level (Smith et al., 2009). Inductive idiographic analyses of individual transcripts from the first interviews were initially completed. This involved a five-step process of dealing with each transcript in turn. First, each transcript was read and re-read to gain an overall sense of the participant's experience. The second step involved inductive noting about initial thoughts and impressions. The third step involved transforming notes into emergent themes within the data and concise phrases or codes were given to pieces of text to capture the essential meaning. In the fourth step, connections across emerging themes were explored. Step five involved moving to the next transcript and repeating the analytic process. This idiographic approach produced a list of themes and questions that informed the second interviews.

Next, following the second interview, the analytic process advanced to produce the findings reported herein. Data from each participant's second interview were merged with the themes derived from the first interview. In IPA studies with larger samples it means that results tend to focus on the "key emergent themes of the whole group" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 106). Hence, we searched for patterns across all the cases and shared commonalities of positive growth following deselection. In doing so, following the advice of Smith et al. (2009) for analyzing data from relatively large samples for an IPA study, we ensured that the "group level themes are still illustrated with particular examples taken from individuals" (p. 106). The process of identifying group level themes involved a more deductive approach because, as Langdridge (2007) noted, themes should "reflect broader, perhaps more theoretically significant concerns" (p. 111). Therefore, in analyzing the themes at the group level, concepts from the functional-descriptive model of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) were used to help interpret and advance the analysis, reflecting the use of a more deductive logic. We took care to avoid unduly forcing the model on the data, demonstrated by the fact that we do not present data regarding

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

19

spiritual change because it was not a salient feature of participants’ positive growth experiences. The final step involved writing, whereby we moved from final themes to the construction of a narrative account of athletes’ experiences of positive growth following deselection. Direct quotes and short extracts from participants were selected to reflect the core of their experiences and provide context for our interpretations.

Quality and Validity Criteria

Smith (2011) provided guidelines for ‘what makes a good IPA paper’ which, it should be noted, have been debated in the literature (e.g., Chamberlain, 2011; Shaw, 2011). Adopting a relativist approach, we used some of these guidelines to design the study and inform the reportage of the results (also see Ingstrup, Mosewich, & Holt, 2017). IPA studies should have a clear focus and typically involve a homogeneous sample, which we articulated. They require ‘strong’ data derived from good interviews, which requires close awareness of the interview process. The quality of data collected determines how ‘good’ a study can be, so high-quality data are paramount (Smith et al., 2009). We addressed issues related to ‘strong’ data by engaging the participants in two interviews. Additionally, the interviewer had extensive qualitative interviewing training and experience derived from conducting several previous studies. We addressed sensitivity to context (Yardley, 2008) by ensuring the interview consistently connected back to the context of sport and experiences of deselection and positive growth. The lead researcher was a former soccer player who had been deselected from a club team during adolescence, so she maintained a reflexive journal to help ensure a balanced awareness of her interpretations of the participants’ accounts. In addition, the research team regularly engaged in discussions about the interviews and the analysis, and provided critical and supportive feedback on the emerging results. This reflective engagement was important because the results of IPA studies are co-created by researchers and participants (Smith et al., 2009).

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

20

Results**Deselection as a Traumatic Experience**

Athletes experienced deselection as a traumatic event. Some said it was “heartbreaking” (Hayden, Interview 1) and “just honestly so devastating” (Tiffany, Interview 1). As athletes recounted their experiences of deselection, they talked about how sport was their ‘world’ and being deselected felt like they had lost everything. For instance, Becky said:

I was definitely like crushed and I was so mad, I was so upset, and embarrassed almost. I think it was just so who I thought I was, and then it was all of a sudden like no, you aren’t that ... like at the moment it seems like the biggest thing in your life, like you can’t imagine moving on from this, it seems like the end of the world (Interview 1).

Many athletes questioned their identity after being deselected from a provincial team. For example, Kate said being deselected “was the end of the world when I was 16” (Interview 1) and went on to say, “I’d always identified as a soccer player and then after I got cut I just wasn’t” (Interview 1). Melissa also questioned her identity after being deselected from a provincial-level ice hockey team. She said:

My identity was completely wrapped around hockey... I wanted my identity to always be hockey, like when people thought of me I just wanted to be known for hockey, I just wanna be the hockey player. Getting cut was so hard because I’m like if I’m not an elite hockey player, who am I? What am I? (Interview 1).

Being deselected also made athletes question their ability because they came into the provincial program as one of the top players on their club teams. As a result, they wondered if they had the skills to compete at a higher level. For instance, Harper stated, “getting cut really made you question yourself as an athlete. ‘Am I not gritty enough, do I not have the best leg?’”

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

21

(Interview 1). Likewise, Quinn vividly recalled sitting in the dressing room and struggling after being deselected, asking herself, “like am I good enough? Do I even wanna play hockey? Can I even play hockey or am I just fooling myself out here?” (Interview 1). These examples suggest that deselection was indeed traumatic for the participants. Deselection caused emotional harm and challenged their identity, sense of self, and view of their sporting abilities, which appeared to be founded on their identification as a high level athlete.

Gradual Process of Growth

The process of realizing positive growth appeared to be gradual. As Olivia explained, “I don’t think it was like a boom, ‘I feel really great about this now,’ it was definitely a step-by-step process” (Interview 1). Although many participants began the process of ‘rebuilding’ in the aftermath of deselection, it seemed to take several years to perceive positive growth had occurred. Although the process was gradual, the time frame for positive growth varied across the athletes. Alexa explained that her perception of deselection “shifted as time went on from not viewing it as such a negative experience but as a learning experience. But that took a very long amount of time, it wasn’t instant, it was probably another year or two later” (Interview 1). Other participants said it was “probably like two years after, two to three [years]...it wasn’t an immediate thing, definitely not” (Kate, Interview 1) or “when I got to play university...so I guess maybe three or so years to deal with it” (Becky, Interview 2). Similarly, Harper said:

My perspective changed when I actually made the team [the following year] and you kinda see wow, ‘this is why I was working so hard.’ I think I was able to reinterpret it in my university years and young adult years (Interview 2).

Hence, positive growth occurred over an extended period (years rather than months), but this gradual process of growth was not uniformly shared (in terms of time frame) across participants. Nonetheless, the athletes shared some experiences (domains) of growth that

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

22

were consistent across these different, and gradual, time frames; these shared experiences are reflected in the theme ‘domains of growth’ that is shown below.

Domains of Growth

“I reprioritized what was important to me.” As a consequence of not being able to play at the provincial level, athletes reflected on the importance of sport in their lives. For Brittany, being deselected was meaningful because “it made me realize how much I wanted hockey and that I wanted to be good. It took me three times [of being deselected] to realize it, but I realized it in the end” (Interview 1). Quinn said she “went back every year just because I loved it [ice hockey] too much. I couldn’t let it go. It’s like the love of my life” (Interview 1). Similarly, Melissa said, “I think at the end of the day just my love of the game and my love to play just like that ‘no, I’m going further’” (Interview 1). Hence, we concluded that participants’ passion for their sport helped them gain a greater appreciation of the meaningfulness and importance of sport in their lives.

Some participants harboured thoughts of quitting sport entirely, although all eventually continued to play. For example, Lauren explained that “there was a short period right after getting cut of ‘this sucks, I don’t want to do this’... But I think one of my strengths as an athlete is to say ‘no I want this. I need this in my life’” (Interview 1). Reflecting on how the process of growth was not uniform across participants, two athletes actually quit their sport for a year following deselection. However, they both returned to their sport the next season because they came to realize how important it was in their lives. Janna said, “it actually took me taking a season off to really love it. Once I came back, I was there to take it seriously and I don’t know if it was a maturity thing or just a renewed appreciation for it” (Interview 1).

The other athletes, who did not quit for a year, seemed to more quickly recognize and understand the importance of sport in their lives. Harper explained:

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

23

499 When you get something taken away it's a little humbling to your own mindset
500 about how you are as an athlete, which kinda rings into the other thing, so that it's
501 a bigger priority, you set bigger goals, you train that much harder to get better to
502 potentially next year make the team. So I would agree with that 100% that it [my
503 sport] became a higher priority (Interview 2).

504 For Elizabeth, deselection was a turning point in her life where hockey became her top priority.
505 She said, "I missed so much school for hockey stuff or because I'd been up late the night before
506 with a game so school and friends kinda took a back burner and hockey took the forefront"
507 (Interview 1). Participants also gave up other activities they had participated in to dedicate their
508 time and energy to their sport. Melissa said, "I actually took out [i.e., quit] all other sports, so
509 instead of playing school volleyball, school basketball and kinda diversifying, I quit all of that. I
510 was strictly focused on hockey [after being deselected]" (Interview 1). Therefore, all the athletes
511 engaged in some kind of reappraisal of the role of sport in their lives. For two athletes, it took a
512 period of time away from their sport to come to this realization. Others more quickly recognized
513 the importance of sport in their lives and sacrificed other activities (e.g., other sports, socializing
514 with friends).

515 **"It's definitely made me a way stronger person."** With time, deselection enabled
516 participants to gain an enhanced sense of their personal strengths. For example, Sarah said that
517 her "mentality was definitely stronger" (Interview 1) and Madison said she developed a "tougher
518 skin" (Interview 1) as a result of experiencing deselection. Furthermore, Melissa stated:

519 A younger me probably wouldn't have listened to this but I just would tell myself,
520 "this is gonna make you a stronger person later on in life." At the time, you
521 definitely wouldn't understand why. Like this sucks, I don't get it but now being

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

24

older and stuff, you're like, yeah, this has made me a stronger person and if I want something, I will work that much harder for it (Interview 1).

In fact, being deselected from the provincial team was the first time in many participants' lives when they had experienced a significant personal failure in sport, because prior to deselection they had been successful athletes at a lower (club) level of competition. Indeed, their success at lower levels was the reason they were even under consideration at the provincial team level. Going through this significant personal experience in sport, often for the first time in their careers, gave participants a new understanding of the strengths they possessed. This was primarily manifested by a realization of their ability to persevere. Becky said:

Deselection was definitely the hardest thing in sport that I ever had to deal with... definitely the first time that I had to actually get through something in sport in a bigger way so it definitely taught me to not just give up and keep going and persevere through whatever was happening (Interview 2).

Similarly, Emma was able to persevere through other hardships in sport because of going through deselection the first time. She said, "I think that it's just that underlying strength, like mental strength I guess of knowing, 'OK I've gone through this shit before and I can do it even though I might not think I can'" (Interview 1).

The enhanced understanding of personal strength that participants' developed after being deselected translated to other areas of their lives. Specifically, participants realized that by coping with deselection from sport they had attributes that enabled them to cope with other life events. For instance, Olivia said, "I think that having that experience under my belt has let me or reminded me how to cope with things that maybe aren't getting cut but are still negative, traumatic things in my life" (Interview 1). In a similar sense, Lauren was able to reinterpret a valuable lesson from her experience of deselection when she said, "learning what to do at a

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

25

young age to fix the kind of situation you're in, now, like being 21, I definitely have realized that failing actually makes you stronger and gives you more tools in your toolbox" (Interview 1). We interpreted that recognizing their ability to persevere and handle adversity experienced later on in life reflected psychological and emotional growth, which contributed to an enhanced sense of personal strength following deselection.

"It made our relationship stronger." Participants drew on other people (parents, siblings, teammates) to deal with deselection and this, in turn, enabled them to form stronger bonds and closer social relationships with these people. Almost all of the athletes talked about the role their parents played in helping them cope with being deselected. For example, Lauren said:

My dad definitely helped a lot. He was the one that was there willing to go every step of the way with me to improve my game... I think it grew my bond with my dad a lot because he was there with me and he wanted to see me succeed so he was willing to learn with me and push me to do my best (Interview 1).

After Quinn was deselected her mother's support was invaluable:

I think having my mom to encourage me was probably the only thing that got me through... It was mostly just like, "let's get over it and move on," and that's what we did, and we became kinda best friends because of all that (Interview 1).

Lisa explained that her father, who had been her coach and a "mean coach guy" was sympathetic. As a result of supporting her, their relationship grew "not stronger, just in a different sense. He wasn't just my coach anymore, he was my dad" (Interview 1). We interpreted that athletes' relationships with their parents were strengthened due to the reliance on their parents for different types of support (i.e., emotional and instrumental support) and through athletes and parents coping together with deselection.

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

26

Athletes believed their relationships with siblings and teammates were also strengthened as a result of dealing with deselection. Madison explained that her relationship with her brother changed. She said, “him and I have always been close but that was kinda like OK, he has my back, no matter what.” Through his support, Madison realized “he actually really does care about me especially in this aspect of my life, and I didn’t really see that part of him before” (Interview 1). Participants were also able to connect with teammates on a new level that brought them closer together. Alexa said “I could relate to them [teammates] in another way that I couldn’t before” (Interview 1). In a similar sense, Madison said, “I have better understanding for other players that have been cut, like you’re able to help them cope with it too because you’re like, OK, I’ve been through the same thing and it’s shitty right now but it will get better” (Interview 1).

Although developing closer social relationships with parents and teammates was a shared commonality across participants, it should be noted that some athletes initially experienced a short-term breakdown of certain social relationships. That is, relationships did not instantly become stronger. For example, Elizabeth reflected on the breakdown of her friendships with her best friends on her club team. She said:

I think I strained the relationships with my friends on my team because I was angry at them for making the provincial team. Whereas it wasn’t their fault at all, they just got chosen over me. So it was weird that I pushed them away instead of using them as a resource to get better. But the same people I strained the relationships with, those are people I’m better friends with now (Interview 2).

As Elizabeth’s example revealed, although there was a short-term breakdown in some of her relationships, these relationships eventually became stronger. Hence, while some of the processes may have varied between the athletes, all found ways to make their relationships

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

27

594 stronger. We interpreted that as a result of being deselected, social relationships became closer
595 through the process of sharing feelings. Emma explained that “when you go through something
596 with someone, your relationship with them is stronger and it’s more binding because you’ve had
597 that shared experience and you’ve talked about bad stuff and good stuff with it” (Interview 1).

598 **“There were still so many opportunities to play later on.”** Participants eventually
599 became more optimistic about the future and recognized they had other opportunities to play
600 their sport at a competitive level. As Madison explained:

601 You might think it’s the end of the road but not even. Being cut from [provincial
602 team] I still had the opportunity to play club and for my school team...There’s so
603 many different options just because that one door was closed doesn’t mean that I
604 was gonna be cut from every other team that I tried out for (Interview 2).

605 It was important for athletes to realize that these opportunities existed and to stay positive about
606 reaching their goals. For Lisa, she explained that after being deselected, she “looked at it like I
607 have next year, like I have a whole year to get better and make sure to make that team... so I
608 think I was always optimistic it could happen” (Interview 1). Many athletes shared a similar view
609 in that it was necessary to adopt an optimistic outlook for future sport opportunities.

610 Athletes’ parents often helped them recognize the opportunities they still had to play.
611 Elizabeth said her parents constantly reinforced “you can’t take one downfall as the end of a
612 career. There’s still 30 games [for club team] and there’s other teams to make” (Interview 2).
613 Emma also explained that her parents helped her to be positive and realize the chances she would
614 still have to compete. She said her mother told her, ““You’ve got [club team], you’ve got all
615 these wonderful opportunities, you guys are gonna go to Mac’s [tournament] again’, that sort of
616 stuff. So turning it around so it’s not focused on the bad” (Interview 1). Perhaps an element of

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

28

relationships with parents becoming stronger was that parents played an important role in helping athletes reframe deselection in a more positive way.

With time participants were able to see the benefits of deselection. Harper provided a good example of a new opportunity she had because she was deselected. She said playing on the provincial team:

It was definitely a missed opportunity to play at a very high level. Having said that, there were other opportunities to play soccer but in a different way. The Summer Games [a major multi-sport event for U-18s in Canada] was one thing that came of not playing for the provincial soccer team (Interview 1).

Madison explained, “I think looking back on it just knowing that what had happened seemed not so great at the time actually ended up benefiting me in the future. I think that was kind of the silver lining of it all” (Interview 2). In addition, Jocelyn said that “when you’re that young you always think that everything’s the end of the world but then when the pieces kinda fall into place, you realize just everything happens for a reason type of deal” (Interview 1).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore female athletes’ experiences of positive growth following deselection from provincial sport teams. The findings suggested that deselection was a traumatic experience for participants, leading them to question their identity and ability as an athlete. Growth was a gradual process that unfolded over several years. Although the specific time frame and processes varied between the athletes, shared commonalities of their positive growth experiences were gaining a greater appreciation of the role of sport in their lives and sport becoming a priority, an enhanced sense of personal strength, developing closer social relationships, and a recognition of new and other opportunities.

This study offers conceptual and empirical contributions to the literature. Conceptually, it suggests that four of the five domains of growth in Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) functional-descriptive model of posttraumatic growth provide a relevant framework for capturing athletes' positive growth in sport—a social context that has received relatively little attention in the positive growth literature (Lepore & Revenson, 2006). Empirically, these findings provide further support for the emerging proposition that certain aspects of participation in the sporting context can precipitate positive psychological and emotional growth (e.g., Howells et al., 2017; Tamminen & Neely, 2016). Specifically, the current findings suggest that deselection was experienced as a traumatic event for participants during adolescence, and adds to our understanding of positive growth in sport, where most research has tended to focus on growth following physical trauma or injury (Day, 2012; Day & Wadey, 2017). Finally, in addition to identifying domains of growth, the results revealed the ways in which athletes understood and interpreted positive growth through cognitive processing, reappraisal, emotional disclosure, and social relationships as they rebuilt perceptions of themselves and of the role that sport played in their lives, in a gradual process that took several years to unfold.

Deselection as a Traumatic Experience

On the surface it perhaps seems surprising that deselection was traumatic given that other research suggests traumatic events include natural disasters (Cryder et al., 2006) or, in sport, sexual and physical abuse (Tamminen et al., 2013). However, the degree of trauma one ascribes to an event is dependent on factors such as subjective appraisal, attribution of blame, and perception of meaning associated with the event, and an event must be 'traumatic enough' to disrupt an individuals' sense of self in order to precipitate growth (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Previous research shows emotional distress, including feelings of increased depression, anxiety, anger, and humiliation (Barnett, 2007; Blakelock et al., 2016; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Munroe et

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

30

al., 1999) and reduced sense of self (Grove et al., 2004) are associated with deselection. Our findings add to this literature by suggesting that deselection was ‘traumatic enough’ to foster positive growth because it led participants to question their identity, their abilities, and the role of sport in their lives. These findings reflect components of shattered assumptions theory (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), with participants perhaps no longer perceiving their sporting world as benevolent and just. They described deselection as “devastating,” “heartbreaking,” and “the end of the world” and questioned their sporting competence, their athletic identity, and assumptions about their sporting world (“Who am I? What am I?”). Therefore, if trauma symptoms are caused by a shattering of worldviews (Edmondson et al., 2013), it appeared that participants’ worldviews were, to some extent, shattered by deselection.

A key factor to consider in this respect is the importance of the provincial team in the athletes’ lives and the fact that participants were adolescents at the time of deselection, a developmental period when they may have adopted a strong and exclusive athletic identity (Houle, Brewer, & Kiluck, 2007). During adolescence, developing a sense of identity is often related to an individual’s self-concept (Harter, 1999), which is comprised of self-perceptions, self-esteem, and perceived competence in multiple domains. For adolescents who are intensely involved in sport, it is likely that the sport domain is most important to their self-concept and becomes their dominant identity (cf. Erikson, 1968). As such, deselection appeared to represent a threat to their identity and sense of self. While a strong athletic identity has been associated with an over-commitment to the athletic role—a potential risk factor for emotional difficulties during transitions away from sport—it can also provide the motivation and discipline necessary for intense training that is often a prerequisite condition for success in competitive sport (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2000). The enhanced motivation and commitment (or re-commitment) to sport that apparently resulted for many athletes following deselection (albeit over different

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

31

lengths of time) may have been predicated upon having a strong athletic identity in combination with the re-appraisal that took place regarding the role of sport in their lives. Clearly more research is required to examine the extent to which athletic identity may play a role in precipitating positive growth in sport.

Gradual Process of Growth

Research in non-athlete populations shows that the passing of time may be a necessary component that provides individuals with opportunities to increase their perceptions of positive growth by virtue of subsequent experiences and reflections they have following a traumatic event (Affleck, Tennen, Croog, & Levine, 1987; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Frazier et al., 2001; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Meyerson et al., 2011). Our findings showed that, although the time frame was not uniform, positive growth occurred over a period of years. It was not clear when growth became stable, although research outside of the sporting context suggests stability occurs after three years (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Again, the age of individuals at the time of trauma may be a contributing factor to the gradual process of growth that was depicted. For example, adolescents may experience more positive growth than children (Meyerson et al., 2011) due to their enhanced cognitive maturity and capacity for greater self-awareness and more developed self-schema (Wolchik, Coxe, Tein, Sandler, & Ayers, 2009). However, Schmidt, Blank, Bellizzi, and Park (2017) recently argued that more research is needed on the process of growth among adolescents and emerging adults (i.e., individuals 18-25 years) because their experiences of growth may be confounded by normative maturation processes. Although we did not examine normative maturation in our study, the current findings suggest that positive growth occurred as the participants entered early adulthood, supporting the idea that a certain level of cognitive ability and maturity is needed to find meaning in the traumatic event (Milam, Ritt-Olson, & Unger, 2004; Schmidt et al., 2017). Continued research with this age group, particularly from a

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

32

development perspective, will provide valuable insight into how the process of growth unfolds during adolescence and emerging adulthood.

Domains of Growth

Cognitive processing and reappraisal were important for positive growth, particularly in the domains of athletes understanding the importance of sport in their lives, enhanced sense of personal strength, and becoming more optimistic for the future. Some participants appeared to engage in rumination, which can include reminiscing, problem solving, and trying to make sense of the trauma (Martin & Tesser, 1996). They learned to understand and reappraise the importance of sport in their lives and gained a sense of personal strength. These findings echo the results of Tamminen et al.'s (2013) study, where participants identified opportunities for growth, reappraised the importance of sport in their lives, and gained perspective on previously unrecognized strengths. Hence, our findings further show that the cognitive processing of an event, rather than the traumatic event itself, is fundamental to understanding positive growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

An enhanced sense of personal strength has also been reported in other studies of positive growth in sport (e.g., Galli & Reel, 2012; Howells et al., 2017; Tamminen et al., 2013; Wadey et al., 2011). For example, athletes who have experienced severe injuries have reported becoming more dedicated, focused, and mentally tougher than they were before their injury (Galli & Reel, 2012). Enhanced personal strength was realized in participants' ability to persevere as well as their ability to cope with adversity experienced later on. We speculate this may be because deselection was one of the first traumatic experiences in sport (and life in general) that the participants had to overcome and may have enabled them to begin to develop coping skills.

Through gaining perspective, participants recognized new and other opportunities they could still attain in their sport. Parents were evidently important in helping athletes realize these

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

33

opportunities. In a previous study of deselection in youth sport, Neely et al. (2017) suggested that the cooperative coping action (i.e., between athletes and their parents) of positive reframing may set conditions that enable positive growth for adolescent athletes. The current findings further demonstrate that parents play an essential part in facilitating the positive growth process following deselection in sport. Adolescents may require assistance in reframing and making sense of trauma (from adults) due to developmental constraints (Meyerson et al., 2011). As such, we propose that parents will likely play a particularly important role around the emotional disclosure and ruminative processes that adolescent athletes may experience in competitive sport. This is an important practical implication as parents can be educated not only on ways to help their daughters cope with deselection (Neely et al., 2017) but also how they can be involved and provide support, and encourage cognitive processes that foster positive growth.

Previous research has shown that social relationships are a feature of positive growth in sport and physical activity settings (e.g., McDonough et al., 2011; Sabiston et al., 2007; Tamminen et al., 2013). However, the precise nature of these social relationships and how they relate to growth was previously unclear (Day, 2012). Our results showed that being able to share thoughts and feelings following deselection was particularly important in building closer relationships with others. This reflects the idea that emotional expression is a predictor of posttraumatic growth (Manne et al., 2004). In a sport context, Salim, Wadey, and Diss (2015) previously showed that injured athletes who disclose their emotions are more likely to experience positive growth, and further evidence suggests that verbal emotional disclosure is more beneficial for positive growth following injury than written disclosure (Salim & Wadey, 2018). Disclosure of emotions and perspectives on the trauma, combined with how others respond to this self-disclosure, is further thought to stimulate cognitive processing (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). As such, relationships with parents, siblings, and teammates appear to be crucial

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

34

factors associated with positive growth because they provide opportunities for emotional expression and cognitive processing.

There may be some unique features associated with the sporting context with regard to relationships with siblings and teammates. Research conducted outside of the domain of sport has shown that support seeking from siblings and peers was not significantly related to any dimensions of posttraumatic growth among adolescents who had experienced parental bereavement (Wolchik et al., 2009). We speculate that the inherently social context of team sport may create an environment that promotes interpersonal coping, such as athletes receiving additional social support from teammates when they returned to their club team (also see Neely et al., 2017). In line with this, a previous study showed that team sport athletes reported more adversarial growth after ACL surgery than individual sport athletes (Brewer, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Tennen, 2017), presumably because of the greater opportunities for social relationships in the team sport context. Thus, the nature of team sports may also provide increased opportunities for emotional disclosure for adolescent athletes beyond their parents. One caveat to consider, however, is the competitive level of team sport from which an athlete is deselected. In instances where an athlete is deselected from a provincial team—arguably the highest level of competitive sport for many youth athletes—teammates on their (lower-level) club team can be a source of support. In contrast, a player who is deselected from a club team may not have the same social support from a sporting peer group, in which case parents may have a more important role in the emotional disclosure process.

Participants did not report spiritual change (despite the fact they were directly asked if they experienced any religious or spiritual changes following deselection). This ‘non finding’ was somewhat surprising given that other studies in sport have revealed strengthened religious beliefs and increased spirituality following traumatic events (e.g., Galli & Reel, 2012; Howell &

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

35

Fletcher, 2015). The absence of spiritual change in the current study may be because the millennial generation is generally less religious than previous generations (Jones, Cox, & Banchoff, 2012). More research is required with this generation to determine the role of spirituality in the growth process and specifically if spiritual change is to be regarded as a relevant domain of growth in Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) functional-descriptive model of posttraumatic growth in both sport and non-sport contexts.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Key strengths of this study include the sampling strategy and the use of two interviews, which provided opportunities for enhancing data saturation and for participants to reflect and elaborate on emerging interpretations of the data. Given the findings highlighted the critical role of social relationships, a direction for future research would be to interview parents, teammates, or siblings, who may be able to provide additional insights into the social relationships inherent to positive growth. We decided to focus on the common (shared) aspects of growth, but it may be that individuals experience different trajectories of growth. In the future, longitudinal studies may permit the analysis of individual growth trajectories. Furthermore, we sampled athletes from team sports, which likely have a greater emphasis on social relationships (e.g., between teammates) than individual sports. Future research examining differences in positive growth by sport type (e.g., team versus individual) may shed more light on the nature and relevance of social interactions across differing sport settings.

Another factor that should be considered in evaluating the overall strengths and limitations of this study pertains to our decision to use Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) functional-descriptive model of posttraumatic growth to inform our interview guide and the subsequent application of the model as an interpretive framework during the latter stages of the analysis. **Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) model offers the most comprehensive theoretical**

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

36

description of growth (Joseph & Linley, 2006), so it is unlikely that the use of this model unduly restricted the analysis. Nonetheless, the application of a different model/theory of growth may have produced subtly different interpretations of the data. For instance, Joseph and Linley's (2005) organismic valuing theory (OVT) of growth through adversity has been most widely used in sport and exercise psychology (Day & Wadey, 2017). OVT holds that individuals have a completion tendency, or a need to integrate new trauma-related information, which may be accomplished via accommodation or assimilation. Accommodating traumatic information requires a supportive social environment that fulfills basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, relatedness, and competence). If individuals do not engage with the significance of the event and rather attempt to engage the pre-trauma schema, assimilation is likely to occur, leaving the individuals' assumptive work fragile to future fragmentation. We did not specifically examine concepts from OVT, but it is possible that growth experiences facilitated accommodation and searching for meaning, and that the levels of functioning individuals attained were influenced by their completion tendencies. In the future, it may be useful to examine the extent to which cognitive processing, reappraisal, emotional disclosure, social relationships, basic need fulfillment, and completion tendencies facilitate accommodation and searching for meaning within the social context of sport.

Conclusion

This study suggests that deselection was subjectively appraised as a traumatic experience that precipitated positive psychological and emotional growth (e.g., Howells et al., 2017; Tamminen & Neely, 2016). From a practical perspective, it is important to realize that the gradual process of growth evolving over time was not uniform, suggesting that individuals process events in different ways. Participants engaged in cognitive processing of deselection, and this may require a certain level of cognitive maturity that comes with age (e.g., entering early

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

37

adulthood). Social relationships were important features of growth and may be important assets to utilize when assisting athletes to cope with traumatic events. Ultimately, the results suggest that four of the domains of growth depicted in Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) functional-descriptive model of posttraumatic growth are helpful in understanding and interpreting positive growth in sport.

Finally, as Tamminen and Neely (2016) noted, there is somewhat of a paradox in that by studying concepts such as positive growth in relation to sport participation, researchers may implicitly contribute to the legitimization of circumstances that could perpetuate damaging or highly stressful situations in sport. Whereas our findings show that growth can occur following a negative sport event, it does not follow that traumatic experiences should be ‘inflicted’ on athletes as a justification or means for creating growth. To this end, and with specific reference to deselection, it remains important for coaches and sport organizations to approach deselection in a considerate and thoughtful way, taking into account the potentially disruptive consequences of their deselection decisions.

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

38

References

- Affleck, G., Tennen, H., Croog, S., & Levine, S. (1987). Causal attribution, perceived benefits, and morbidity after a heart attack: An 8-year study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 55*, 29-35. doi:10.1037//0022-006x.55.1.29
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Baker, J. M., Kelly, C., Calhoun, L. G., Cann, A., & Tedeschi, R. G. (2008). An examination of posttraumatic growth and posttraumatic depreciation: Two exploratory studies. *Journal of Loss and Trauma, 13*, 450-465. doi:10.1080/15325020802171367
- Barnett, L. (2007). "Winners" and "losers": The effects of being allowed or denied entry into competitive extracurricular activities. *Journal of Leisure Research, 39*, 316-344.
- Blakelock, D. J., Chen, M. A., & Prescott, T. (2016). Psychological distress in elite adolescent soccer players following deselection. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology, 10*, 59-77. doi:10.1123/jcsp.2015-0010
- Brewer, B. W., Cornelius, A. E., Van Raalte, J. L., & Tennen, H. (2017). Adversarial growth after anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 39*, 134-144. doi:10.1123/jsep.2016-0210
- Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., Linder, D. E. (1993). Athletic identity: Hercules' muscle or Achilles' heel? *International Journal of Sport Psychology, 24*, 237-254.
- Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., & Petitpas, A. L. (2000). Self-identity in sport career transitions. In D. Lavallee & P. Wylleman (Eds.), *Career transitions in sport: international perspectives* (pp.29-43). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

39

- 869 Brown, G., & Potrac, P. (2009). You've not made the grade son: De-selection and identity
870 disruption in elite level youth football. *Soccer & Society*, 10, 143-159.
871 doi:10.1080/14660970802601613
- 872 Calhoun, L. G., & Tedeschi, R. G. (1998). Posttraumatic growth: Future directions. In R. G.
873 Tedeschi, C. L. Park, & L. G. Calhoun (Eds.), *Posttraumatic growth: Positive changes in*
874 *the aftermath of crisis* (pp. 215-238). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- 875 Chamberlain, K. (2011). Troubling methodology. *Health Psychology Review*, 5, 48-54.
876 doi:10.1080/17437199.2010.520113
- 877 Cryder, C. H., Kilmer, R. P., Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2006). An exploratory study of
878 posttraumatic growth in children following a natural disaster. *American Journal of*
879 *Orthopsychiatry*, 76, 65-69. doi:10.1037/0002-9432.76.1.65
- 880 Day, M. (2012). Coping with trauma in sport. In J. Thatcher, M. Jones & D. Lavalley (Eds.),
881 *Coping and emotion in sport* (2nd ed., pp. 62-78). New York: Routledge.
- 882 Day, M. C., & Wadey, R. (2017). Researching growth following adversity in sport and exercise:
883 Methodological implications and future recommendations. *Qualitative Research in Sport,*
884 *Exercise and Health*, 1-15. doi:10.1080/2159676X.2017.1328460
- 885 Edmondson, D., Chaudoir, S. R., Mills, M. A., Park, C. L., Holub, J., & Bartowiak, J. M. (2013).
886 From shattered assumptions to weakened worldviews: Trauma symptoms signal anxiety
887 buffer disruption. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 16, 358-585. doi:10.1080/
888 15325024.2011.572030
- 889 Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity, youth, and crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- 890 Frazier, P., Conlon, A., & Glaser, T. (2001). Positive and negative life changes following sexual
891 assault. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 69, 1048-1055.
892 doi:10.1037/0022-006X.69.6.1048

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

40

- 893 Galli, N., & Reel, J. J. (2012). 'It was hard, but it was good': A qualitative exploration of stress-
894 related growth in Division 1 intercollegiate athletes. *Qualitative Research in Sport,*
895 *Exercise, and Health, 4*, 297-319. doi:10.1080/2159676X.2012.693524
- 896 Grove, J., Fish, M., & Eklund, R. (2004). Changes in athletic identity following team selection:
897 Self-protection versus self-enhancement. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 16*, 75-81.
898 doi:10.1080/10413200490260062
- 899 Harter, S. (1999). *The construction of the self: A developmental perspective*. New York: Guilford
900 Press.
- 901 Hefferon, K., Grealy, M., & Mutrie, N. (2009). Post-traumatic growth and life threatening
902 physical illness: A systematic review of the qualitative literature. *British Journal of*
903 *Health Psychology, 14*, 343-378. doi:10.1348/135910708X332936
- 904 Houle, J. L., Brewer, B. W., & Kluck, A. S. (2010). Developmental trends in athletic identity: A
905 two-part retrospective study. *Journal of Sport Behavior, 33*, 146-159.
- 906 Howells, K., & Fletcher, D. (2015). Sink or swim: Adversity-and growth-related experiences in
907 Olympic swimming champions. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 16*, 37-48.
908 doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.08.004
- 909 Howells, K., Sarkar, M., & Fletcher, D. (2017). Can athletes benefit from difficulty? A
910 systematic review of growth following adversity in competitive sport. *Progress in Brain*
911 *Research* (Vol. 234, pp. 117-159). doi:10.1016/bs.pbr.2017.06.002
- 912 Ingstrup, M. S., Mosewich, A. D., & Holt, N. L. (2017). The development of self-compassion
913 among women varsity athletes. *The Sport Psychologist, 31*, 317-331.
914 doi:10.1123/tsp.2016-0147
- 915 Janoff-Bulman, P. (1992). *Shattered assumptions*. New York: Free Press.

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

41

916 Jones, R. P., Cox, D., & Banchoff, T. (2012). *A generation in transition: Religion, values, and*
 917 *politics among college-age Millennials: Findings from the 2012 Millennial Values*
 918 *Survey*. Washington, DC: Public Religion Research Institute and Georgetown
 919 University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs.

920 Joseph, S. (2010). *What doesn't kill us: The new psychology of posttraumatic growth*. London:
 921 Piakus.

922 Joseph, S. & Linley, P. A. (2006). Growth following adversity: Theoretical perspective and
 923 implications for clinical practice. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 26, 1041-1053. doi:
 924 10.1016/j.cpr.2005.12.006

925 Kesimci, A., Göral, F. S., & Gençöz, T. (2005). Determinants of stress-related growth: Gender,
 926 stressfulness of the event, and coping strategies. *Current Psychology*, 24, 68-75.
 927 doi:10.1007/s12144-005-1005-x

928 Langdridge, D. (2007). *Phenomenological psychology: Theory, research and method*. London:
 929 Pearson.

930 Lepore, S. J., & Revenson, T. A. (2006). Resilience and posttraumatic growth: Recovery,
 931 resistance, and reconfiguration. In L. G. Calhoun & R. G. Tedeschi (Eds.), *Handbook of*
 932 *posttraumatic growth: Research and practice* (pp. 24-46). New York: Psychology Press.

933 Lewis, R., & Frydenberg, E. (2004). Adolescents least able to cope: How do they respond to
 934 their stresses? *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 32, 25-37.
 935 doi:10.1080/03069880310001648094

936 Linley, P. A., & Joseph, S. (2004). Positive change following trauma and adversity: A
 937 review. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 17, 11-21.
 938 doi:10.1023/B:JOTS.0000014671.27856.7e

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

42

- 939 Manne, S., Ostroff, J., Winkel, G., Goldstein, L., Fox, K., & Grana, G. (2004). Posttraumatic
940 growth after breast cancer: Patient, partner, and couple perspectives. *Psychosomatic*
941 *Medicine*, 66, 442-454. doi:10.1097/01.psy.0000127689.28525.7d
- 942 Martin, L. L. & Tesser, A. (1996). Clarifying our thoughts. In R. S. Wyer (Ed.) *Ruminative*
943 *thoughts: Advances in social cognition, Vol. 9* (pp.189-209). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence
944 Erlbaum.
- 945 McDonough, M. H., Sabiston, C. M., & Ullrich-French, S. (2011). The development of social
946 relationships, social support, and posttraumatic growth in a dragon boating team for
947 breast cancer survivors. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 33, 627-648.
948 doi:10.1123/jsep.33.5.627
- 949 McMillen, J. C., & Fisher, R. H. (1998). The Perceived Benefit Scales: Measuring perceived
950 positive life changes after negative events. *Social Work Research*, 22, 173-187.
951 doi:10.1093/swr/22.3.173
- 952 Meyerson, D. A., Grant, K. E., Carter, J. S., & Kilmer, R. P. (2011). Posttraumatic growth
953 among children and adolescents: A systematic review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 3,
954 949-964. doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2011.06.003
- 955 Milam, J. E., Ritt-Olson, A., & Unger, J. B. (2004). Posttraumatic growth among
956 adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 19, 192-204.
957 doi:10.1177/0743558403258273
- 958 Munroe, K. J., Albinson, J. G., & Hall, C. R. (1999). The effects of non-selection on first year
959 female varsity athletes. *Avante*, 5, 63-81.
- 960 Neely, K. C., Dunn, J. G. H., McHugh, T-L. F., & Holt, N. L. (2016). The deselection process in
961 competitive female youth sport. *The Sport Psychologist*, 30, 141-153.
962 doi:10.1123/tsp.2015-0044

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

43

- 963 Neely, K. C., McHugh, T-L. F., Dunn, J. G. H., & Holt, N. L. (2017). Athletes and parents
 964 coping with deselection in competitive youth sport: A communal coping
 965 perspective. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 30, 1-9.
 966 doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2017.01.004
- 967 O’Leary, V. E., & Ickovics, J. R. (1995). Resilience and thriving in response to challenge: An
 968 opportunity for a paradigm shift in women’s health. *Women’s Health: Research on*
 969 *Gender, Behavior, and Policy*, 1, 121–142.
- 970 Park, C. L., Cohen, L., & Murch, R. (1996). Assessment and prediction of stress-related growth.
 971 *Journal of Personality*, 64, 71–105.
- 972 Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA:
 973 Sage.
- 974 Roth, S., & Cohen, L. J. (1986). Approach, avoidance, and coping with stress. *American*
 975 *Psychologist*, 41, 813–819. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.41.7.813
- 976 Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (2nd ed.).
 977 Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- 978 Sabiston, C. M., McDonough, M. H., & Crocker, P. R. (2007). Psychosocial experiences of
 979 breast cancer survivors involved in a dragon boat program: exploring links to positive
 980 psychological growth. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 29, 419-438.
 981 doi:10.1123/jsep.29.4.419
- 982 Salim, J., & Wadey, R. (2018). Can emotional disclosure promote sport injury-related
 983 growth? *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 30, 367-387.
 984 doi:10.1080/10413200.2017.1417338

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

44

- 985 Salim, J., Wadey, R., & Diss, C. (2015). Examining the relationship between hardiness and
986 perceived stress-related growth in a sport injury context. *Psychology of Sport and*
987 *Exercise, 19*, 10-17. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.12.004
- 988 Sarkar, M., Fletcher, D., & Brown, D. J. (2014). What doesn't kill me...: Adversity-related
989 experiences are vital in the development of superior Olympic performance. *Journal of*
990 *Science and Medicine in Sport, 18*, 475-479. doi:10.16/j.sams.2014.06.010
- 991 Schmidt, S. D., Blank, T. O., Bellizzi, K. M., & Park, C. L. (2017). Posttraumatic growth
992 reported by emerging adults: A multigroup analysis of the roles of attachment, support,
993 and coping. *Current Psychology, 1*-10. doi:10.1007/s12144-017-9670-0
- 994 Shaw, R. L. (2011). The future's bright: Celebrating its achievements and preparing for the
995 challenges ahead in IPA research. *Health Psychology Review, 5*, 28-33.
996 doi:10.1080/17437199.2010.524808
- 997 Smith, A. L. (2007). Youth peer relationships in sport. In S. Jowett & D. Lavallee (Eds.), *Social*
998 *psychology in sport* (pp. 41-54). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- 999 Smith, J. A. (2011). Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis.
1000 *Health Psychology Review, 5*, 9-27. doi:10.1080/17437199.2010.510659
- 1001 Smith, J. A. (2017). Interpretative phenomenological analysis in sport and exercise: Getting at
1002 experience. In B. Smith & A. Sparkes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of qualitative research*
1003 *in sport and exercise* (pp. 219-229). London: Routledge.
- 1004 Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*.
1005 London: Sage.
- 1006 Smith, J.A., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith
1007 (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to methods* (pp. 51-80). London: Sage

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

45

- 1008 Somerfield, M. R., & McCrae, R. R. (2000). Stress and coping research: Methodological
1009 challenges, theoretical advances, and clinical applications. *American Psychologist*, 55,
1010 620-625. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.55.6.620
- 1011 Sparkes, A. C. (1992). The paradigm debate: An extended review and a celebration of difference.
1012 In A. C. Sparkes (Ed.), *Research in physical education and sport* (pp. 9-60). London:
1013 Falmer Press.
- 1014 Tamminen, K. A., Holt, N. L., & Neely, K. C. (2013). Exploring adversity and the potential for
1015 growth among elite female athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 14, 28-36.
1016 doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2012.07.002
- 1017 Tamminen, K. A., & Neely, K. C. (2016). Positive growth in sport. In N. L. Holt (Ed.), *Positive*
1018 *youth development through sport* (2nd ed., pp. 193-204). New York: Routledge.
- 1019 Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (1996). The posttraumatic growth inventory: Measuring the
1020 positive legacy of trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 9, 455-471.
1021 doi:10.1002/jts.2490090305
- 1022 Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and
1023 empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15, 1-18. doi:10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01
- 1024 Wadey, R., Evans, L., Evans, K., & Mitchell, I. (2011). Perceived benefits following sport
1025 injury: A qualitative examination. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 23, 142-158.
1026 doi:10.1080/10413200.2010.543119
- 1027 Wadey, R., Clark, S., Podlog, L., & McCullough, D. (2013). Coaches' perceptions of athletes'
1028 stress-related growth following sport injury. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 14, 125-
1029 135. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2012.08.004

DESELECTION AND POSITIVE GROWTH

46

- 1030 Wolchik, S. A., Cox, S., Tein, J. Y., Sandler, I. N., & Ayers, T. S. (2009). Six-year longitudinal
1031 predictors of posttraumatic growth in parentally bereaved adolescents and young
1032 adults. *OMEGA: Journal of Death and Dying*, 58, 107-128. doi:10.2190/OM.58.2.b
1033 Yardley, L. (2008). Demonstrating validity in qualitative psychology. In J. A. Smith (Ed.),
1034 *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (2nd ed., pp. 235-251).
1035 London: Sage.