Recreational Athletes' Experiences of Adversity Outside of Sport

by

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Abstract

Sport involvement can be both a stressor and protective factor for athletes' well-being (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Secades et al., 2016). With potentially fewer performance stressors, recreational athletes might be best positioned to experience the positive aspects of sport (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009; Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013; Khan et al., 2012) including engaging with coping strategies within sport. As a means of understanding the potential coping strategies associated with recreational sporting participation, this study addressed the question: how do recreational athletes experience adversity? Ten recreational athletes participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2004; Reid, Flowers, and Larkin, 2005). Analysis was reviewed through member reflections (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Findings indicated that recreational athletes utilized coping strategies through sport as well as coping outside of sport in response to life adversities. Through social support, distraction, identity reaffirmation and personal goal setting, recreational athletes of this study found coping strategies within sport. Notably, participants recounted experiences of goal setting by first relaying the importance of psychological safety in their sporting environments. For instance, recreational athletes spoke to experiences of unsafe sport environments being a barrier to successful coping processes. Taken together, these findings provide information on the potential role of sport involvement of recreational athletes in their experiences of adversity. Participants of this study also spoke to coping resources outside of sport including social support beyond their sport community and time to resolve the stressors.

Preface

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Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Researcher Statement

In interpretive studies, the researcher is inherently attached to the resultant experiential

texts created: their interpretation of experience. As such, I first want to provide insight into the

lens through which I view sport. Through my childhood and adolescence, I grew up without

being involved in competitive sport. I was always intrigued by those who were raised to be

"athletic", and whose commitment to sport was noticeable. When my studies in my

undergraduate program led me towards kinesiology, my curiosity for sport participation and

athletes grew.

In my undergraduate degree stream, I was exposed to several theories of performance in

sport, but I learned far more about psychological well-being of athletes through anecdotal

observation of my peers involved with varsity athletics. Through research I learned about the

tremendous power of physical activity and sport involvement in promoting positive mental

health; however, my athletic peers would seem almost psychologically hindered by their

intensive training schedules, performance setbacks, and deselection. This notion of encouraging

elite athletes to do their utmost in gameplay at the expense of their personal well-being has never

sat well with me. Admittedly, I became quite disenchanted with elite athletics because I saw the

negative effects of competitive stressors on my peers.

I was left with a dichotomous idea that sport is inherently healthy for one's psychological

well-being, but competitive or performance stressors can negatively influence an athlete's

wellness. This uncomfortable feeling of both supporting and fearing elite athletics led me to my

research interest in recreational sport. If there was an avenue through which the negative

performance stressors were somehow lessened, would sport involvement become inherently

healthy? Perhaps, without the potentially damaging intense competition, recreational athletes would primarily experience the positive aspects of sport. Coping literature in the sport domain largely centres around response to stressors within sport (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009; Mosewich, Crocker, & Kowalski, 2014); sport is rarely viewed as a coping strategy in and of itself. Although physical activity and coping have been studied extensively, specific studies of recreational athletics are largely missing from coping literature. More attention given to recreational athletics might uncover an avenue for individuals to gain benefits from sport participation, without the anxieties associated with elite-level competition. To better understand the potential effect of recreational sport on one's coping, I want to first understand how recreational athletes might experience adverse events.

Positioning Recreational Sport

Creators of public health campaigns on local (City of Edmonton 2013, 2016) and national levels (Government of Canada, 2012) have specifically called for greater emphasis on recreational sport participation through the lifespan. In the Canadian Sport Policy (2012), recreational sport is differentiated from elite sport by the objectives behind participation: "even when participation is competitive, participants are motivated primarily by fun, health, social interaction and relaxation" (p. 10). It is this performance motivation that distinguishes recreational and elite athletes.

Sport involvement can be a both a stressor and a protective factor for elite athletes' well-being, but the relationship between adversity and recreational sport participation is unknown (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Secades et al., 2016). Elite athletes have reported experiencing injury, deselection, and other performance stressors related to their pursuit of success in their chosen sport (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Mosewich et al., 2014). Despite

understanding the stressors in elite sport, stressors and coping processes involved in recreational sport may differ.

Few studies specifically focus on recreational athletes. When recreational athletes are involved in a study, the results are often overgeneralized into an umbrella category of "athletes" consisting of participants at a variety of competitive levels (Nicholls, Polman, Levy, Taylor & Cobley, 2007). In a meta-analysis of elite athlete literature, Swann, Moran, and Piggott (2015) found differences in several factors of inclusion criteria including professionalism and experience. Following analysis, Swann and colleagues (2015) suggested a systematic categorization of "eliteness" ranging from semi-elite to world-class elite. Although potentially helpful for future classifications of elite athletes, this study did not include analysis of recreational athletes. Regardless of the classification under which they fall, it is possible that recreational athletes experience sports differently than their elite counterparts. Little is known about recreational athletics and potential coping strategies found within the recreational athlete experience (Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Secades et al., 2016). Findings from this study will help to uncover the unique coping experiences of recreational athletes.

Purpose and Research Question

Through this study, I aim to learn more about the potential role of recreational sport participation in coping with adversity. Active sport participation has been touted as beneficial to long term physical, emotional, and mental well-being (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Eime et al., 2013; Khan et al., 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Secades et al., 2016). Although much of sport psychology literature focuses upon competitive sport, a far greater percentage of the population are able to participate in recreational sport. Information from the 2010 census suggests that recreational sport participation has declined by nearly 17% over a twenty-year span, with a

predicted trend of continual decline (Statistics Canada, 2013). Such a trend may impede the paramount goal of the Canadian Sport Policy (2012) for "Canadians [to] have the opportunity to participate in sport…" (p. 10). This study explored recreational sport from a psychological framework, looking at potential coping strategies with this recreational context. Creating a broader basis exploring benefits of recreational sport participation could support pre-existing policies to reach a wider audience with their recreational sport promotional efforts. The applicability of findings from the proposed study could inform restructuring of recreational sport institutions and programs, potentially curtailing the downward trend of sport participation among adults, positioning people to receive benefits from sport. Additionally, research into recreational sport participation and associated coping responses to adverse events would add to the understanding of psychological effects of sport involvement. The purpose of this study was to explore recreational athletes' experiences of adversity. As a means of exploring recreational athletes' unique experiences, my research question is: *How do recreational athletes experience adversity?*

Chapter 2: Literature Review

When conceptualizing my research question, I needed to explore pre-existing understandings of recreational sport, specifically involving psychological well-being. Recreational sport is underrepresented in the field of sport psychology (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Secades et al., 2016), so I sought out potential overlapping experiences reported within elite sport and leisure literature, and the importance of athletic identity. In terms of best conceptualizing adversity, I explored stress, adversity, and trauma as separate, yet related concepts, and the responses to these events: coping and resilience.

Athletic Identity

An important component of this study is the participants' self-identification as recreational athletes. As such, reviewing athletic identity literature is essential for positioning resultant experiences of individuals found in this study within the broader field of literature. Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) describe athletic identity as "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role" (p. 237). In elite realms, athletic identity generally develops in childhood (Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). In a study by Webb and colleagues (1998), athletic identity resulted from performance successes in childhood: "developing that talent becomes a central preoccupation for both the child and the significant adults in his/her life" (p. 340). The impermanent nature of elite sport participation makes elite athletic identity fragile and vulnerable to change. The negative effects of abrupt changes to elite athletic identity are exacerbated by the level of public athletic reputation (Webb et al., 1998). Webb and colleagues (1998) best articulate this notion in saying "psychologically fortified by this public acclaim, one's public athletic reputation becomes part of the athlete's overall

identity." (p. 340). Recreational athletic identity may or may not be affected by public perception; however, the relative weight of public perception is likely different from elite athlete identity. Webb and colleagues (1998) suggest the increased public attention associated with elite athletics codifies athletes' identity into rigid, truncated archetypes, overemphasizing the athlete component of identity. Recreational athletes generally have less public attention than their elite counterparts, potentially indicating a decreased role of public perception in shaping athletes' identity and associated experiences. Moreover, it is possible that performance successes play a smaller role in recreational than elite athletic identity. In elite athletics, a strong athletic identity has been associated with role engulfment (Adler & Adler, 1991), which is an experience of their athletic identities overtaking other components of the athletes' identities. Role engulfment and personal investment in sport performance have been associated with experiences of burnout in elite athletic populations (Brustad & Ritter-Taylor, 1997; Coakley, 1992; Goodger, Gorely, Lavallee & Harwood, 2002). It is possible that the recreational athletic experience differs due to less weighted importance in their athletic identities.

Recreational athletes are not purely defined by their athletic participation, as identity is much more complex than association with a dominant activity interest; rather, "the social self is not unitary, but instead is comprised of many different identities, each with its own implications for thoughts, feelings, and actions" (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005, p. 333). A study by Yopyk and Prentice (2005) explored facets of identity for student-athletes. They wanted to understand the potential effect of priming student-athletes with their student identity versus their athlete identity. Interestingly, they found a significant difference in math scores between the different types of priming. Those primed with their student identity scored more highly on the controlled academic test than their athlete-primed counterparts. Athletes primed with their athletic identity also had a

lower self-regard for their academic ability. Findings from this study suggest one can not necessarily study athletic identity solely. Instead, Yopyk and Prentice (2005) suggest that people are complex culminations of all facets of multiple components of identity. "This research attests to the remarkable fluidity of self-definition" (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005, p. 334). Recreational athletes may associate themselves with many other identifiers, which should be acknowledged through collaborative understanding of experience in the research process. During the proposed study, I will continually reflect back to this understanding of identity being a layered and complex notion. The individuality of identity also reflects the necessity for idiographic analysis of experience, as each participant in this study will have different and equivalently important experiences within recreational sport. It is, after all, these unique experiences of this population that will foster greater understanding of recreational athletic participation and connection with adversity.

Leisure

While recreational athletics is defined by involvement in sport in organized or unorganized contexts (Canadian Sport Policy, 2012), leisure encompasses a variety of activities for enjoyment (Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber & Dattilo, 2003). Even if one were to define recreation as a specific subset of leisure, there lacks specific exploration of recreational sport participation and adversity response in current literature. Recreational sport is colloquially misrepresented as a leisure activity. When understanding experiences of recreational athletes, it is essential to understand any overlap with leisure literature. Although both inherently nontaxing, leisure pursuits encompass a wide range of activities (Denovan & Macaskill, 2017), while recreational sport involvement is specific to the sporting domain. Participation in leisure activities is intrinsically motivated and guided by the pursuit of benefits such as social affiliations (Stewart,

2014), healing and liberation (Deschênes, 2011), and well-being (Iwasaki, Messina, & Hopper, 2018). Benefits associated with leisure could be arguably linked to recreational sport participation as well; as such, experiences in recreational sport could overlap with the greater body of leisure literature. Leisure has been associated with adaptive coping in times of stress and trauma (Denovan & Macaskill, 2017; Hutchinson et al., 2003; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Shank, Iwasaki, Coyle, & Messina, 2015). This association is intriguing as the unintentional inclusion of recreational sport in "leisure activities" could imply similar coping benefits for recreational athletes. Moreover, lack of specificity in defining leisure activities within coping research might have included recreational sport (Denovan & Macaskill, 2017; Hutchinson et al., 2003; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Shank et al., 2015), the effect of which could have conflated coping experiences in recreational sport participation as a broader idea of "leisure coping".

Often, recreational sport is included in leisure coping literature (e.g., Denovan & Macaskill, 2017; Hutchinson et al., 2003, Shank et al., 2015), indicating potential coping strategies in recreational sport. Unfortunately, the aforementioned studies reported a compilation and summary of all studied leisure experiences rather than separating sport from other realms of leisure experience. Regardless, these studies indicate a potential unexplored coping experience through recreational sport participation.

Leisure activities have been described as providing a sense of purpose and renewed perspective for participants (Iwasaki et al., 2018), an idea described as "meaning making" (Park, 2010, p. 257). Literature surrounding the connection between leisure activities and meaning making (Iwasaki et al., 2018) indicates a potential inclusion of meaning making experiences in recreational sport participation in this study. Meaning making refers to the ways in which individuals reflect upon external stimuli to find a deeper personal connection (Park, 2010). Park

and Folkman (1997) originally found that individuals created meaning from experiences of stress. As meaning making is a relevant concept in both stress and leisure literature, it is possible that recreational athletes might discuss meaning made from their experiences of adversity. It is quite likely that the recreational athletes find meaning from their recreational sport experiences, and from negative life events.

Stress, Adversity, and Trauma

Adversity within sport has been explored through athletes' experiences of performance setbacks, deselection, and various emotional, physiological, and social negative life events specific to their sport (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009; Galli & Vealey, 2008; Mosewich et al., 2014; Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015). Rather than focused on adversity outside of sport, and the role of sport as a potential coping practice, current literature is focused on adversity within elite sport participation (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Although exploration of stressors within sport offers potential reprieve for elite athletes (Nicholls & Polman, 2007), non-elite populations could be supported in their general adversities through use of sport for additional coping strategies. Regardless of specifically evaluating experience with resilience or coping literature in mind, experiences of stress, trauma, and adversity often overlap. For the purposes of this study, I will specifically explore responses to adversity within a recreational athletic population. A general lack of prescriptive definitions has seemingly conflated the terms *adversity, stress,* and *trauma*. It is crucial to differentiate current understandings of adversity from trauma and stress. From better understanding the negative life events that might necessitate a coping response, ways through which recreational athletes cope can be best situated.

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) definition of coping clearly indicates a prerequisite "internal or external demand" (p. 141) to which an individual must respond. Similarly, Grace

(2015) denotes the trigger for resilience as a "tremendous adversity or trauma" (p. 29). In Lazarus' (1993) conceptualization, stress results from one appraising the demands of a situation as taxing or exceeding their resources. For an individual to express a level of coping or resilience, there must first be a perception of stress, from a demanding life situation to which a response is required. One of the most distinctive features differentiating discussions of resilience and coping is the severity of these negative events. Lazarus (1984) refers mostly to stress, expressing a wide range of negative life effects. Resilience research by Masten (2001) and Rutter (1993) focuses primarily on trauma, which can have severely debilitating effect.

Early iterations of stress models such as Cannon's (1932) explanation of fight or flight response did not effectively describe psychological experiences of stress. Moreover, these initial understandings of stress did not accurately depict the range of responses to stress. Selye (1956) attempted to represent a full range of experiences of stress in his explanation of *General Adaptation Syndrome.* Holmes and Rahe (1967) aimed to quantify experiences of stress in their *Life Events Measure*. Negative events were given a *Life Change Unit* score for practitioners to best understand one's struggles (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). The crucial missing feature of this understanding of stress was the exclusion of daily life stressors.

The culmination of major life events and daily hassles was the premise of Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress (1984). Stress is not the primary focus of this study, but given the self-report nature of adversity, there is a potential inclusion of experiences that mirror Lazarus' conception of stress. Trauma is slightly more convoluted, as researchers further differentiate between *Trauma* and *trauma*. The difference between types of trauma align similarly with the distinction between *Life Events Measure* (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) and daily hassles (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Where daily hassles encompass average experiences of

stress and anxiety, life events are thought of as highly troubling events with proliferating effect

through various life domains (Grace, 2015). *Trauma* in resilience research largely involved loss

of loved ones, abuse, or other severely negative event (Masten, 2001; Rutter, 1993). Other

resilience research in the field of clinical and counselling psychology separate trauma and abuse

into different categories (Becvar, 2012). While stress and trauma differ in their severity,

experience of negative life events could be categorized under either based on the individual's

specific needs for adjustment following said event. Adversity is a term representing negative

events in terms of the necessary adjustments an individual would have to make (Luthar &

Cicchetti, 2000).

       While stress might be experienced on a daily level (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and

trauma denotes serious and life changing negative events (Grace, 2015), adversity falls

somewhere in between. Adversity has been defined as negative life experiences accompanied by

adjustment issues (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). The primary focus on the response to the negative

event rather than categorizing the extent of event severity paired well with this study, where I

more so explored athletes' responses to negative life events. While stress may not have required

periods of adjustment, and trauma may have significantly changed the trajectory of an

individual's life, adversity was defined as requiring a period of adjustment, with the potential to

return to some semblance of normalcy (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Due to the weighted

importance of adjustment in this definition, I preferentially used the term *adversity* in my study

to explore negative life experiences that required greater adjustment than daily stressors and still

allowed for return to normalcy unlike experiences of trauma. This study was inductive in nature

where resultant texts were produced from participant reports of these adjustment experiences.

The co-created understandings through discussions on negative life events may not coincide with

current literature on stress, trauma, or adversity, but the framework for each model helped to place findings from this study with the broader field of research.

Coping

Through this study, various aspects of responses to adversity were discussed. As reports of experiences of adversity among the recreational athletic population differed, there could be innumerable parallels with various coping literature. To appropriately position experiential reports of adversity, it is important to understand the current literature surrounding coping mechanisms. To best situate current understandings of coping, I will briefly outline the historical context of coping literature.

Lazarus' work in stress and coping has been influential in sport psychology. Coping research was intrinsically linked with stress research from its inception in the 1960s (Lazarus, 1993). Coping was originally thought of in terms of *ego* defense from Freud's psychoanalytic model (Sjöbäck, 1973). In this conceptualization, a threat to the *ego* would occur in the form of a traumatic event. When trauma occurs, the individual's emotional response from the *id* is moderated by the *ego*. If the internal response (i.e., *id*) does not match the societal norm, supporters of the psychoanalytical approach say the result is stress; mitigation of stressors is termed coping (Sjöbäck, 1973). It should also be noted that Freud and his contemporaries used the three main stages of psychosexual development to further convolute coping theory (Lazarus, 1993).

The ranking of coping approaches in hierarchical fashion began through the research of Menninger (1954). Haan (1969) added to this foundation with a thought of *coping* as the healthiest level of response to stress, *defending* as a neurotic response, and *ego-failure* as the most detrimental response. Those involved in current coping research, typically evaluate coping

success within a range of effectiveness of improving overall health. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggest evaluating coping outcomes by three components: social living, morale or life satisfaction, and somatic health. If the coping practice has deleterious effect on any of these three factors, it could be argued that the process is maladaptive. For example, if someone with a stressful work life turns to smoking as a coping mechanism, it is still considered coping, but would damage somatic health; therefore, smoking is considered a maladaptive coping practice. Thus, coping in and of itself is not necessarily adaptive.

Another impactful, historical step in development of modern coping theory is the evolution from stagnant to dynamic models (Lazarus, 1993). Vaillant (1977) conducted a longitudinal study individually evaluating the coping styles of over 200 participants, who were deemed to be highly successful. In the study, Vaillant (1977) used an ego-defense model of coping in which he evaluated the processes in terms of psychoanalytical theory. Although a great breadth of qualitative information was gathered from this study, outcome and process were conflated. Vaillant (1977) viewed some of the coping practices as inherently unhealthy, but Lazarus (1993) argued that it is evaluation of the coping outcome that truly defines whether the response to stress is adaptive or maladaptive.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) denote stress as "a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (p. 19). In this definition, two key aspects of stress are described: an appraisal process, and a resultant expenditure of available resources. The perception and response relationship described by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in their conceptualization of stress is the basis of Lazarus' (1993) notion of coping. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to

manage specific external or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p. 141).

For the purposes of my study, I will be continually referring to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) working definition of coping to position the findings of my study with the greater body of coping literature. Coping typology seemingly overlaps with resilience literature; thus, attention must be given to resilience research to position the resultant knowledge gained from this study.

Resilience

Through the past century, the scientific community became interested in conceptualizing life outcomes and experiences of individuals (Rutter, 1985). As scrutiny of childhood trauma and subsequent outcomes in adulthood increased, researchers observed great diversity among those who experienced hardship during youth. The variety suggested an unheeded, underlying characteristic or occurrence within the subjects, thus, the creation of a characteristic called "invulnerability" (Rutter, 1993). Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1991) describe the concept of invulnerability as a flawed over-simplification of a complex series of protective factors mediating stressors.

Murphy and Moriarty (1976) introduced the notion that invulnerability is too stagnant a concept to rightfully display the intricacies of resilience. Instead of a 'have' or 'have not' relationship with ones' ability to cope, they suggested that resilience stems from innate and learned mechanisms. This ecological lens on resilience began a new wave of research centred around risk analysis (Masten et al., 1991). As risk analysis occurs, Masten (2001) suggests a process of first determining statistically significant life events in adolescence that correlate with adversity in adulthood. Interestingly, both access to recreational facilities and school sporting programs were found as statistically significant correlates with expression of resilient

characteristics (Masten, 2001). One of the glaring issues with risk analysis alone is the lack of

explanation of mechanisms through which these risk factors undermine adaptive coping. The

protective features and relative impact on future success must be explored throughout the

adversity response process to more thoroughly understand these relationships. Masten (2001) and

Rutter (1993) recommend further research into the bidirectional relationship between protective

attributes and environments, and eventual thriving or hardship (Masten et al., 1991; Rutter,

1993).

Decades of research on individuals' life experiences has led to a modern-day perspective

of resilience as a fluctuating pathway, with successful outcomes facilitated or inhibited by

external milieu and inherent behaviours (Masten et al., 1991). Through my study I continually

reflected upon where the findings were could be situated within the broader field of research.

Throughout this study, I reflected upon the definition of resilience provided by Grace (2015):

"Resilience is a sustainable recovery process, a capacity and an outcome of effectively adapting

in the face of tremendous adversity or trauma and significant threats to personal welfare, health,

safety, and security" (p. 29). This more modern conceptualization of responses to negative life

events includes mention of adversity, and also adaption, which are consistent with Luthar and

Cicchetti's definition of adversity (2000). Not unlike the definition of adversity (Luthar &

Cicchetti, 2000), Grace's approach to resilience (2015) is process-based and lends itself well to

rich reports of personal experiences while recovering from hardship. The experience-based

nature of adjustment organically pair resilience (Grace, 2015) and adversity (Luthar & Cicchetti,

2000) with the inductive study process I used through this research.

Summary

Recreational athletes' voices are largely missing from literature exploring experiences in sport (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Secades et al., 2016). Recreational athletes likely have unique experiences from their elite counterparts due in part to potentially lessened stress from lofty performance goals and more complex identities outside of sport. Of particular interest in this study, is recreational athletes' experiences with adversity. Leisure activity participation has been associated with adaptive coping in the face of adversity and trauma (Hutchinson et al., 2003; Shank et al., 2015; Denovan & Macaskill, 2017) and perhaps recreational athletics has a similar role in coping. In understanding the effect of recreational sport participation on coping, it is important to first explore the research question of this proposed study: How do recreational athletes experience adversity?

Chapter 3: Method

Philosophical Assumptions

Through the creation of a research question and continued perspective shifts in writing my proposal, my research interests and the underlying associated paradigms developed. My view of my research topic was informed by an interpretivist perspective, described by Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) as a means to "gain understanding by interpreting subject perspectives" (p. 102). It would have been difficult using less interpretive methods, like positivism, because the idea of reality is so stagnant. In interpretivism, not only the researcher's perspectives are presented, but also the participants', in a cooperative interpretation of the participants' notions. I think this idea is best reflected by Guba (1990) in saying "realities are taken to exist in the form of multiple mental constructions that are socially and experientially based, local and specific, and dependent for their form and content on the persons who hold them" (p. 27).

The purpose of this study was to seek understanding of experiences of recreational athletes when they face adversity. Knowledge was obtained through interpretation of athlete experiences and constructed with collaboration between researcher and participant. Athletes were the source of information in this study and their contextual subjective experiences were considered factual: an ontological position of relativism (Lincoln et al., 2011). This aligned with an epistemology of subjectivism, where knowledge was gained from individual experience (Lincoln et al., 2011). Knowledge produced through this study built upon previous literature in athlete coping and provided rich understandings of experience. Guba and Lincoln (2005) suggest that interpretive analysis be a "sophisticated reconstruction; vicarious experience" (p. 196) in which the researcher is highly sensitive and reflexive in their interpretation of one's experience.

Within the interpretation of participants' experiences lie issues of hermeneutical and dialectical methodology or praxis (Lincoln et al., 2011). Hermeneutical approaches of knowledge obtainment require deep reflexivity and acknowledgement of underlying researcher bias for accurate and respectful analysis (Lincoln et al., 2011; Smith, 2004). Allowing hermeneutical evaluations into the research process entails an implied assumption of accurate interpretation. Dialectical processes of co-creating meaning are based on the assumption that lived experiences can be fully understood by an outsider to the experience (Smith, 2004). Within any form of interpretation, it is assumed that the researcher accurately portrays meaning, which is one of the challenges of interpretivist research methodologies (Lincoln et al., 2011). When the participant is brought on as a co-creator of knowledge, they assume an interpretivist role as well, encouraging appropriate translation of their lived experience. This process is based on the assumption that the participant has a vested interest in accurately depicting their experiences.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

I chose an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to guide my study, which involved a double (arguably triple) hermeneutical process (Weed, 2008), in which interpretation of the situation, the feelings or experiences of the interviewee, and potential interpretations by readers of any and all published themes were considered. The idiographic nature of IPA studies is built on the assumption that everyone's experience must be fully explored and analyzed prior to cross-case analysis to maintain the purity of individual experiential texts (Smith, 2004). As depth of interpretation increases or changes, IPA researchers must maintain a thoroughly reflexive approach to confront their biases (Smith, 2004).

My position through this study is first and foremost an interpreter of experience. I wrestled with the question of whether I would be considered an outsider or insider to a sample of

recreational athletes. This question led me to my operational definition of *recreational athlete* as a self-defined identifier. Reid and colleagues (2005) suggested that IPA method dictates researcher adoption of insider and outsider perspectives at different points of research process. In the initial interviewing process, the researcher acts as an insider through the inductive establishment of experiential texts (Reid et al., 2005). Analysis requires the researcher to seek meaning within these texts, evoking more objectivity with an outsider, interpretive perspective (Reid et al., 2005). It was the unique balance between the insider and outsider components of study that promoted phenomenological interpretation characteristic of IPA methods (Reid et al., 2005).

Perhaps the most appropriate avenue for positioning myself within social psychological research is reflecting upon potential sources of bias, based on my personal societal experiences. I appear to society as a white, cis-gendered, able-bodied woman; a position of assumed privilege. Although I could not predict with any certainty the demographic composition of my study participants, it was crucial for me to understand how my experiences impact my perceptions to promote fully reflexive research process. Through detailed field notes and reflexive writing, I explored my position throughout the research process.

Upon considering my research question, an IPA approach was the most suitable choice based on its core descriptors: idiographic, phenomenological, and hermeneutical (Smith, 2009). Idiographic study allows for deep detailed derivation from small samples. Smith (2004) went as far as to challenge IPA researchers to apply the approach within a single case study. With the primary goal of experiential exploration, idiography provides data feedback after every interview (Smith, 2004). This continual feedback is crucial in re-evaluating interview questions to best expose aspects of specific experience.

Although the process of knowledge obtainment is inductive, IPA researchers work to interrogate understandings in literature through positioning their research within current psychological theories (Smith, 2004). Through this process, researchers reject parsimonious truncation of information, instead acknowledging the significance of individual experience. As a generally ignored segment of society, the recreational athletes' individual voices should be magnified and positioned among other human experiences; IPA approaches form a framework to facilitate this research intent.

Participants

Ten recreational athletes, of varied gender identities from ages 18 to 28 were recruited through purposive sampling (Smith, 1996; Wagstaff et al., 2014). This age group is referred to as emerging adulthood (18 to 29 years of age; Arnett, 2007). Further demographic details are listed in Table 1. Emerging adulthood is a period of development encapsulating unique life transitions (Arnett, 2007). Unlike young adulthood, which spans from 18 to 40 years of age, emerging adulthood represents a more specific window of experience (Arnett, 2007). Arnett (2007) described emerging adulthood as a product of the times: a generational experience of a lengthened journey to adulthood. Although full of exploration and discovery, for those in emerging adulthood "it is also a time of anxiety, because the lives of young people are so unsettled and many of them have no idea where their explorations will lead" (Arnett, 2007, p. 1). With the continual trend of delayed "adulthood" with each successive generation, more research should be conducted to explore experiences within emerging adult populations. This study focused on emerging adult recreational athletes and added to understandings of experience within this phase of life.

Although experiences of men and women athletes differ (Chalabaev, Sarrazin, Fontayne, Boiché, & Clément-Guillotin, 2015), the essential component of this study was recreational athletic identity. As such, I recruited any recreational athlete in their emerging adulthood, without specifying gender identity. A concern prompting this choice is the potential unintentional inclusion of stereotypical gender roles in prescriptive gender identity recruitment. Gender roles in competitive sport are often pronounced (Chalabaev et al., 2015), but understandings of similar effects in recreational sport are unknown. It is my contention that specifically recruiting men or women athletes would have inadvertently led to recruitment of those identifying with stereotypical gender roles in sport. If this were the case, my sample would be representative of their gender identity as well as their recreational athletic identity: not necessarily representative of all recreational athletes. To mitigate biases of gender identity, I recruited without specifying gender.

IPA researchers range in their preferred sample size, basing participation numbers upon the goal of evidencing data saturation rather than strict quantity (Wagstaff et al., 2014). As IPA is structured through an idiographic approach, case by case evaluation will determine the point at which there is evidence of data saturation (Smith, 2004). Smith and Osborn (2004) describe that most IPA research occurs with six to 15 participants. Smith (2004) even suggests potential knowledge gained from single-case studies using IPA. Clinical psychology researchers often recruit samples of six to eight participants (Larkin & Thompson, 2012), and Smith and Sparkes (2016) note that many IPA researchers have sample sizes of 10 or fewer. Taking these suggestions into consideration, I decided to recruit 8-10 participants for this study, basing final recruitment number on evidence of data saturation. I included 10 participants in this study, as the I recognized more interviews would deepen my understanding of the athlete experience.

Prior to study initiation, I received ethical approval from the University of Alberta Ethics Research Board 1 (Pro00081913). A copy of the approval letter can be found in Appendix A. Once the research board approved my study, I sent out recruitment advertisements through flyers and social media posts, searching for people who considered themselves to be *recreational athletes*. The self-identification as being a recreational athlete promoted inclusion of various levels of competition. The salient point of this recruitment choice is that I wanted to emphasize a fully inductive, experiential study of recreational athletes. Providing a prescriptive definition of recreational athletics would have limited the exploration of this largely ignored group in society. The identity of being a recreational athlete was coherent with my goal of exploring adverse experiences within this population. Once prospective participants communicated their interest in participating in the study, I ensured their current participation in recreational sport, within 18-29 years of age, and English-speaking. A copy of the initial recruitment email can be found in Appendix B.

Consent and Confidentiality

Once prospective participants communicated their interest in participating in the study, and met the inclusion criteria, participants were sent a consent form and information letter (Appendix C).

Participation in this study was completely voluntary and participants could have withdrawn from the study at any time, for any reason, without any penalty. No participants chose to withdraw from the study, but if they had, any and all data contributed by said participant would have been destroyed upon request. Participants had 14 days from the date of receiving their verbatim transcripts to add, delete, or modify their responses, or to withdraw and request deletion of any informational texts (i.e., recordings and transcripts) from their interview.

Participants were informed of confidentiality measures prior to each stage of study. Any identifying information, including names of participants, were removed from interview transcripts. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to support privacy.

All data has been stored in locked cabinets, and in encrypted documents on a password-protected server. All identifying information was removed during the transcription process. Data will be stored in encrypted computer documents on a private, password-protected server, or in a locked cabinet in the University of Alberta for 5 years after study completion. Following this 5-year period, all data will be destroyed: transcripts securely shredded, and files (transcripts and audio recordings) deleted from the computer.

Data Generation

I selected athletes currently involved in organized sport to limit the extent of retrospective recall (Gaudreau & Blondin, 2004). The goal of any IPA sampling is to find a homogeneous sample, capable of giving rich experiential description (Smith, 1996; 2004). Smith and Osborn (2004) stated that the goal of effective IPA sampling is to "[find] a more closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant." (p. 56). My group in this study was English-speaking, self-identified recreational athletes aged 18 to 28. Although their sporting experiences differed, common themes surrounding managing adversity were discussed through the interviews.

All interviews took place in person at the University of Alberta. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes. The interview process was semi-structured, with a few guiding questions to direct conversation when rhetoric became tangential to the original research purpose (see Appendix D for the interview guide). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) outline the necessity of rich data generation to accommodate the

phenomenological analysis process. Although rich data could be generated through various approaches, Smith and colleagues note that one-on-one interviews "are easily managed, allowing for rapport to be developed and giving participants space to think, speak and be heard" (p. 57). Reid and colleagues (2005) explain that one-on-one interviews are the preferred approach to IPA studies for those same aforementioned reasons. In an effort to promote methodological coherence, I chose to utilize one-on-one semi-structured interviews for this study. Prior to meeting with participants, I tested my interview guide in three pilot interviews to evaluate the schedule of questions and develop question probes. As the expert of their own experience, participants had full autonomy over the stories they chose to share, which evoked unexpected but incredibly impactful experiential reports. Conversation began with discussion around sporting involvement, followed by a discussion surrounding experiences of adversity and the role of sport in their experiences of adversity. One-on-one interviews provided an opportunity to elevate the idiographic nature of this study. The semi-structured component of this study allowed flexibility to most suitably explore each participant's experiences.

Data Analysis

Knowledge was obtained through the analysis process described by Smith and Osborn (2003). Each interview transcript was coded, which involved writing initial notes on linguistic and conceptual comments on a line by line basis for each transcript (Smith et al., 2009). I relied on verbatim terminology used by participants to promote methodological coherence with inductive coding where possible (Wagstaff et al., 2014). Once codes were developed in the transcript, codes were grouped into emergent themes that best described the related codes (Smith et al., 2009). These emergent themes from each transcript were then evaluated for connections, and clustered under more suitable theme titles (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2009).

Emergent theme clusters were listed on a separate document and contextual quotes were connected to each cluster (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This process was repeated for each transcript for idiographic analysis. Herein lied a potential issue of unintentional deductive knowledge obtainment. As I became heavily immersed in the analysis of each text, there could have been unintended carry-over from previous analyses biasing thematic creation. To mitigate potential biasing effect of previous interviews, I made thorough field notes following each interview and step of analysis, as well as devoting two days of coding and two days of theme-seeking for each participants' experiential reports to prevent bias from analysing multiple transcripts simultaneously (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Wagstaff et al., 2014). Detailed field notes following every interview coalesced with idiographic analysis of each individual's experiential reports. These field notes served to not only promote greater reflexive practice, but also increased transparency in my analysis process (Lincoln et al., 2011).

Interpretation of co-created experiential texts from one-on-one interviews can occur on various levels, with greater depth within each progressive analysis (Smith, 1996; 2004). Smith (2004) described levels of analysis on a spectrum ranging from grounded IPA to imported psychoanalytic IPA, which would be associated with slightly different epistemological viewpoints. Research conducted in accordance with a subjectivist epistemology would likely favour a more grounded IPA approach, with participant statements leading the inductive knowledge attainment. Conversely, when including deeply psychoanalytic components of analysis, more deductive analysis would be required (Smith, 2004). As a novice researcher, my natural inclination was to adhere to a more grounded IPA analysis (Smith, 2004), but the information presented in interviews could have been further represented in literature through connection with more deeply psychoanalytic analysis. The latter approach requires deep

reflexivity and inclusion of clinical psychological research, which was beyond my expertise. Smith (2004) suggested that pushing analysis further "remains a suggestion and not a necessity" (p. 46) for an IPA study; therefore, I continually reflected upon analysis depth through this study.

Member Reflections

Member reflections (Smith & McGannon, 2018) were utilized in this study rather than member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as a means of addressing accuracy while encouraging participants to engage more deeply with the research questions. Standard practice for member checks involves communicating findings with the participants and allowing them an opportunity to add, delete or modify their transcripts to best reflect their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While it is necessary to promote open communication with the participants through all phases of the study, member checks generally facilitate simple acceptance or rejection of initial findings (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Member reflections were suggested by Smith and McGannon as a deeper approach to member checks, where once sent initial findings, the participants would be encouraged to reflect more deeply on their experiences and discuss initial findings with the researcher. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested the now commonly employed practice of member checking would promote accuracy, but Smith and McGannon (2018) recommended that member reflections should be preferentially utilized to provide opportunities for rich discussion during analysis (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Participants in this study were treated as co-researchers, and the effective experts of their own experience. Smith and McGannon (2018) argued member checks were originally used as "a means of controlling or correcting the subjective bias from the researcher" (p. 3) but may not have effectively served that role in practical application. Rather than viewing member checks as an administrative requisite, Smith and McGannon (2018) encourage engaging in member

reflections as an inductive approach to garner deeper contemplation from participants. In practical application, member checks are subject to practical problems that prevent a fully inductive analysis process, where participants are more motivated by a desire to be perceived as helpful than exploring research questions more deeply (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Prompting participants to simply agree or disagree with the researcher's interpretation would position the study's findings as a reality meant to be checked (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Smith and McGannon (2018) recognized the potential issue of researchers and participants separating themselves from their perceptions of the social world. As was consistent with my paradigmatic allegiance with an interpretivist lens, I was not interested in a purely objective exploration of sport experiences; rather, the subjectivity of experiential exploration was a strength of phenomenological analysis. Although member checking is viewed through an ontology of realism, Smith and McGannon (2018) posit an incompatibility between realism and epistemology of constructivism when uncovering social reality. My ontology of relativism and epistemology of constructivism informed my acceptance of social reality as a fallacy. Member reflections in this study was not used to reaffirm discovery of social truths, but rather prompt participants to further explore the depictions of their relative experiences.

Participants of this study were sent verbatim transcripts from their interviews and asked to reflect upon their responses to each question more thoroughly, to emphasize the co-creation aspect of IPA study (Smith & McGannon, 2018). These member reflections occurred after the one-on-one interviews. Participants received an email including a verbatim transcript of their one-on-one interview, with initial codes listed line-by-line in a column beside the transcript. This email also included a prompt for the participants to more deeply reflect upon the research questions and contact me for further discussions on the assigned codes. Participants were given

two weeks to review their transcripts and express their interest in further reflective discussions. Although none of the athletes opted to engage with this process, member reflections allowed participants the option to make appropriate changes prior to thematic analyses to most accurately represent their experiences.

Smith and McGannon (2018) have suggested that implicit power dynamics between the researcher and participant can influence the participant's willingness to "correct" interpretations during member checks. To address this concern, I continually relayed the importance of the co-creation of experience and emphasized the participant's role as an expert of their own experiences. Although power relations may never be completely removed from member reflections, the aforementioned steps helped mitigate any implied power dynamics. Consistent with suggestions from Smith and McGannon (2018), I utilized member reflections over member checks to "[find] correspondence with the truth or getting at the independent reality" (p. 8). Instead of purely asking for acceptance or denial of interpretations following interview analysis, member reflections were requested to produce a greater depth of information and open a discourse for potential contradictions (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Through this more involved version of member checking, member reflections promote methodological rigor and are coherent with an IPA framework.

Specific Ethical Considerations

Through the previous sections, I have outlined ways in which I limited my personal biases to ethically represent the experiences of participants in the proposed study. There are additional ethical considerations I addressed prior to study initiation to emphasize my commitment to ethical praxis. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest an inextricable connection between the information collected and the source of information. Particularly salient in

phenomenological research, the experience of the individual is something wholly attached to their being (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and must be treated with care and caution. With this understanding, continued analysis of the participant's stories would be a de facto continuation of the relationship with the participant. As such, proper gratitude was required for a participant's disclosure. In some studies, the ratio of benefits to risks is clearly weighted towards the positive, but my study involved the potential for reliving painful memories. This invited a certain level of vulnerability for the participant, an abrupt relationship end could have exacerbated feelings of hurt or abandonment that were already relived through the interview process. As part of the informed consent process of this study, participants were informed of potential psychological risks associated with sharing details of a deeply personal nature. Participants were allowed to remove anything from their interview transcripts at anytime, if they felt uncomfortable by any statements made.

Most micro ethical decisions occurred on a reactionary basis, where I valued the safety and security of participants above all else. Information was disseminated only with approval from the individual providing their experiential text. Although the participants of this study did not show signs of psychological distress, I informed them of the options available to University of Alberta students, including Counselling and Clinical Services. Participants who were not University of Alberta students were directed towards off-campus resources including: The Support Network, Distress Line, and Alberta Mental Health Helpline. In an effort to minimize risk and discomfort, participants had the right to refuse to answer questions.

Trustworthiness/Rigor

Criteria for a rigorous research process was laid out by Schwandt, Lincoln, and Guba (2007), but neglected to address issues of rigorous interpretation (Lincoln et al., 2011). I relied

primarily on guiding steps outlined by Schwandt et al. (2007) for the research process and

Lincoln et al. (2011) for the interpretation. Rather than completely rejecting the notion of

criteriology, I adopted the criteria suggested by Lincoln and colleagues (2011) to evaluate study

rigor. *Fairness*, relating to balanced representation of all experiences within results, was

addressed in two primary ways: member reflections upon viewing their verbatim interview

transcript, and personal reflexive journaling throughout the study. *Ontological and educative*

authenticity through this study refers back to my methodological assumptions in seeing

experiential texts as accurate representations of relativist truths in society. As I progressed

through my study, I continually confronted my assumptions and challenged myself to view not

only the words of participants, but the context surrounding their statements. Through IPA

method, I sought to understand experiences through inductive reasoning (Smith, 2004). Lastly, I

addressed *catalytic and tactical authenticities* by offering various resources to participants

interested in learning more adaptive coping responses, when they voiced a concern about such

matters. I used caution when relating back to this final criterion, because my goal was not to

categorize experiences as wholly positive or negative, but rather provide opportunity to

recreational athletes to voice their stories. It is my contention that ethical research practice would

include offering available resources to anyone in distress.

       The method of one-on-one interviews provided opportunities to build rapport with

participants, a crucial component of interpretivist inquiry (Lincoln et al., 2011). Member

reflections also promoted trustworthiness and assured appropriate representation of co-researcher

experiences (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Chapter 4: Findings

The findings from this study relate to recreational athletes' experience of adversity, and resultant coping within sport and coping outside of sport. To provide context for the athletes' experiences, Part A details findings from the prompts for participants to define a "recreational athlete". Responses suggest that recreational athletes define themselves as such through institutional definitions, and the primary goals of social interaction, enjoyment, and fitness, rather than performance motivations. Understanding the athlete's definitions of a recreational athlete provided context for their responses to adversity, while also exploring universal, undocumented understandings of recreational athletics. Part B outlines findings related specifically to the research question: how recreational athletes experience adversity. This section outlines how recreational athletes utilized social support, distraction, goal setting, and reaffirmation of their athletic identity through sport participation. Part B also relays the athletes' experiences of finding social support outside of sport and resolving negative emotions over time in response to adversity.

A. Defining a Recreational Athlete

To explore the experiences of recreational athletes, it was first necessary to understand what defines a recreational athlete for the participants in this study. Exploring any distinctions between recreational and elite sport creates a basis for understanding the experiences of recreational athletes. Through interviewing these athletes, it was important to remember that participation was based on a self-definition as a recreational athlete. As the participants discussed the defining features of recreational athletes, they continually contrasted themselves with elite athletes - a meaningful consideration in distinguishing recreational athletics from other sport environments.

Institutional definitions. When asked about who might be considered a recreational athlete, participants in this study often referred to the competitive tiers defined by the organizational sport bodies to which they belonged. Alex described this notion in saying:

> In my mind, you are still a rec athlete unless you get to one of those larger institutions
>
> like the WHL or the NHL. So, it is kind of defined by an institution, so it makes it a
>
> recreational or elite athlete.

Large organizations defined the levels of competitiveness and classification as "recreational" for many participants in this study, thereby impacting their self-identification. Sam described specific performance standards set by institutions that categorized an athlete as recreational or elite through an example: "The race directors will say 'okay, you are sub-elite for this race, but like you might not be for another one'". Sam further clarified elite ranking in running by saying "like for example… to run under 3:15 in Tokyo you would be considered sub-elite." A recreational athlete might define themselves as such due to institutional parameters for performance standards.

Goals of participation. Athletes often described the distinction between elite and recreational athletes as having differing primary goals for their athletic participation, which included enjoyment, social interaction, and fitness.

Enjoyment. Recreational athletes reported that enjoyment was a primary motivator in their sport participation. Galen articulated this in saying "[recreational sport] is more for fun than for winning. It is not as regimented, it is not like the main focus of your life." When comparing elite and recreational athletes, participants in this study suggested that elite athletes use performance goals to motivate their participation, while recreational athletes engage in sport for

fun. Reagan depicted the story of a recreational powerlifter as "he does not lift to be competitive, he lifts because he enjoys it and he is recreational."

Four of the recreational athletes interviewed had previously defined themselves as elite athletes and compared their goals within an elite realm to their current recreational experiences. When asked about their goals in a previous elite context, Taylor said:

> Our goal was always to be the best team, have the best players, and just be like the best in the province. And finally, in grade 12 we were the best team in the province, and that was after 4 years of hard work leading up to it. I guess the goal was to be the best in the province. And I guess the goal in the back of everyone's mind was "maybe I'll get scouted, maybe someone will see me, and I'll become one of those high-level people that you end up seeing on TV or something like that."

When reflecting upon their goals now, Taylor portrayed a different perspective: "My current goals are to have a good time and to… really facilitate enjoyment of other people." The recreational athletes of this study were motivated to participate in sport because they enjoyed it.

> ***Social interaction***. The athletes in this study noted that one of the most predominant goals in their sport participation was the social interaction component. Alex noted the importance of being around peers by saying "I just kind of like the community of soccer. I obviously - I love playing the sport, you know being with your friends". Other athletes continually referred to the idea of community, demonstrated in this sentiment from Gene describing one of their goals as "[gaining] an extended social network of friends."

The athletes in this study who previously self-identified as elite recognized a distinction between their goals during their elite sport and their recreational sport experiences. In fact, Kai described the social setting of their elite sport background as being a stressor, rather than a

positive in sport: "I just wanted to win every game and… I guess also a goal that's not really a performance-based goal, but I never wanted to be the person who let the team down or contributed to a loss." Kai's reflection of the performance-based goals and social fears in their elite sport background was contrasted with their recreational sport experiences: "it's not like anything big or special, it is just a thing for people to do so they can get out and be active and social."

> ***Fitness.*** Fitness was also noted as a goal for individuals participating in recreational sport. Rather than focusing on specific skills within the sport, many athletes in this study viewed sport as a means of staying active and seeking physical fitness. Sam described their initial draw to running:
>
> Running was like just a means of kind of being fit outside of that? And when I was little like I hated riding a bike so I would just run beside my brothers so it was kind of always a good like just an easy sport that you can do."

Athletes in this study noted being drawn into continued or renewed sport participation from a goal of maintaining physical fitness. Kai described their experience seeking out sport after a period of being inactive:

> It was not until about… 2 or 3 years ago that I realized I had to become more active again and going to the gym was kind of boring for me because all of the physical activity that I really valued for most of my… kind of childhood and formative years were team sports.

Having the context of a sport influenced Kai's interest in engaging with physical activity. This notion was echoed by Steph's experiences of finding a love for physical fitness through their sport participation:

> I really liked to stretch my body and push myself to some more strength and abilities in
>
> terms of physical skills, and from there I went to the gym a little bit at the same time and
>
> at the gym I found I really like this and I really liked how it redefined your body shape
>
> and stuff.

Similarly, four participants discussed their fear of being unfit as a strong motivator for their regular sport participation. In their reflection of life without sport, Reagan noted: "if I am not doing stuff I am not really maintaining myself. And when you are just sitting in a chair, you know you are like kind of like wasting away really slowly." Whether it was a fear of being unfit, or a desire to seek out higher levels of physical fitness, all participants referenced fitness as one of their main goals in recreational sport participation.

B. Coping through Sport

All of the athletes in this study reported using their sport participation as a means of coping with adversity outside of sport. There were various avenues through which recreational sport was an effective coping mechanism for participants. Social support, distraction, reaffirmation of identity, and goal setting are discussed below in the context of the participants' sporting environment.

Social support. In their interviews, all athletes noted the importance of social support they received from teammates, coaches, and others in their sporting communities. Many athletes suggested that their adaptive responses to adverse life events were due in large part to important others supporting them within their sport. The comfort provided by social support within a sport community was articulated by Sam in the following quote:

> The teammates and the community that sport can provide you - even in an individual
>
> sport you still run with other people a lot of the time, so the time that that offers you to be

with those supportive people is really valuable and the emotional relief it can provide

you.

Some athletes noted that their peers in sport could help with sport-specific frustrations. When

experiencing setback in sport, the participants of this study reached out to teammates and

coaches for formative advice and emotional support. Galen explained how social support

bettered their performance:

> I mostly train in the bigger boats, so a lot of it is group, and the older, more experienced
>
> athletes will say "okay, here's what you're doing wrong, here's how to fix it, let's work
>
> on this for the next little while."

Reagan expressed the commonality of setbacks across their sporting club helped to ease

frustrations and foster closer relationships:

> The powerlifting club before… with my knowledge base then compared to now was
>
> extremely important because all the things I would face adversely in the gym like "why
>
> can't this increase in strength?" or "I'm getting this pain here, my IT band is tight, or I
>
> have a compressed muscle in my left leg, my left glute med isn't firing" - I had people
>
> that could help me out.

Social affiliation in sport fostered a sense of belonging in some participants' experiences. This

sense of belonging associated with sport encouraged athletes to continue with their sporting

participation, while giving the athletes a sense of emotional comfort. Kai described finding a new

support system and community through sport after moving, explaining "I left most of my support

system back in Ontario. And sports kept me active, tended to my mental health, but also gave me

that real feeling of belonging as when I played team sports as a kid."

Athletes noted that sport provided a unique climate for relationship building. This idea was expressed by Taylor:

Just that feeling of being with people who are experiencing… an activity that you are experiencing, and they might be experiencing it differently, and just being able to talk with people and build relationships based on sport, based on that activity you are doing.

When describing an impactful friendship developed through sport, Gene went as far as to say, "if we had not played badminton together, it would have just been really different." The social support gained through sport was noted as distinct from social support outside of sport, and impactful in athletes' responses to adversity.

Distraction. Athletes engaged in their sport as a means of avoiding negative emotions. The distraction of their sport experiences helped athletes take their minds off the negative life events they experienced, if only for a little while. The athletes of this study articulated that this temporary relief from thoughts of adversity was a strong draw for their continued sport participation. Sam described being pleasantly distracted by sport in saying: "it's something you can go do to take your mind off of everything else you have going on in your life."

Jordan relayed a different tale of using sport for distraction, noting both the positive and the potential maladaptive aspects of trying to avoid negative emotions.

Because you didn't really have the proper coping and things like that, so looking at [my sport participation] now, I can see that as a bit of an escape behaviour. Kind of advantageous, but also somewhat maladaptive in terms of you do not actually escape it because later on when sport's done, it is still going be there. Whereas, well, it's adaptive in that physical activity is really good for your body and things like that really helps you in that and helps to relieve stress, and that's where I think you have the sort of mixture.

When faced with adversity without a tangible, instantaneous solution, solving the small, more

addressable problems in sport introduced a modicum of control into the athletes' lives. Athletes

described a transferable feeling of control when distracting themselves from their life adversities

by solving sport-specific problems. Galen described the idea of finding stability and control in

sport through the quote below.

> It's just sort of been a way to take my mind off of things. Instead of thinking about things
>
> in my life that are scary or stressful, I can think "okay, this is my boat. What am I doing
>
> today? What do I need to fix?" and focus on that instead.

While distraction was discussed as a potentially maladaptive escape from solving adversities,

most of the athletes in this study cited distraction as a primarily positive result of their sport

participation. When faced with adversity, athletes utilized sport as a distraction from their

negative emotions. Athletes explained that this distraction was unique to sport, indicating a

distinction between sport and other facets of life.

Reaffirmation of identity. Most of the athletes expressed that the moniker of "athlete"

was a crucial aspect of their overall identities. In fact, the participants voiced that their

participation in sport seemed like second nature, due to their identities being so deeply rooted in

athletics. Alex mentioned feeling that sport "is just inherent in me at this point", depicting the

idea that sport participation can become habitual and deeply associated with one's identity. Gene

described the three important aspects of their identity in the following excerpt:

> I breathe and live sport every single day at my job and I also volunteer out of this world. I
>
> sign up for everything I can get my hands on so there's three things that define me as a
>
> person. There's sport and recreation, there's my culture, so I'm Chilean, and there's my
>
> family. For those top three things to be up there it means they define who I am as a

person. So, sport and rec are definitely like top three. They make up who I am. If I didn't

have sport or rec I don't know what I would do.

Other athletes explained that they wanted to be seen as an athlete in social situations. For reasons

of pride in their hard work in athletics, or credibility in their chosen field of work, participants

wanted those around them to perceive them as a recreational athlete. Tristan voiced this idea in

saying:

It is very important to me obviously. Not only because I am going into the field with my

career, but also, I want people to know I know there is background, I am not just some

guys who plays, right? I am there because I want to [participate].

Although many athletes had extensive sporting backgrounds, Steph depicted the idea that athletic

identity could be gained through a shorter period of time.

I can say it is a very important part of my identity right now and it's ironic that it wasn't a

couple years ago, but now I would define it as important as my academic life. I cannot

really live without it. Like if I have to give it up for a short period of time for whatever

reason, it's a pressure on me and I really need to get back to the gym as soon as possible.

Through exploration of demands outside of sport, athletes noted that other components of

their identities were as important as their sport involvement. Competing goals from complex

identities of athletes in this study was sometimes reported as a barrier to sport participation.

When an athlete valued parts of their identity outside of sport participation, they experienced a

stressful process of trying to balance all important aspects of identity. This balancing act was

often framed as a barrier for many athletes in seeking further athletic involvement, but the

overarching notion was that athletic participation was still worth any potential grief from this

balancing act. Recreational athletes spoke to more complex and multifaceted identities than their

elite counterparts, likely due to lessened importance athletic identities. Although difficult to

balance, recreational athletes reported valuing other components of their identities quite highly.

Sam discussed the importance of balancing sport with another main aspect of their identity:

being a student researcher.

> Just realizing the immense amount of work I still had yet to do on this research project
>
> and then committing, I also decided to help with another research project on top of that
>
> and then classes for my degree so trying to like find a place where you can *give* a little bit
>
> and relieve yourself of some stressors.

In this excerpt, Sam shared that finding balance between conflicting aspects of identity meant

that sacrifice was necessary. The struggle of balancing time spent towards maintaining athletic

identity and student identity was also voiced by Alex in saying "it's like a half hour drive there,

half hour drive back, you have to be there a half hour before and it's like and hour and half. It's a

lot of time and I could just spend time getting things done instead of doing that." Despite the

barriers of balancing components of their identities, the participants found their sport

participation motivating and important in their experiences with adversity.

Goal setting. As was mentioned previously, the goals of recreational athletes are not

necessarily distinct from elite athletes, but the importance of performance goals differs greatly.

The performance goals of elite athletics are eclipsed by goals of social interaction, enjoyment,

and fitness in recreational athletics. Understanding the goals that define recreational athletics

provided background for a prominent theme in recreational athletes' responses to adversity: the

importance of goal setting. When recreational athletes reached individual goals, strived towards

collective goals with their teammates, and felt as though their participation goals matched with

their teammate's goals, the athlete reported the greatest potential for positive responses to

adversity.

Individual goals. The participants of this study discussed the importance of setting and reaching goals in relation to their sport performance, as well as their social, psychological, and physical experiences of sport. First, participants in this study cited a variety of goals for their involvement in sport. Along with the aforementioned goals of enjoyment, social interaction, and fitness, participants described both specific and general performance goals that encouraged them to invest in their sport. Galen described their goals in rowing in the following quote: "it is not necessarily a new skill or a certain level you need to get to, but there is always technique you can improve, and you can always go faster. You set your own benchmarks." Through the self-enforced goals represented in this quote, Galen articulated the diversity of performance goals within their sport.

Second, athletes spoke to the notion that accomplishing performance goals in sport translated to improved responses to adversity in other contexts. Sam described the positive emotions associated with reaching a goal within sport:

The sense of accomplishment you get when you are done is a stress-relief in itself, because it almost gives you the idea of like "okay, I don't actually know if I can get through this year of school but I know now that my body and mind is more capable of stuff than I think it is."

Tristan further highlighted the idea of transferable confidence gained through reaching performance goals in sport by explaining that "going to the gym and hitting PR's and how accomplished you feel … transfers over into the academics." Other athletes spoke to similar experiences of gaining a sense of relief, a feeling of accomplishment, and resultant heightened confidence that came with resolving negative emotions from adversity. When asked to further

explain the feelings of accomplishment that sport added to global self-confidence, Galen said, "It just feels nice to have some power in you." Similarly, Sam mentioned the idea of seeking a sense of control: "I guess sport is a really good opportunity to focus on something you can control." When reaching the goals, they set in their recreational sport, these athletes felt confident and in control of situations outside of sport; their sport successes improved their overall confidence levels.

      Collective goals. Many of the athletes spoke to experiences within team sport or competitions with fellow athletes. In circumstances that involved others, a recognition of the goals of all individuals within the sport context contributed to an overall concept of collective goals. These collective goals were expressed as either specific performance or relational standards. When speaking to their experiences with collective goals, Jordan noted that "the goal is cooperation, for the most part, and communication in order to achieve a shared [performance] goal." Other athletes noted that collective goals could harmoniously interact with collective goals. Reagan relayed the message that a strong cooperative culture could promote individual accomplishment:

> There is a difference between having goals and helping other people meet their goals and still have a good time. It is the difference between spotting someone and being on your phone while spotting someone… you are there to have someone feel safe… [support would look like] 'Come on! Come on! Come on! Come on, yeah!' rather than just turning around and walking away as soon as they are done their set.

Whether collective goals were experienced as specific performance goals, or more relevant to building a sport culture, the athletes of this study reflected that they were impactful in their overall sport experience.

Goal congruence. The most notable theme depicted in athletes' statements was the

notion that goal setting was only helpful and positive when institutional, collective, and

individual goals were aligned: an idea I chose to represent as goal congruence. Jordan

recognized that people often enter sport with different goals than their teammates':

Some people have the mindset that they want to win, whereas others are looking for, you

know, "I just want to be here just for physical activity" or "it doesn't matter if we win or

lose, but it's because I want to be here with friends' or something of that variety."

This excerpt depicted the diversity that could exist within a specific sport setting, particularly

during competition.

Athletes suggested that many of the negative experiences they had in sport were largely

due to a mismatch in the expectations and goals for participation. Someone entering a sport with

highly competitive aspirations were contrasted with those who entered sport for aforementioned

recreational motivations. Kai articulated some of the negative consequences of divergence in

goals of those participating in the same league:

I was thinking about getting people who have never played hockey on the ice, building a

team, having a lot of fun, being active together, and it became apparent that most of the

other teams we were playing were there to win… At nine-nothing like when you are

crushing the other team in the second period you do not literally need to crush someone

by running them over because you are both going for the puck. Like you are already

burying us, we are [just] having fun.

Although individual goals were motivating and provided a sense of control, a mismatch of

institutional, collective, and personal goals appeared to undermine the benefits of goal setting for

the athletes in this study.

Coping Outside of Sport

Although athletes in this study primarily spoke to their experiences using sport for coping with adversity, many reported coping through other means.

Social support. When experiencing negative life events, the recreational athletes of this study often sought out social support from outside of their sport community. Support from friends and family was noted as incredibly important for individuals' coping experiences. Jordan noted a crucial component of responding to adversity as "social support from friends and family and things like that saying 'oh, it's okay, cause like it's not the end of the world that you weren't able to make this, or you weren't able to do this.'" Other athletes also found that social support provided valuable objectivity that helped their coping process. Galen expressed finding perspective and self-acceptance through reaching out to similar others "as I found more people, it was easier and easier to sort of be "okay this who I am and that's fine. This is a fine thing to be. Not something that's bad."

Time. Participants claimed that a helpful component of responding to adversity was simply allowing for time to pass. This time was usually used to either allow the situation to resolve itself naturally, or to create space to resolve negative emotions. First, when faced with a negative life event without an instantaneous solution, the recreational athletes of this study found that being patient was a key concept in coping. When dealing with a physical injury, Jordan recognized the importance of patience:

> You always want to go back and do things, but at the same time you also have to let your injuries heal because if you don't it could worsen and tear and do things to where you actually can't play the sport anymore.

Alex described their experience with a temporary adverse situation by viewing it as something one should "just push through and make sure you get [it] done." The interviewed athletes experienced a resolution in their adversity through the passage of time.

Second, some of the athletes of this study reflected upon how their perspectives and objectivity about their past adversities changed over time. Gene recognized that gaining objectivity was a lengthy process in saying "it's just something I can comfortably talk about now about ten years back and just be like 'I actually did this, I went through this.'" Steph reiterated this perspective-finding experience in saying:

> I can't think of a particular thing that really helped me out of it, it was just, umm, I just needed some time to accept it and absorb it and look at different aspects of it and realize it wasn't that big of a deal.

In Part A, institutional definitions and participation goals of social interaction, enjoyment, and fitness were revealed to be impactful components of how one might identify as a recreational athlete. Part B outlined how recreational athletes responded to adversity both through sport and outside of sport. Within sport, social support, distraction, goal setting, and reaffirmation of athletic identity emerged as primary themes, while social support and time were revealed as primary themes outside of sport. Through the next chapter, these themes will be discussed within the context of current sport policy and relevant sport research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Little is known about recreational athletes and their responses to negative life events. My study provided context for exploring coping strategies utilized by recreational athletes by first understanding the definition of "recreational athlete". Participants situated their experiences by noting the distinction between recreational and elite athletes in the relative importance of goals and the importance of organizational criteria for elite and non-elite athletes. While elite athletes strive for bettered performance through their sport engagement, recreational athletes are more motivated to participate through enjoyment, a desire for social affiliation, and fitness goals. Participants defined themselves as recreational athletes through a combination of evaluating their goals for participation and referring to labels created by the sport organizations to which they belonged. The implications of an athlete-derived definition of recreational athletes will be situated within current sport policy for practical consideration.

Once an understanding of the participants' definitions of recreational athletes were discussed, I explored how the athletes experienced and responded to adversity outside of sport. Athletes responded to adversity through seeking coping strategies within sport and outside of their sporting environments. Seeking social support, finding distraction, reaffirming their athlete identity, and finding an environment that supports goal setting were all found to be notable themes of coping through sport. In terms of setting goals, individuals who sought out sport opportunities where their individual and collective goals matched with the level of competition were able to view sport as a viable coping strategy. Goal congruence was a prerequisite for athletes setting personal goals in their sporting environment. Athletes engaged in coping outside of sport through seeking social support and allowing time to resolve negative emotions and disengage from the negative life event. Social support, distraction, reaffirmation of athletic

identity, and goal setting will be discussed throughout this chapter as impactful components of

sport that are utilized by recreational athletes during adversity. Responses to adversity outside of

sport, which, in this study, were time and social support, will also be discussed for their

contribution to the coping experiences of athletes interviewed. The sport and non-sport coping

strategies will be discussed in terms of stress, coping, and resilience frameworks to deepen

understandings of recreational athletes' responses to negative life events.

The present study explored recreational athletes' experiences with adversity to reveal

ways through which recreational athletes cope with negative life events. Findings from this

study address a distinct lack of research specifically focused on recreational athletes' stress and

coping processes (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Secades et al., 2016).

Recreational athletics is often included within elite sport (Sarkar et al.,2015; Nicholls & Polman,

2007) or categorized generally as leisure activities (Hutchinson et al., 2003). Current research

exploring stress and coping within sport generally involve elite athletic populations, where

events related to sport participation are often noted as the trigger for stress (Nicholls & Polman,

2007). The present study explored recreational athletes' experiences of adversity outside of sport.

In their interviews, participants described their reliance on sport as a means of coping, rather

than sport as a stressor requiring coping. As municipal and federal policies (e.g., City of

Edmonton 2013, 2016; Government of Canada, 2012) promoting recreational athletics evolve,

understanding coping strategies available within sport could influence ways through which

recreational sport policy is formed. This study provides support for current policies emphasizing

the importance of recreational sport participation (City of Edmonton 2013, 2016; Government of

Canada, 2012). The Canadian Sport Policy (2012) anecdotally noted that "fun, health, social

interaction, and relaxation" (p. 10) are primary goals for recreational athletes' continued

participation, which aligns well with athlete-derived definitions of "recreational athlete" within this study.

Institutional Definitions

Participants noted that pre-existing institutional definitions restricted their athletic identities, by instilling performance criteria for each level of play. This top-down approach to categorizing a sport participant as a recreational athlete might not capture the full breadth of this type of athlete; instead, looking to athletes' motivations to participate might better inform their self-definition as a recreational athlete. In discussing who might consider themselves recreational athletes, it is worth noting that those who fit institutional definitions of "elite" could feasibly have similar aspects motivating their sport participation to their "recreational" counterparts. Although potentially helpful for organizing tiers of competition within sport, rigid performance-based criteria for recreational definitions could substantially impact the athletes' self-definitions as such. This research provides evidence that might counter current institutional definitions of recreational athlete and could be impactful for future public health policies in promoting recreational athletics (e.g., City of Edmonton 2013, 2016; Government of Canada, 2012).

Goals of Participation

Although not wholly immune from performance stressors, recreational athletes in this study noted their primary goals for participation being enjoyment, social interaction, and fitness. These goals for recreational athletes were voiced through contrasting with the goals of elite athletes' being primarily centred around performance improvement.

Enjoyment. When discussing specific goals of participation, the athletes of this study noted that enjoying their sport was highly motivating for continued participation, which they contrasted with the prioritization of performance goals for elite athletes. Similarly, recreational

athletes noted that enjoyment was a primary goal for continuing their participation. As

exemplified in studies of committed participation in elite-level athletics, enjoyment provides

athletes with opportunity to become more deeply involved in sport (MacDonald, Côté, Eys, &

Deakin, 2011; Schmidt & Stein, 1991). This finding not only helps to clarify why one might

identify as a recreational athlete, but also how sport organizations could reframe their policies. A

sport organization looking to both attract recreational athletes and keep them actively involved in

sport could gear their programing towards increasing participant's enjoyment in various ways.

Along with continued participation in sport, MacDonald and colleagues (2011) noted deeper

social connections were associated with a more enjoyable sporting experience.

Social affiliations. As compared to past research identifying the primary goal of elite

athletes being performance-specific (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Nicholls & Polman, 2007)

recreational athletes prioritize social affiliations gained from sport. While elite athletes might

continue participating in sport in spite of negative social interactions with coaches, peer, and

parents (Keegan, Harwood, Spray & Lavallee, 2009), recreational athletes are primarily

motivated to continue their sporting endeavours due to positive interactions. Although elite

athletes receive benefits from positive social interactions, their continued involvement is not

dependent on the outcome of social aspects of sport. Recreational athletes in this study, on the

other hand, would alter their sport participation to seek positive social connections, at the risk of

their sport performance.

Fitness and body image. Fitness was mentioned by the athletes in discussing their goals

for participation in recreational sport. Though potentially less impactful than other themes, this

finding does help to understand the goals of the interviewed athletes and should be explored

further. The athletes of this study recognized that recreational athletes utilize sport as a means of

maintaining a certain level of physical fitness. The relative importance of fitness aspirations differed among the recreational athlete population, but the primary concerns related to physical appearance rather than desire for cardiovascular or strength improvements. Through defining "recreational athletes", participants suggested that one might continue being involved in sport as a more enjoyable form of exercise, reaching a personal standard of physical activity. When speaking to personal goals, the recreational athletes in this study referred to fitness in terms of maintaining or seeking a specific body image. It is interesting to note that "fitness" was used interchangeably to refer to aesthetic and performance concerns. Body image is often positioned as a goal for participants in exercise contexts that may or may not include recreational sporting activities (Markula, 2001; McCreary, Hildebrandt, Heinberg, Boroughs, & Thompson., 2007). More research specifically focused on recreational athletes would help to uncover the connections between body image and sport participation at a recreational level. In future efforts to define recreational athletes, it will be important to note differing views on fitness; recognizing the aesthetic or performance-based fitness goals of an individual will help with specific recreational sport marketing, assisting the growing push for continued sport participation (City of Edmonton 2013, 2016; Government of Canada, 2012).

It is clear from this study that recreational athletes define themselves as such due to their perception of organizational performance standards and their appraisal of the weighted importance of performance goals in motivating their participation. Their desires for social affiliation, fitness, and enjoyment are of greater importance than performance-specific improvements; therefore, public policy geared towards creating increasing recreational sport participation should utilize these three points for promotional campaigns. Once the definition of

recreational athletes was discussed, athletes discussed how sport was useful during times of adversity.

Responding to Adversity

Adversity has been defined as negative life experiences accompanied by adjustment issues (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). The ambiguity of this definition was noted by participants in this study and evoked diverse stories of adversity. The negative life events cited by participants were varied and evoked differing adjustment needs. It is important to note that resilience and coping literature were both involved in interpretation of the experiences of the participants, based on the severity of adjustment issues following the event. Since adversity was not phrased as a structured definition with strict criteria, participants cited experiences that could have arguably been labeled "stressful" or "traumatic". As previously mentioned, resilience literature more strongly aligns with experiences of trauma (Grace, 2015), while coping literature aligns mostly with experiences of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). More severe adjustment requirements could align more strongly with understandings of resilience, as Grace (2015) denotes the trigger for resilience as a "tremendous adversity or trauma" (p. 29). Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) definition of coping clearly indicates a prerequisite "internal or external demand" (p. 141) to which an individual must respond; this could include less severe adjustment needs. Participants' responses to the aforementioned adversities will be discussed within the context of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and resilience (Grace, 2015; Masten, 2001; Rutter, 1993).

Social Support in Sport

When discussing adversity, athletes noted several ways through which sport allowed for coping opportunities; namely: through social support, distraction, reaffirming athletic identity, and goal setting. Social support was revealed to be an impactful component of athletes'

successful responses to adversities. Athletes noted that connecting with teammates, training partners, coaches, and various others in sport helped alleviate the emotional burden of negative life events. Masten (2001) suggested that certain environmental factors dictate the success of one's response to adversity. These environmental supports were dubbed "protective factors". Through this conceptualization, social support would be viewed as a protective factor for building resilience (Masten, 2001). Similarly, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) included resource management and perception in their Transactional Theory of Stress. Through the Transactional Theory of Stress, the severity of a stressor is dictated through appraisal of the resources used in response (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); therefore, a more vibrant social network would be viewed as a usable resource during stress appraisal. Whether situated within stress and coping or resilience literature, social support through sport could have been viewed as a resource for adaptive responses to adversity for recreational athletes. The situational view of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) provides an avenue for evaluating resources for coping opportunities, but it is important to note that literature on dispositional coping could also help to frame the use of social support noted in this study.

Dispositional coping tendencies may not represent the complexities of different environmental constraints, but this lens provides unique perspectives on ways in which social support within sport is used for coping with adversity. First, through social learning (Bandura & Walters, 1977), recreational athletes could model novel coping techniques presented through to coping of those around them. Second, social supports can provide informational and instrumental supports (Cohen & Wills, 1985) that promote opportunities for problem-focused coping (Carver & Scheier, 1994). Finally, social support in sport could be connected to emotion-focused coping (Carver & Scheier, 1994) through reliance on acceptance, and value experienced in emotional

social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). It is important to explore how social support is impactful

for recreational athletes experiencing adversity, because understanding this aspect of sport is

helpful with recreational sport promotional efforts and working within current sport policy (City

of Edmonton 2013, 2016; Government of Canada, 2012).

Distraction

Athletes of this study noted that one of the reasons for seeking out sport in response to

adversity was the distraction sport provided. Rather than fixating on difficult emotions,

recreational athletes engage in their sport to temporarily distract, a scenario consistent with

understandings of avoidance coping (Carver & Scheier, 1994). Athletes described their

experiences of focusing on their sport rather than a negative life event as either a "distraction" or

as "escapism"; distraction was self-identified by athletes as an adaptive form of avoidance

coping, while escapism generally was identified as a maladaptive form of avoidance coping. The

recreational athletes of this study depicted their sport as being uniquely distracting, with

physical, mental, and social demands that fully involved their focus. The demands of sport, even

at a recreational level, provide an opportunity for the individual to gain perspective on their

adversity. Although often a successful coping strategy, some athletes noted that temporary

distraction from negative life events was sometimes unsuccessful or maladaptive. When

problem-focused coping (Carver & Scheier, 1994) was noted as a more adaptive option, utilizing

sport for its distracting nature was a less successful response. Those who experienced seeking

sport as an escape from negative life events noted that often their efforts to avoid a stressor

would only worsen the situation. In events where the more adaptive option was directly resolving

a tangible stressor, athletes who engaged in avoidance coping experienced negative effects from

their sport escapism. Whether the result was positive or negative, the recreational athletes noted

that distraction was a strong draw for their continued engagement in sport. Sport policy on

municipal and national levels (e.g., City of Edmonton 2013, 2016; Government of Canada, 2012)

would benefit from promoting sport through the adaptive forms of distraction it can provide.

Promoting sport for its ability to distract might appeal to non-athletes seeking distraction from

various adversity. This could be an effective method of encouraging the general population to

become more involved with sport. It should be noted, however, that the potential usage of sport

for escapism was described as a maladaptive response to adversity by the participants of this

study; for this reason, the distracting nature of sport should be promoted cautiously. Rather than

wholly positive or wholly negative, distraction, like any other form of coping strategy, was noted

as an available coping option through sport, but the successes of this type of coping differed

within and between athletes' experiences.

Reaffirming Athletic Identity

When faced with adversity, the recreational athletes of this study revealed that they

sought out sport, because it felt like second nature to do so; they experienced comfort from

reaffirming their athletic identity. This finding could be interpreted through the athletes

increasing their intrinsic motivation to participate in their sport (Vallerand & Losier, 1999),

leading to greater sport commitment and more opportunities for sport-based coping strategies.

Perhaps initially motivated to engage in sport from external benefits, the participants in this

study self-identified as recreational athletes and considered participation as a necessary part of

the definition of "recreational athlete". This transition from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation is

thought to produce a more robust behaviour (Vallerand, 1997; Vallerand & Losier, 1999).

Greater engagement in their sport would have allowed more opportunities to experience coping

opportunities through social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Masten,

2001), distraction utilizing avoidance and emotion focused coping (Carver & Scheier, 1994), and goal setting to increase global self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982, 1997). Through greater athletic identity, recreational athletes found more opportunities to cope with adversity. This finding should be interpreted cautiously, because recreational athletic identity appears to differ from elite athletic identity. Understandings of athletic identity are complicated in the elite athletic realm, where a higher athletic identity is potentially problematic in two ways: over-investment in the sport during active participation, and issues adapting to transition out of elite sport. In elite athletics, where athletes are primarily motivated by performance, a strong athletic identity has been associated with role engulfment (Adler & Adler, 1991), where other aspects of identity are overshadowed by their athletic involvement. During active sport participation, role engulfment and personal investment in sport performance can evoke experiences of burnout (Brustad & Ritter-Taylor, 1997; Coakley, 1992; Goodger et al., 2002).

Athletic identity can motivate an individual to increase their athletic involvement, which appears to be quite positive for recreational athletes. In elite populations, increased athletic identity comes with potential harm to the athletes' well-being. An internalized athletic identity improves intrinsic motivation to engage in their sport (Vallerand & Losier, 1999), but when sport engagement is no longer possible due to injury, deselection, or retirement, the individual has two options: adapting to their newfound reality or seeking to restore an identity that no longer exists. When the latter occurs, the athlete experiences negative effects of identity foreclosure (Linemeyer & Brown, 2010; Park, Lavallee & Tod, 2013), where their uninformed commitment to sport resulted in a lack of preparedness for life outside of sport (Cavallerio, Wadey & Wagstaff, 2017; Jewett, Kerr & Tamminen, 2018). Not only can the elite athlete identity overwhelm other facets of identity, but that elite-level experience is finite and often short-lived.

Elite athletes' highly specific, performance-based goals impose an expiry date on elite participation; the exact date of sport expiration often being unknown to the participant. Recreational athletics does not involve a performance-based expiry date. Recreational athletes of this study considered themselves to be generalists with their sporting goals revolving around fun, social affiliation, and fitness. Unlike the highly specific goals of elites, recreational athletes' goals could be accomplished in a variety of sport opportunities; therefore, recreational athletes may be sheltered from the negative effects of identity foreclosure (Park et al., 2013; Linemeyer & Brown, 2010), role engulfment (Adler & Adler, 1991), and burnout (Brustad & Ritter-Taylor, 1997; Coakley, 1992; Goodger et al., 2002) with increased athletic identity.

There appears to be a threshold with athletic identity; once this threshold has been passed, the individual would consider themselves an elite athlete, regardless of how sport institutions might categorize them. A recreational athlete with a higher athletic identity would be motivated to continue their participation, and therefore may notice more coping strategies through sport. Once athletic identity increases, the athlete would consider themselves elite and would be at a higher risk for negatives associated with identity foreclosure (Park et al., 2013; Linemeyer & Brown, 2010), role engulfment (Adler & Adler, 1991), and burnout (Brustad & Ritter-Taylor, 1997; Coakley, 1992; Goodger et al., 2002). Athletic identity appears to differ between recreational and elite athletes and should be treated as such in future research involving recreational athletics. Encouraging individuals involved in recreational sport to see themselves as recreational athletes might encourage their intrinsic motivation towards their sport and increase their exposure to the coping strategies present in sport. Future policy could employ greater emphasis on the positive aspects of recreational sport, slowly allowing people to see the extrinsic

rewards of sport, then building their recreational athlete identity and establishing intrinsic

motivation.

Goal Setting in Sport and Global Self-Efficacy

The athletes in this study outlined how goal setting in sport and reaching said goals was

helpful during times of adversity. The idea of goal setting being inherently motivating is

complicated by competing individual and collective goals within sport. For athletes who

experienced congruence between individual and collective goals, engaging in goal setting

benefitted their responses to adversity. Those that noted divergence between individual and

collective goals expressed that goal setting in their sport was stressful and did not help with life

events outside of sport, even going so far as to claim that the stressors from this goal

incongruence worsened their coping processes.

To understand this relationship with goal congruence, it is important to first understand

goal setting within the coping process. Since adversity represents a spectrum of severity in terms

of adaptation requirements, coping literature that primarily relates to stress (Lazarus & Folkman,

1984), and resilience literature that primarily relates to trauma (Grace, 2015; Masten, 2001;

Rutter, 1993), could aid in interpretation of study findings. For the purpose of describing goal

setting, this section will explore the relationship between individual goal setting and coping with

adversity. Athletes reported experiencing a newfound confidence in their global competence

when they experienced success within their recreational sport. Through setting attainable goals,

athletes were actively engaged with their sport, while challenging themselves to improve their

sport experience in various dimensions. The idea of improving overall confidence when

experiencing domain-specific goal achievement strongly aligns with notions of global self-

efficacy (Bandura, 1982). As one experiences repeated successive attempts at a behaviour, they

increase their self-efficacy toward that specific action (Bandura, 1997). Recreational athletes

noted increased affect following successes in their sport, which surely improved their perspective

of external adverse events. More importantly, the athletes of this study expressed that their

general ability to cope in adaptive ways was improved by their successes in their sport; domain-

specific successes encouraged global change. This notion was depicted by Bandura and Walters

(1977) through a claim that domain-specific self-efficacy promotes general self-efficacy.

Athletes not only utilized individual goal accomplishment to improve their disposition, but also

to improve their self-efficacy towards resolving adversity outside of sport.

Similarly, athletes found comfort and improved confidence through forming and

accomplishing collective goals with teammates, coaches, and within the broader sport

environment. As athletes worked towards the goals of the team or league to which they

belonged, they experienced more adaptive coping with adversities outside of sport. The notion of

collective goal setting is situated within several bodies of literature. First, as an athlete engages

with teammates and others within their sporting social network, they effectively have

opportunity for deeper social support. As discussed previously, social support could be viewed as

an additional resource within stress and resilience literature (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Masten,

2001), or as an approach-focused coping mechanism (Carver & Scheier, 1994). Social support

gained through engagement in collective goals likely played a role in the athletes' positive

coping experiences, but the most impactful constraint with goal setting was congruence between

individual and collective goals.

Athletes discussed the importance of matching individual goals with collective goals. In

fact, the participants of this study experienced barriers to the coping potential of goal setting

when their sporting environments were built around goals they deemed as mismatching their

own. A recreational athlete, motivated by individual goals of social interaction, fitness, and enjoyment would not feel well-supported by an elite environment uniquely focused on performance goals. This finding has important implications in sport programming, because finding a match of competition level, collective goals and individual goals of recreational athletes would allow for greater coping potential from recreational sport. These findings indicate that centering recreational sport programs around enjoyment, social interaction, and fitness would be the most effective way of seeking goal congruence.

Social Support Outside of Sport

Along with the coping options provided by sport, the athletes in this study sought out social support outside of sport and allowed time to pass when experiencing adversity. Social interactions outside of a sporting environment generally involved important others like family and long-time friends. As discussed previously, social support could be viewed as resource-building within coping and resilience literature (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Masten, 2001), or as an approach-focused coping mechanism (Carver & Scheier, 1994). These social connections were impactful for athletes' perspectives of the severity of adversity. Supports from outside of their sporting realm provided the athletes of this study with valuable objectivity that promoted more adaptive coping responses from the athletes. Similarly, athletes found a more objective view of their adversity through the passage of time. Whether through avoidance or emotion-focused coping (Carver & Scheier, 1994), athletes found time was an impactful consideration for coping opportunities.

Conclusion

During this study, recreational athletes were encouraged to share their experiences of adversity. The discussions revealed a definition of recreational athletes that was adopted by the

athletes to cement their experiences of coping through sport. While elite athletes are primarily

motivated by performance goals, recreational athletes defined themselves by their goals of

enjoyment, fitness, and social affiliation. Along with pre-existing institutional definitions, the

weighted importance of the aforementioned goals was what participants described as

distinguishing them from elite athletes.

Recreational athletes appear to rely upon the social support they receive through sport to

adaptively respond to adversity. This social support provided positive coping experiences likely

due to increased exposure to different coping strategies and encouragement of emotion-focused

coping by important others. Sport provided an adaptive distraction from difficult emotions, but

also had the potential for maladaptive escapism. Athletes appeared to seek out their sport

involvement instinctually when their athletic identity was higher. While higher athletic identity

in elite athletes can lead to negatives associated with role engulfment (Adler & Adler, 1991),

recreational athletes' athletic identity was discussed as being beneficial, particularly in terms of

coping with life adversities. Increased athletic identity in recreational athlete promoted positive

coping experiences from greater exposure to adaptive components of the sport environment, and

comfort from engaging in familiar actions. When recreational athletes set and reach their

sporting goals, they have a greater sense of self-efficacy that helps them improve their responses

to adversity. Social support outside of sport and time to explore coping strategies were beneficial

to recreational athletes.

Limitations and future directions. This study provided important initial understandings

of coping within recreational sports, but it is not without limitation. Although the recreational

athletes of this study represented various sports, the distinction between individual and group

sports were not explicitly explored. There could be differences in the ways through which

athletes seek social support and relate with collective goal setting within group and individual sport. Further research could focus specifically on comparisons between individual and group sport to discern overlaps and distinctions in experiences.

Along with flexible interpretation of the term recreational athlete, no definition of adversity was provided to the athletes. The conceptualization of adversity in the literature is flexible and allowed for discussion on a wide variety of negative life events. It was important in this study to allow experiential reports of adversity, but the participants' interpretations of the term adversity could have inadvertently encouraged reports of experiences that they may have otherwise been interpreted as stress or trauma. There are notable overlaps in stress, adversity, and trauma, but self-defining those terms may be different for individuals. It would be interesting for future research to delineate what criteria an individual might have for categorizing experiences as stressful, traumatic, or adverse. Distinguishing between these notions might allow for a more concrete understanding of peoples' responses to each category of hardship, allowing for more efficient support.

Finally, although this study may provide potential avenues for recreational sport policy promotion, no specific recommendations can be made without further research. This study provided unique insight into recreational athletes' experiences with adversity, but future research is necessary to further understand this under-represented population and be able to direct application and inform sport policy. The definition of recreational athletics should be explored in different contexts, and environments to create a unified definition for federal sport policy. To assist in calls for greater recreational athletic involvement, a cohesive definition of "recreational athlete" would be essential. Distinguishing between group and individual sport could allow for more specific marketing of coping strategies available in sport.

This study provided an initial view of recreational athletes' experiences with adversity. Findings from these interviews provide insight into how athletes utilize their sport environments for coping with external life events. When promoting recreational athletic involvement, sport organizations could position the findings from this study as potentially beneficial components of continued sport participation. These sport policies could also reframe their definitions of recreational athletes using these results to best encapsulate this under-represented population. Understanding ways through which sport can be utilized for adaptive responses to adverse events would allow for promotion of these components to both the general population for novel coping strategies and recreational athletes for more adaptive strategies. Akin to other coping strategies, the availability of coping options through sport does not ensure successful coping experiences. Rather, it is through honest exploration of various forms of coping one can find the most successful coping strategy for each situation. Recreational sport participation could provide coping strategies, and through promoting these benefits, people may feel encouraged to invest in sport and their overall well-being.

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Appendices

Appendix A Ethics Approval Letter

Notification of Approval

Date:	October 29, 2018
Study ID:	Pro00084468
Principal Investigator:	Kelsey Wright
Study Supervisor:	Amber Mosewich
Study Title:	Recreational Athletes' Experiences of Adversity Outside of Sport
Approval Expiry Date:	Monday, October 28, 2019

Approved Consent Form:	Approval Date	Approved Document
	10/29/2018	Informed Consent

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the Research Ethics Board does not encompass authorization to access the staff, students, facilities or resources of local institutions for the purposes of the research.

Sincerely,

Anne Malena, PhD.
Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).

Appendix B Recruitment Email

<div align="center">

EMAIL SCRIPT FOR INITIAL RECRUITMENT

Recreational Athletes' Experiences of Adversity
</div>

To whom it may concern,

I am a researcher from the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation. I am looking to explore recreational athletes' experiences of adversity. As an individual who identifies a recreational athlete, you are invited to participate in this study. To be eligible to participate, you must also:

- Be 18-29 years of age

- Be fluent in the English language

- Have experienced an adverse life event

- Be currently involved in recreational sport

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview with a researcher. This interview will take place in person, at the University of Alberta main campus (in a private room), or at a public facility (e.g. coffee shop, other meeting place). The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. During this interview, you will be asked about your experiences of adversity. We will discuss how your sporting background might be related to your response to adversity. We are interested in hearing your unique experiences with adversity and your opinions of any relation to your sport participation.

A summary of the key findings of the study will be emailed to you when the study is complete if you provide your email address on the consent form that will be signed prior to the interview.

If you are interested in participating in this study or have further questions, please respond to this email or contact the primary investigator.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Kelsey Wright, Graduate Student Researcher
Pro00081913

Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation

University of Alberta

(403) 614-4593

kwright3@ualberta

Appendix C Informed Consent

INFORMATION LETTER AND CONSENT FORM

Pro00081913

Recreational Athletes' Experiences of Adversity

Principle Investigator	Supervisor
Kelsey Wright, Graduate Student Researcher	Dr. Amber Mosewich, Assistant Professor
Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation	Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation
University of Alberta	University of Alberta
(403) 614-4593	(780) 492-1002
kwright3@ualberta.ca	amber.mosewich@ualberta.ca

The purpose of this research study is to learn more about the potential role of recreational sport participation in coping with adversity.

Sport involvement can be a both a stressor and a protective factor for elite athletes' well-being, but the relationship between adversity and recreational sport participation is unknown. As a means of exploring recreational athletes' unique experiences, my research question is: *How do recreational athletes experience adversity?*

Eligibility

As an individual who identifies as a recreational athlete, you are invited to participate in this study. To be eligible to participate, you must also:

- Be 18-29 years of age

- Be fluent in the English language

- Have experienced an adverse life event

- Be currently involved in recreational sport

Study Procedure

Pro00081913

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview with a researcher. This interview will take place in person, at the University of Alberta main campus (in a private room), or at a public facility (e.g. coffee shop, other meeting place). The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. During this interview, you will be asked about your experiences of adversity. We will discuss how your sporting background might change your response to adversity. We are interested in hearing your unique experiences with adversity and your opinions of the importance of your sport participation. A summary of the key findings of the study will be emailed to you when the study is complete if you provide your email address on the consent form that will be signed prior to the interview.

Benefits

There are no guaranteed direct benefits to participating in this study. Engaging in personal reflection of sport experiences may help enhance your self-awareness and emphasize positive aspects of sporting experiences. Self-reflection on coping practices may also help you to constructively evaluate your coping efforts. Additionally, contributing to this research may provide valuable insight into the coping practices of recreational athletes to assist future research initiatives.

Risks

While there are minimal risks in participating in this study, it is possible that participation may result in psychological or emotional discomfort as the premise of the interview is about dealing with adversity. You are under no obligation to answer any interview questions, and all phases of this researcher are completely voluntary. In the event that you would like to continue a conversation about thoughts and feelings that may arise from this study, the University of Alberta provides possible resources: https://www.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mental-health. If this is the case, you will be encouraged to seek support from a health care provider and explore the options available to University of Alberta students. Non-University of Alberta Students will be encouraged to seek out external resources such as the Edmonton Distress Line, is psychological or emotional discomfort arises.

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There is a minimal risk that you could be identified based on information provided during interviews. The researchers will make every effort to remove identifying information from transcripts prior to public release. You will also be given the opportunity to add, delete or modify anything in the transcripts once they have been sent back to you via email. You will then have two weeks to make any changes you see fit.

Voluntary Participation and Freedom to Withdraw

Participation in this study is voluntary. You under no obligation to answer any interview questions or disclose any information. There are no penalties associated with non-participation or withdrawal. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason during the study. Following the interviews, you may contact the researcher to withdraw your data for up to 2 weeks after you are emailed your transcript for review. All data will be deleted upon request.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Prior to beginning the interview, you will have the opportunity to select a pseudonym to stand in place of your name, to protect your identity. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researchers will do everything possible to remove any identifying information from the transcripts. You will also be given the opportunity to view your transcript and may add, delete, or modify it as you see fit. Participants are not required to participate in one-on-one sessions, and there will be no penalty for non-participation.

All data will be stored in locked cabinets, or in encrypted documents on a password-protected server. Identifying information will be removed during transcription. Identifying information will remain on initial consent forms, which will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office, separate from the rest of the data. Only the investigators, members of the research team, and the Research Ethics Committee will have access to the complete interview data collected.

Further Information

This study has been approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board. Any questions you may have about this study may be directed to the study's principle investigator: Kelsey Wright. You may

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contact any other members of the research team through the contact information provided above. The plan

for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to the ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board 1 at

the University of Alberta. For questions or concerns regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of

research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615. This office has no direct involvement with

this project.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity

to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told

whom to contact. I agree to participate in a **one-on-one interview** of this research study described above.

I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

_____   _____

Participant's Name (printed) and Signature   Date

_____   _____

Researcher's Name (printed) and Signature   Date

Pro00081913

Appendix D Interview Guide

1. What experiences have you had in recreational sport?

    a. How did you join [this sporting event/opportunity]?

    b. How long have you participated?

    c. What is your highest level of competition?

2. Why do you define yourself as a recreational athlete?

    a. How important is this aspect of your identity?

    b. What are the parameters or elements that make you think of yourself as a rec athlete?

    c. What would make others a recreational athlete?

Now that we have discussed your sporting involvement, I want to switch gears a bit. My goal is

to understand the potential role of athletic involvement in facing adversity. I have chosen a

recreational athletic population for this study.

As a recreational athlete, you represent an under-represented group in adversity literature. My

goal in this conversation is to understand your experiences of adversity. Adversity can

encompass a wide range of events. For this discussion, I want you to specifically focus on

negative life events that happened outside of the sporting realm.

3. Please describe a particular adversity you have faced in your life.

    a. How did this event impact you?

    b. What was the aftermath of this adverse event?

    4. How did your participation in recreational sport change your response to this adverse
        event?

    a. Did your recreational sporting involvement change as a result of this adversity?

    b. Could you describe your experience with sport following this adversity?

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      c.   What changed in your experience of sport?

5.   Would you like to add anything else?

6.   Do you have any advice for the general population dealing with adversity in some way?

      a.   Is there anything you would like to say to those contemplating joining a recreational

           sport?

Appendix E Table 1

Table 1
Participant pseudonyms, age, and sport

Pseudonym	Age (years)	Sport
Sam	28	Marathon/ Ultramarathon
Reagan	27	Powerlifting
Gene	24	Multisport
Jordan	24	Soccer
Kai	27	Baseball, Hockey
Tristan	22	Hockey, Weight-training
Galen	18	Rowing
Taylor	24	Soccer, Kickboxing
Steph	24	Kickboxing, Weight-training

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