

‘It’s More than a Game’: Young Women’s Experiences with Physical Activity as a Means for Resilience throughout Adolescence

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explored how physical activity is experienced as a means for resilience as well as the defining characteristics and meaning of that experience. Physical activity has been connected to various physical, intellectual, psychological, and social benefits during adolescence. Four participants were interviewed, aged 18 to 21 years, all of whom were receiving a university education at the time of the interviews.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the methodology utilized to investigate the data generated through several semi-structured in depth interviews with each participant. The analyzed data formed the overarching theme of *self development in the face of adversity*, which was evident throughout the three superordinate themes: *channeling energy, nurturing relationships, and challenging the self*. The participants explained their passages through adolescence amidst adversities to be ones full of ups and downs, but ultimately progress towards their current accomplishments, goals, dreams, and personal growth. The themes are discussed within the context of the current literature and then followed by recommendations for future research and considerations for professionals.

The purpose of this study was to explore how physical activity is experienced as a means for resilience and to reveal the defining characteristics and meaning of those experiences. In order to understand the phenomenon of physical activity and resilience, the central research question was: what is the role of physical activity in young women's experiences of resilience during adolescence? This research question was based on the belief that individuals have unique perspectives in relation to the phenomenon and that there is an essence to their experiences that is shared with others.

Literature Review

Available literature has demonstrated that physical activity can provide many benefits to youth, including resilience (Collingwood, 1997; Fraster-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2007;

Martinek & Hellison, 1997, Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones 2005). *Resilience* is the process of effectively negotiating, adapting to, or managing significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets within individuals, their lives, or the environment facilitate this capacity for bouncing back in the face of adversity (Lee, Cheung, Kwong, 2012; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Richardson, 2002; Ungar, 2004a; Windle, 2011). There are three critical conditions to consider and incorporate when studying resilience: 1) growing up amidst distressing life conditions and demanding societal conditions that are considered significant threats or adversities, 2) the availability of protective factors that may counteract risk factors, and 3) the achievement of positive adaptation and development despite significant adversity (Windle, 2011).

Adversity or risk factors encompass negative life circumstances or individual characteristics that are statistically associated with adjustment difficulties or poor outcomes in one's future development (Luthar, & Cicchetti, 2000; Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009). These risks can be experienced personally, within the community, and/or in family areas. Examples include, but are not limited to, the following distressing life and societal conditions: poverty, stress, trauma, deprivation, oppression, prejudice, inadequate parenting, family violence, low IQ, and disability (Gitterman, 1991; Lee, et al., 2012; Luthar, et al. 2000; Willms, 2002). A common theme among these examples is that each lies outside of one's control. Youth have no choice in their biological make-up, the community they reside in, or the family that cares for them. In the context of the current study, the term adversity is conceptualized as an uncontrollable internal or external life circumstance that the participants perceived to be significantly difficult to overcome.

Protective factors are biological, psychological, and/or environmental processes that modify, ameliorate, or alter a person's response to some environmental stressor that would otherwise predispose him or her to maladaptive outcomes (Gitterman, 1991; Rutter, 1985; Rutter, 1990). Factors such as self-regulation skills, good parenting, community resources, effective schools, close relations with supportive adults, and connections with competent, pro-social adults in the wider community serve to protect human development under adverse conditions (Luthar, et al., 2000; Masten, et al. 2009). Prior research has demonstrated that physical activity can serve as a medium to provide youth access to external or internal protective factors such as supportive relationships with adults and peers (Goodman, 1999) or life skills,

including goal setting and planning, which work to buffer youth from poor life outcomes and promote positive adaptation (Martinek & Hellison, 1997).

The meaning of *positive adaptation* varies in the resilience literature. For example, in some cases positive adaptation is achieved when there is an absence of psychopathology or low levels of negative symptoms, while other cases suggest maintaining competence, returning to normal functioning, or thriving and flourishing are required (Windle, 2011). Some research even suggests that positive adaptation is not necessary and that individuals can experience resilience through maladaptive behaviors and actions, such as substance abuse (Ungar, 2004b). Ultimately, individual experiences of resilience are represented in humans' personal journeys to defining themselves as healthy despite adverse conditions (Ungar, 2004b). Resilience research has traditionally been carried out from an ecological approach, utilizing primarily quantitative methods in hopes of explaining *cause/effect* relationships (Masten, 2001; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Ungar, 2004a). More recently, there has been a growing body of literature looking at resilience with a constructionist lens (Madsen, Hicks, & Thompson, 2011; Ungar, 2004a; Ungar, 2004b; Ungar, 2005; Shek, Sung, & Merrick, 2012), where the meaning of physical activity is discussed and individual perspectives are prioritized (Carless & Douglas, 2010; Darbyshire, Macdougall, & Schiller, 2005). An ecological approach to research seeks to uncover and understand the crucial processes youth undergo on their journeys to health and wellbeing despite growing up with adversity.

Research has shown regular participation in physical activity to be associated with positive youth development. *Positive youth development* is described as a natural process suggesting that all youth have the potential to thrive and develop optimally (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). Active youth are more likely to experience higher physical, intellectual, psychological, and social developmental outcomes than their less active peers (Douyon, Brunte, Hosburgh, & Strunin, 2010; Fraster-Thomas, et al., 2007; Holt, Kingsley, Tink, Scherer, 2011; Madsen, et al. 2011; Petitpas, et al., 2005;). Resilience and positive youth development are similar in that they both describe pathways to healthy development through promoting assets in youth or protecting them from risk factors (Kia-Keating, Dowdy, & Morgan, 2011); however, the terms *resilience* and *positive youth development* are not synonymous. Conceptually, both resilience and positive youth development are grounded in the belief that all youth have the potential to ameliorate or avoid problematic outcomes and become contributing if not thriving

members of society (Schwartz, Patin, Coatsworth, & Szapocznik 2007). Nevertheless, resilience is only obtained and understood as a contributor to positive youth development if *adversity* is present (Lee et al., 2012). Resilience and positive youth development have the same goals of positive life outcomes; however, they cannot be equated, as adversity is a requirement of resiliency but not of positive youth development.

Physical activity, a term often used interchangeably with physical fitness and exercise, is a broad concept that involves all leisure and nonleisure body movement resulting in an increase of energy expenditure (Caspersen, Powell, & Christenson, 1985; Hahn, Payne, Gallant, & Fletcher, 2006). Previous research has demonstrated that physical activity is connected to positive youth development in physical, intellectual, social, and emotional domains (Fraser-Thomas, et al., 2007; NCRIM, 2002), but the voices and perspectives of youth who have faced adversity are mostly absent from this literature. With regards to physical activity and mental health, research has been predominantly *on* adolescents as opposed to being *with* or *for* them (Darbyshire, et al., 2005). Carless and Douglas (2010) identified that the majority of the literature focuses on measurement (i.e., what physical activity takes away in terms of symptoms, impairments and problems) as opposed to meaning (i.e., what physical activity contributes or brings to a person's life). This is worrisome because the specific *ways* in which sport and physical activity help people has been sidelined in the literature and is a valuable area to address (Carless & Douglas, 2010).

Adolescence is defined as the period of transition across the second decade of life where biological, psychological, and social characteristics undergo change in an interrelated manner as a person becomes adult-like (Lerner, Brown, & Kier, 2005). Adolescence is a time where individuals begin planning for their futures and where they have the opportunity to adopt healthy attitudes that could counter risk-taking behaviors and ultimately lead to a lifetime of desirable health behaviors (Wu, Rose, & Bancroft, 2006). Adolescence is a time with challenges, especially for females. During adolescence, females' dissatisfaction with their bodies increases and they are more likely than males to develop eating disorders (Lerner et al., 2005) and experience poorer psychosocial health in somatic, depressive, and internalizing areas (Räty, Larsson, Psychol, Söderfeldt, & Larsson, 2004). Active adolescent females experience above average self-confidence and moral development (Perry-Burney & Takyi, 2002) as well as improved access to social networks (Brady, 2005), higher self-esteem (Pederson & Seidman,

2004), self-efficacy (Bosscher & Smit, 1998), social acceptance, and global self-worth (FERENCE, 2004). Through physical activity, adolescent females have the opportunity to be in control, develop competence, and create a space for themselves as individuals (Perry-Burney & Takyi, 2002). Despite all these benefits, adolescent females remain significantly less active than their male counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2005). It is crucial that adolescent females receive interventions that could enhance their wellbeing and prevent poor health.

There is evidence suggesting that engagement in a diverse range of physical activities is associated with decreased chances of adolescents being involved in health risk behaviors with factors such as: alcohol and drug usage, sexual activity, delinquency, smoking, truancy, and seatbelt usage (Nelson & Gordon-Larsen, 2006). Resilient children possess traits of social competence, autonomy, optimism, and hope (Martinek & Hellison, 1997). These traits can be developed through quality physical activity programs that teach and emphasize skills in the areas of: teamwork, goal setting, conflict resolution, and personal/social responsibility (Martinek & Hellison, 1997).

Research exploring the processes adolescent females undergo as they build resilience is valuable. This knowledge informs professionals and communities to more readily support this population as adolescent females manage internal and external adversities in their transitions to adulthood. More research is needed that explains *how* resilient qualities are acquired and the experiential processes adolescents undergo as they determine how they will react to threatening circumstances (Richardson, 2002); this involves studying the interactions between risk exposure and the solutions they find to cope with personal and environmental adversities (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). In the current study, it was revealed that physical activity played an important role in the solutions the young women found to cope with adversity during adolescence. Participants in this study shared powerful stories about the protective nature of physical activity and how it fostered their strength, courage, and persistence; their insights offered information about what specific aspects of physical activity contributed to their resilience.

Methodology

Qualitative research is exploratory; it accepts the value of context and searches for a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As this study aimed to explore the experiences of young women throughout their adolescence and the meanings they associated with physical activity, qualitative research was appropriate (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2005). This study fell into a constructivist paradigm, where there is no objective truth; meaning only occurs in relation to the mind (Crotty, 1998). Furthermore, interpretivism guided the research methods and analysis, meaning that interpretations were grasped through the subjective contexts of each unique situation (Grix, 2002). In phenomenological investigations, how people perceive their world is emphasized and an essence of psychological meaning is revealed (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009; Smith, 2003). Phenomenology's roots in philosophy generate distinctive ontological and epistemological concepts. Husserl (1927) discusses the human experience in relation to how individuals know their experiences (as cited in Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Husserl was most interested in how people reflect with such depth and rigor that they are able to identify the essential qualities of an experience and an essence could be shared with others. This essence is found through investigating lived examples of the phenomenon under investigation. In phenomenological research, the focus is to unravel the readily experienced world; therefore, one cannot see subjects and objects in isolation or determine what is "real" and what is in the mind (Landridge & Hager-Johnson, 2009). These philosophical underpinnings influenced how I approached collecting and analyzing data. I wanted to know the processes that a group of individuals with similar experiences went through on their journeys to health and wellbeing despite growing up amidst adversity.

The specific branch of phenomenology that was utilized in this study was Smith's (2003) Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA embraces researcher subjectivity and reflexivity; therefore, specific epistemological and ontological assumptions guided me as I attempted to make sense of the data (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). While I could observe and experience empathy with the participants, I could never share their experiences entirely. Each person in the study, including myself, contributed an authentic perspective that was exclusive to their embodied positions in the world (Smith, 2003). The findings of this study are a product of a double hermeneutic process where I was making sense of the participants, who were making sense of their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Therefore, as the researcher, I played an instrumental role in this study and took necessary steps to bracket and acknowledge my personal assumptions through keeping a research journal, peer debriefing, and member checking (Ashworth, 2003; Fischer, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman, 2011).

Participants

Four participants were interviewed, aged 18 to 21 years, all of whom were receiving a university education at the time of the interviews. Participants saw posters displayed in settings where physical activity was encouraged and there were high populations of young people. They volunteered for the study and we co-determined whether they met the selection criteria via phone or email. Each participant had experienced a form of internal or external adversity in adolescence (e.g. divorce, loss of a parent, bullying, mental illness). They also identified themselves as resilient and indicated that they managed adversity with physical activity (e.g. dance, skating, soccer, cross country running). The pseudonyms I created with the participants were as follows: Carly, Rochelle, Terra, and Jennifer.

Interviews

This study aimed to explore individuals' lived experiences; therefore, an in-depth interview was the primary method utilized in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Specifically, a *semi-structured interview* was implemented, as recommended in IPA (Smith, 2003). This method allowed me to engage with the participants in flexible dialogues where I could modify questions in the context of each interview and probe further as interesting ideas emerged; I was also able to elicit specific details and deepen my understanding (Shank, 2006). Prior to data collection, I conducted a pilot study with two peers to determine the format, initial questions, and additional questions for the interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I incorporated open ended questions to avoid leading the participants and to encourage elaboration. I also utilized the method of *funneling* where I asked broad questions initially and then narrowed the questions to probe specific issues and better grasp the participant's worldview (Smith, & Osborn, 2003). An interview and follow-up conversation was conducted with each participant, producing approximately 8 hours of audio-recorded data, which was later transcribed word for word into text. Transcribing the data was a crucial step in IPA because the text was later broken down into themes and clusters (Smith, 2003).

Data Analysis

During analysis, I was constantly balancing emic and etic positions with the collaborative approach recommended in IPA research (Reid, et al., 2009). With an emic perspective, I was relating to the participants and making sense of my own experiences *with* them. On the contrary, I maintained an etic position as I analyzed each participants' own words as well as the

convergences and divergences of experiences in the overall data set. As I was so heavily involved in the meaning making process, it was essential for me to recognize and distinguish my experiences and interpretations from those of the participants. However, I feel like my perspective as an insider relative to the research topic allowed me to better engage with the participants and reach a level of insight that could not be achieved otherwise.

An idiographic approach was utilized to analyze the data, in which cases were reviewed individually before generalizations were made (Smith, 2003). Initially, I read and re-read the first participant’s transcripts and reflected in the margins about the descriptive, semantic, and conceptual aspects of the text (Reid, et al., 2005; Smith, 2003; Smith, et al., 2009). I then drew out patterns and themes which I later organized into clusters. Next, I followed the same steps with the other participants. Once each case was analyzed individually, I integrated the cases and produced a final table of themes (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Findings

In the final stage of analysis, three superordinate themes emerged, tied together by an overarching theme. The overarching theme of *self-development in the face of adversity* was found among the other themes. It was prevalent as the participants described the processes they underwent in the pursuits of resilience despite adversity. Their journeys were influenced by the superordinate themes of *channeling energy*, *nurturing relationships*, and *challenging the self*. First, *channeling energy* explored the participants’ desire and need to find an immediate distraction and a positive outlet when confronted with adversity. Secondly, *nurturing relationships* was discovered to be an important component in the participants' passages towards healing and recovery. Physical activity provided a means to find balance, belief in self, self-expression as well as peer and mentor support. Lastly, *challenging the self* was revealed as the theme directly related to overcoming adversity as well as thriving and flourishing despite life challenges. Autonomy and self actualization were important facets of this critical experience. Figure 1 illustrates the themes that emerged from the data and how they are connected.

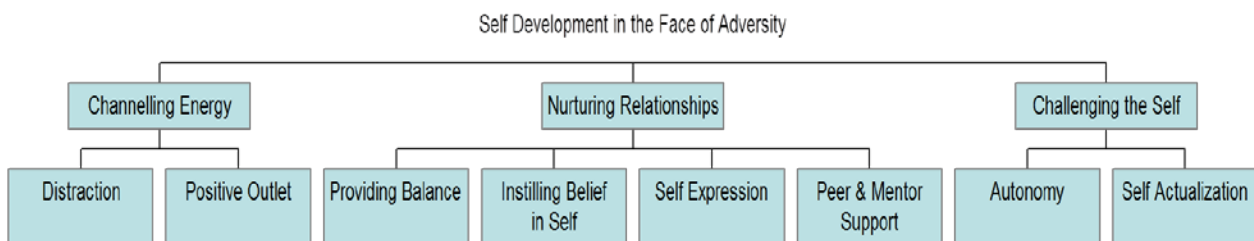


Figure 1. The role of physical activity in young women's experiences of resilience during adolescence: Overview of themes and subthemes.

Self Development in the Face of Adversity

"I worked on my stuff [and] myself through [dance]" Carly explained in a conversation about the purpose of dance in her experiences coping with adversity. Carly identified that dance helped her express her feelings in an authentic and individual manner. After growing up in a conflicted home due to divorce and poverty, she reflected that dance facilitated sorting things out and expressing her emotions through a positive outlet. She was then able to move forward in her own personal journey to wellbeing despite the things she couldn't control at home or at school. In each participants' story, a specific activity or sport served as a refuge where they could work on themselves and continue to grow despite the chaos and havoc they were experiencing in their external and internal worlds. From the experience of physical activity in itself, the theme of *self development in the face of adversity* emerged.

Terra brought forth an interesting perspective about the purpose of physical activity in relation to positive development and resilience. She discussed how it was not uncommon to fall in with the wrong crowd or start using drugs if one dropped out of sport. She found her experiences with soccer made her stronger and helped her navigate through hardships in adolescence. Terra experienced severe bullying within and outside her sport. With a hint of relief she declared that "as tough as some of those times were... I am so glad it was just soccer kind of problems, not really life problems." Terra's narrative described a strong parallel in her adverse experiences within physical activity and those in her outside world. In essence, physical activity served as a place where it was safer to address conflict, feel pressure and sometimes fail or make mistakes in comparison to other areas of life where there were more severe consequences.

"If I wasn't involved in sport... I have no idea what I would have done" Rochelle declared when she was discussing how physical activity impacted her life in adolescence. She identified a specific point in her adolescence, shortly after her father passed away, where skating and school sports provided her an opportunity to feel "normal". It was soothing for her to have something normal amongst the vast and unfamiliar emptiness at home. In her words, sport afforded her "a chance to take a step back" from the void of her missing dad, her mother's grief and indifference, as well as how unsettled her brother was. This sense of normalcy through participating in physical activity with her peers and teachers initiated a movement towards healing, recovery, and

positive development. She was therefore able to tap into the necessary resources she needed to continue to move forward through such a difficult time in her development.

Jennifer experienced much difficulty with social relationships and self esteem while living with Social Anxiety Disorder in adolescence. She described physical activity as something positive in which she could “get out of her regular self.” Physical activity also allowed Jennifer to have fun and feel joy, feelings which became fewer and farther between in the rougher points of her adolescence. Jennifer commented on how becoming more active again, like she was in childhood, sparked playfulness and revitalizing feelings after going through an emotional slump in adolescence. "I remember being happy... being in track, in running back when I was a kid so I was like okay you should do this again." She associated physical activity in her early stages of development with freedom, joyfulness, and not worrying so much about what others thought. In adolescence, reigniting that relationship with physical activity allowed her to navigate through the isolation she felt in adolescence and eventually she felt more able to connect with others. The pleasure and optimism physical activity provided helped her move toward what she considered to be a healthier way of living.

The themes that emerged in the participants' stories identified how physical activity helped these participants develop themselves positively despite the adversities they endured in adolescence. Specifically, the superordinate themes of *channeling energy*, *nurturing relationships*, and *challenging the self* emerged as the methods in which physical activity influenced the participants' resilience. Themes will be presented in the following sections that illustrate the intricate details of how physical activity served as a mechanism for resilience. Despite the adversities they endured, the participants all shared stories of strength; commitment to taking hardships in stride; and a willingness to continue to pursue health, wellness, and excellence in all aspects of their lives.

Channeling Energy

In the language and wording of the participants, "channeling" or "releasing" energy was a common thread linking their individual experiences. They expressed how this method of managing adversity with physical activity followed them into adulthood. For example, Terra shared: "I feel like sport was a way for me to just go and release that energy and release any stress that I had so now... if I have a tough day at work I can really just channel that energy and go out for a run." Similarly, Jennifer commented that physical activity is like a vent in the sense

that it "puts your energy towards something." Furthermore, Jennifer explained, "I will go to the track and just let everything go." Each participant generally had different experiences with the types of activities they channeled their energy into; however, they all experienced elements of the distraction and positive outlet sub themes that formed the superordinate theme of *channeling energy*. All of the participants, particularly Terra and Jennifer, referred frequently to *channeling energy* as a method of immediately dealing with the stress or upset related to uncontrollable adversity in their lives.

Nurturing Relationships

Throughout the course of the interviews and data analysis, I noticed common aspects between how the participants utilized physical activity in their relationships with themselves and others. "It taught me how to be a good friend" Carly declared in our second interview while she reflected on the importance of the relationships she made through dance. An aura of teamwork, companionship, support, and camaraderie was presented in the stories of the participants in addition to the learning processes that go along with such characteristics. Terra's comments on the relational aspect of physical activity were unique in a sense because she was involved primarily in a team sport while the other participants competed in individual sports. "Anytime we stepped on the field we were a family," Terra said. She explained that although her team was often divided outside of soccer, they were united when they stepped on the field.

In their individual ways, the other participants' stories converged in the sense that it was sport, specifically, which taught them how to work effectively with others. These interpersonal skills were important protective factors as Terra and the other participants encountered adversity during adolescence; these skills were also very transferable to academics and the workplace as the participants transitioned to young adulthood. Elements that primarily related to the participants' relationships with others contributed to *nurturing relationships*. Specifically, self-expression as well as peer and mentor support were two themes that emerged from the data addressing the interpersonal aspects of *nurturing relationships*.

In addition to how participants were able to nurture relationships with others through physical activity and sport, the participants were also provided with a strong means for personal growth and development. Rochelle discussed how some of her most important lessons were from the times she failed in skating. Rochelle reflected with a grin in our second interview, "cause some days just suck!" She explained that she would be covered in bruises in her attempts to

learn new moves: "you fall a lot... and you fail a million times before you ever succeed... [but] you succeed once and you remember that feeling and then you fail a million times more, so you have to be willing to continue." Her experiences with failure and persistence revealed the emotional and psychological aspects of skating. In my interpretations of Rochelle's experiences as well as those of the other participants, I perceived that the learning that goes on in such situations requires one to trust and rely on one's self. The relationship that one nurtures with self is built on the foundations of balance as well as belief in one self, subthemes that emerged in *nurturing relationships*.

Challenging the Self

Challenging the self was a superordinate theme that emerged through the participants' stories of perseverance, persistence, and their innate desires to push the limits of their potential. "Can I keep going?" Terra reiterated a few times throughout the interviews. I felt her perspective highlighted the essence of this theme. In Terra's words:

I love that feeling... you know 'can I push myself till I can't go anymore?' And reach my goal and then emotionally sometimes when you work so hard... your emotions just come out... you start tearing up 'cause you're so happy or you start crying 'cause you're so tired.

Terra illuminated the emotional investments these young women shared in their experiences with physical activity. She continued with a hint of exasperation and laughter, that she feels "tired but excited" after she has completed a hard workout or competition. After a long pause to reflect, she elaborated that she also feels "proud.... mostly like belief in myself afterwards." I felt that the *challenging the self* superordinate theme aligned and interconnected with the *nurturing relationships* and *channeling energy* superordinate themes. Specifically, aspects of subthemes such as instilling belief in self and positive outlet were also evident in the stories that emerged through the *challenging the self* superordinate theme. The participants embodied experiences with movement in which everything they had was invested in and channeled towards. This dedication expanded their perceptions of what was possible.

Jennifer recollected the specific aspects of cross country that influenced her resilience. She summed it up quite eloquently in a simple statement: "it's about running your own race." Jennifer explained this idea further: "it's about resilience and just putting yourself in the right

mind frame... I've had races when I don't start out good but then the last kilometer will be better... It's about individual determination." I perceived Jennifer's experience to essentially equate racing to a metaphor for resilience; this was an idea that emerged from Terra's experiences earlier, when she discussed the shared meaning of resilience through life and through sport. When individuals encounter adversities throughout life or within physical activity, it does not mean they are destined for failure. These are the most crucial times for learning and personal growth.

The lessons the participants learned through physical activity in adolescence are vast and varied. Most participants expressed that they are far from being done learning or discovering themselves further as they continue their personal journeys towards health and wellbeing. In a conversation about the unique aspects of physical activity that promoted resilience, Rochelle described her experience with running a marathon for the first time. In what felt like an insurmountable task, it became a life changing moment.

Finally when I crossed that finish line, I felt like "okay, I can't feel my body and feel like I'm going to die, someone get me a stretcher!" Honestly all that was running through my mind after I could think again was, "you did it!" Being able to self-talk your way through the most painful thing I've ever done so far... and be able to finish made me think: "you can do anything!" Doesn't matter how hard your stupid class is that you're taking or whatever concept you don't understand, you can do this! And I don't think I would have ever experienced something like that if I hadn't [ran] and done physical activity... It totally changed my perspective on what I was doing... I don't think you need like a big huge moment like that either... I think even people scoring a winning basket is enough!

In Rochelle's account, it is clear that the accomplishments individuals make through the medium of physical activity are transferable to other facets of life and that these accomplishments can be incredibly powerful. The role of physical activity in building resilience during adolescence cannot be underestimated. The experiences the young women gained through participating in physical activity allowed them to develop positively and manage adversity through channeling energy, nurturing relationships, and ultimately challenging the self by working towards autonomy and self actualization. The assets and resources gained through the medium of

physical activity allowed the participants to ameliorate the risk factors they experienced. In turn, the participants felt motivated and empowered to strive for their full potentials, flourishing in sport and in life.

Discussion

In the context of the literature, I noticed that the participants' stories revealed that it was often characteristics associated with *sport* as opposed to physical activity, which facilitated their resilience in adolescence. *Sport* is a form of physical activity that includes gross physical skills, competition, and institutional aspects such as rules, history, and a wide geographical base (Drewe, 2003). Alternatively, *physical activity* is a broader concept, where essentially any movement of the body resulting in energy expenditure is included (Caspersen, et al., 1985). Therefore, there was much overlap between these two constructs in my discussions with the participants. I chose to use *physical activity* as the primary construct to be explored through my research question because this construct includes various forms of physical expression, such as dance, which is often debated as being a sport or a performing art in the literature (Nordin-Bates, 2012). Most of the participants, with the exception of Jennifer, had completed their competitive careers in sport by the time of the interviews. I noticed as I listened to the participants' stories, that although they repeatedly referred to their experiences with *sport* facilitating their resilience through adolescence, those teen years were also a time where the participants built meaningful relationships with *physical activity*. Furthermore, the participants expressed that physical activity was what they accessed in adulthood when they were coping with stressful situations. I question if this would have been the case if they had not developed such meaningful relationships with physical activity through the medium of sport in adolescence. Therefore, the constructs of sport and physical activity are intricately connected and often utilized interchangeably throughout this discussion.

This study has added to the literature exploring the experiences of adolescent females, emphasizing the constructs of resilience and physical activity. Specifically, it discussed the importance of youth developing positive short and long term strategies to manage adversity (Sheperd, Reynolds, & Morgan, 2010; Ungar, 2004a). This research uncovered physical activity to be a protective factor, supporting previous studies (Collingwood, 1997; Fraser-Thomas, et al., 2007; Martinek & Hellison, 1997; Windle, 2011; Masten, et al.). The participants' experiences in their chosen pursuits influenced the complex psychosocial processes they underwent as they

achieved resilience and positive development despite difficult life circumstances in adolescence, also reinforcing past research results (Richardson, 2002; Sheperd, et al., 2010; Ungar, 2004a; Ungar, 2005). As often elucidated to in the literature, resilience or positive development in the face of adversity (Lee, et al., 2012) is a dynamic process where one adapts and achieves perceived health and wellbeing (Luthar, et al., 2000; Richardson, 2002; Ungar, 2005; Windle 2011). Ungar (2004b) brought forth the idea that youth often navigate and negotiate within their environments for the resources they need to survive and define themselves as healthy despite adverse conditions, thus achieving resilience. In the current study, physical activity appeared to function as a safety net where the participants found resources and discovered healthy ways of coping despite the adversity they were experiencing.

Physical activity held powerful underlying meanings for the participants, another result supported by prior research (Richardson, 2003; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001). The subthemes that emerged from the data illuminated the participants' relationships with physical activity and how it contributed to providing them resources as well as evoking the motivation and strength within, assets that were necessary to survive in times of hardship. Specifically, physical activity influenced the participants' abilities to navigate and negotiate their circumstances, to be kind and nurturing towards themselves, and to ultimately psychologically flourish within and outside their activities, so that they could achieve *positive development in the face of adversity*, just as previous studies suggests (Collingwood, 1997; Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, Wilson, & Crocker, 2012; Ference, 2004; Fraser-Thomas, et al., 2007; Gilman, 2001; Martinek & Hellison, 1997; Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski, & DeLongis, 2013; Neff, 2011; Ungar, 2004b).

Previous literature suggested that protective factors function in young people's lives to modify, ameliorate, or alter a person's response to environmental stressors that would otherwise predispose that individual to maladaptive outcomes (Gitterman, 1991; Rutter, 1985; Rutter, 1990). Developing skills to self regulate during stressful conditions has been shown to be crucial for positive development (Luthar, et al., 2000). The participants' references to the role physical activity played in "channeling" or "releasing" energy, explicated these essential skills. For example, Rochelle discussed how physical activity gave her "something to do instead of feeling frustrated" or "boxed in and pent up with [her] life." She went on to explain that: "when stuff was bad, I always felt like 'okay, activity is there to get you out of the house or get you out of your

head." Rochelle's words captured the essence of *channeling energy* that was shared among the other participants.

The value of relationships for positive development in adolescent females has been emphasized in the literature repeatedly (NCRIM, 2002). Specifically, physical activity serves as a catalyst for such growth in interpersonal relationships where individuals are able to connect more readily with their peers, parents, and communities (see Fraser-Thomas, et al., 2007); in addition, intrapersonal relationships are also facilitated as they can effectively foster positive self regard, coping skills, and good mental health (see Paluska & Schwenk, 2000; Taylor, Sallis & Needle, 1985). Physical activity has been linked to fostering positive social development through building citizenship (Elley & Kirk, 2002), positive peer relationships (Evans & Roberts, 1987; Weis, Smith, & Theeboom, 1996), and leadership skills (Wright & Côté, 2003). In the same token, it has also been demonstrated that physical activity is associated with improved mental health and psychological benefits (Paluska & Schwenk, 2000; Taylor, et al., 1985). Through their participation, youth are offered opportunities to feel enjoyment, enhance self-esteem, decrease stress and anxiety, and alleviate depression (Health Canada, 2011; Long 1985; Mulholland, 2008). Going beyond the surface of *channeling energy*, the superordinate theme of *nurturing relationships* included the intricate details of processes that work to heal or recover individuals during and after they experience adversity. Through *nurturing relationships*, the participants expressed a heightened sense of internal and external resources; therefore, they were more able to counter difficult circumstances effectively.

Prior research has suggested that physical activity provides a means for people to develop optimal psychological functioning so that they can flourish at their maximum potential, otherwise known as "eudemonic wellbeing" (Ryff, 1989). In addition, it has been supported that quality physical activity contributes to women's lives, allowing them to fulfill their potential through goal setting/striving, providing bonding experiences, allowing for self-reflection, and developing a physical/able body (Ferguson, et al., 2012). In the current research, the connection between physical activity and optimal functioning or flourishing was reinforced through the theme *challenging the self*. When I developed my research question and began to explore the literature, I expected the results of my study to fall into the second wave of resilience literature as identified in Richardson's (2002) metatheory of resilience. The second wave differed from the first wave because it was centered in the *processes* youth undergo on their journeys to health and

well being despite adversity; whereas the first wave was focused on measuring risk and protective factors in youth. *Challenging the Self* and *Nurturing Relationships* aligned with the second wave of resiliency research. Richardson (2002) also identified a third wave of resiliency research, which involved studying the motivational forces within individuals or groups and how these forces can be activated through experiences. *Challenging the Self* emerged in my data set; in the heart of this theme lied the innate desire and motivation within the participants. This drive allowed them to keep going in the face of challenges and to come out feeling empowered through the themes of *autonomy* and *self actualization*. Therefore, the results of the current study involved aspects of both the second and third waves of resilience research.

The preventative, protective, and positive developmental characteristics that physical activity can offer youth is useful for professionals who work directly (counsellors, teachers, coaches) or indirectly (agencies, organizations) with adolescent females, or youth in general, who are facing adversity. With regards to creating optimal experiences with physical activity for adolescent females, the participants in this study explained that there is a need for initiatives to foster the following attributes:

- Safe, welcoming, and supportive environments
- Opportunities for both success and challenge
- Positive young female role models

Strengths & Limitations

There are limitations to the present study, as there are in any research. As explained earlier, a qualitative research methodology was implemented to meet the goal of unraveling the human experience. This informed certain decisions when developing a research methodology. For example, I presented my interview questions and the constructs of physical activity and resilience to the participants in an open ended manner. This approach could be questioned because there was no way to ensure the participants were understanding the questions and the constructs in the same ways. I could have made things more structured and standardized by conducting a survey or even providing the participants with definitions from the literature of physical activity and resilience during the interviews; however, I chose to keep things more open-ended to align with my qualitative methodology. I was most curious about *their* uninfluenced definitions and ideas surrounding the constructs being investigated. This study provided in depth experiences of a specific homogenous sample involving a small number of

participants; therefore, the findings are not generalizable to a wide-ranging population. However, generalizability was not the goal of my research. Similarly, this study only explored the experiences of young women who thought physical activity helped them manage adversity. The experiences the participants expressed were positive for the most part; however, I am aware that physical activity is not *always* a positive experience for people, especially young women and adolescent females (see Gibbons & Humbert, 2008). Therefore, the results of this study will not be generalizable to all young women. For example, the perspectives of inactive females would certainly offer valuable information in resilience research. Resilience can be experienced in different ways and obtained through various means (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Therefore, it would be advantageous for future studies to explore how adolescent females experience other activities such as art, music, writing, or other hobbies as a means to manage the adversity in their lives. As many adolescent females do not necessarily have positive experiences with physical activity, future research into other mechanisms for managing adversity would be a practical and meaningful area to address.

Conclusion

This research has contributed to the literature by describing four young women's experiences with resilience and physical activity during adolescence. Current literature has fallen short regarding the lived experiences of resilience in relation to physical activity among adolescent females specifically. The major contribution of this study to the literature was the presentation of young women's encounters with adversity during adolescence and how their relationships with physical activity helped them navigate on their journeys towards perceived health and well being.

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