

Growing From Sports-Related Adversity: Investigating the Role of Spirituality in the Resiliency Process of College Student Athletes

Edgar F. Arceo, Sarah Murnen PhD
Department of Psychology Kenyon College
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Abstract

This present study investigated contributing factors, and their possible sources, that help student-athletes “bounce back” from sport-related adversity. Drawing directly from Galli and Vealey (2008) and utilizing the Richardson’s Resilience Model (1990), the study profiled student-athlete’s resiliency process as well as examined the relation between resiliency factors. The three key factors explored in this study included athletic coping skills, social support, and degree of spirituality, with emphasis on spirituality. Upon administering a battery of questionnaires regarding these three variables, a total sample of 74 college athletes was gathered, and from this sample, a sub group (N=10) was selected for interview. Interview participants were queried regarding the most difficult adversity they had encountered in sports, and of these, only one participant presented a profile of Resilience Reintegration, while the majority presented profiles of Reintegration Back to Homeostasis or Reintegration with a Loss. Generally, survey participants reported high levels of perceived social support and athletic coping skills, while reporting low levels of spirituality. Implications and limitations are discussed. Additionally, previously unexamined factors in the literature relating to favorable outcome after an experience of sports-related adversity are also considered and discussed.

Introduction

As documented by Richardson (2002), the study of resiliency, in general, has evolved in three stages, or waves. The **first wave** of resiliency inquiry was grounded in investigator’s efforts to identify and describe resilient *qualities* that predicted social and personal achievement. Such studies yielded a list of ‘resilient qualities.’

The **second wave**, which the present study orients from, framed resiliency as a *process* of coping with disruption (i.e., stressors, adversity) and reintegrating from that disruption. This kind of research produced a model with four possible outcomes, namely (and in order of least to most favorable), dysfunctional reintegration, reintegration with loss, reintegration back to comfort zone, and resilient reintegration (see Figure 1).

The **third wave** of resiliency research has focused on the identification of motivational *force(s)* within individuals and groups that render resilient reintegration; it has taken the most favorable outcome of second wave inquiry, namely, resilient reintegration, and has put it under a microscope of sorts, exploring its origin, nature, and accessibility. Moreover, resiliency inquiry has refined its focus to “**growth or adaptation through disruption rather than to just recover or bounce back.**” More specifically, this inquiry is driven by the question, *What and where is the energy source or motivation to reintegrate resiliently?* (Richardson, 2002).

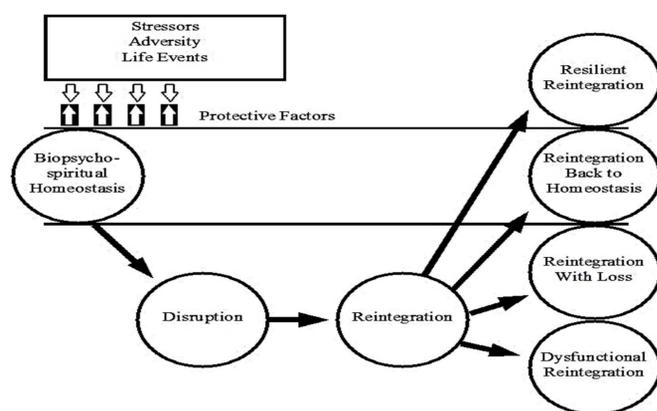


Figure 1. The Resiliency Model, Richardson (2002).

In our investigation with college student-athletes, who experience sport-related adversity, we sought to build upon Galli and Vealey’s (2008) study, which explored the resiliency process among athletes from an ‘adversity-growth’ perspective. Although this study worked from a second wave orientation, it laid a foundation from which to move into third wave resiliency inquiry. More precisely, since third wave inquiry suggests that resiliency comes from external social, ecological, and spiritual sources, our primary interest focused on the spiritual aspect and its role in the realm of sport-related adversity for college-athletes.

It has been well-established that athletes who have both high perceived social support and inter/intrapersonal qualities are more likely to experience resiliency reintegration upon undergoing sport-related adversity (Reese & Hardy, 2000; Cresswell & Eklund, 2007; Galli & Vealey, 2008). Although the concept of spirituality has been well-documented in the literature of sports psychology (Watson and Nesti, 2005), the role of spirituality in the resiliency process within the context of sports has largely been left unexamined. Thus, the presented study explored the relationship between spirituality and athletic coping skills and perceived social support. The study also examined the relationship between spirituality and student-athlete’s resiliency profile.



Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1, Survey –

Student-athletes who report being more spiritual will have high athletic coping skills and high perceived social support

Hypothesis 2, Interview –

Student athletes with high perceived social support, high athletic coping skills, and who report to be more spiritual will be more likely to experience resilient reintegration.

Methods

➤ **Participants** – Student-athletes from the North Coast Athletic Conference (NCAC) were recruited for this study. All participants (N=74) were in active competition and ranged from 18-24 years of age, females (65%), males (35%). Thirteen total sports were represented in this study, with soccer, football, and basketball as the most represented sports (47% of all participants played one of these three sports).

➤ **Procedure** – This study had a two-part procedure. The first part involved student-athletes answering a battery of questionnaires in the form of a survey, while the second part of the study entailed a follow-up interview with a sub-group selected from the pool of participants.

➤ **Survey** – Participants were administered an online survey which included the following measures.

Measures

- Athletic Coping Skills Inventory- 28
- Social Support Questionnaire – Shorten Version
- Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality

➤ **Interview** – A sub-group of 10 student-athletes was recruited from convenience for a follow-up interview regarding the most difficult adversity participants had encountered in sports, 7 females and 3 males. The interview followed a semi-structural approach.

Protocol

- Galli & Vealey (2008) Interview Guide
- Approximately 60 minutes in length

➤ **Data Analysis** – Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to codify and profile athletes’ resiliency experiences. Utilizing Galli and Vealey’s (2008) Conceptual Model of Sport Resilience (see Figure 2.), athletes were categorized into one of four reintegration outcomes, and analyzed with their survey responses regarding athletic coping, social support, and spirituality.

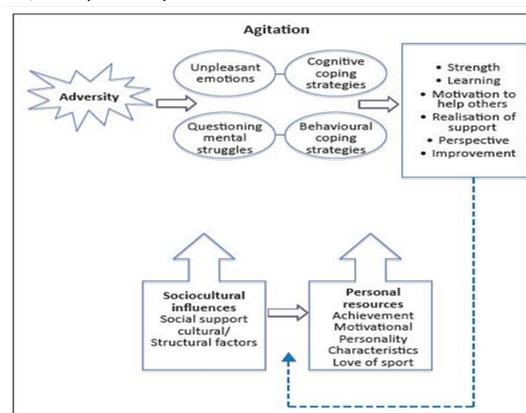


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Sport Resilience, Galli & Vealey (2008).

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Results

Hypothesis 1 –

Pearson’ Correlation Test

Seventy four student-athletes were surveyed about their athletic coping skills (M = 76.97, SD = 9.74) and degree of spirituality (M = 5.59, SD = 1.61). A Pearson’s r data analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation, $r = .37$. Student-athletes who scored higher on athletic coping skills reported a higher degree of spirituality. See Figure 3. Statistical significance was not found between degree of spirituality and perceived social support.

Athletic Coping Skills (M = 76.97, SD = 9.74); Degree of Spirituality (M = 5.59, SD = 1.61).

Hypothesis 2 –

Student-athletes (N=10) with high perceived social support, high athletic coping skills and a high degree of spirituality did not necessarily experience resilient reintegration.

Profiles of the Ten Interviewed Student-Athletes

Student-Athlete ID	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Sport	Softball	Softball	Softball	Basketball	Soccer	Soccer	Soccer	Soccer	Track & Field	Soccer
Athletic Coping Skills	74	88	91	81	65	81	75	75	70	68
Perceived Social Support	33	36	32	32	23	35	36	34	35	33
Degree of Spirituality	5	4	6	7	4	6	6	7	8	4
Adversity Type	Physical	Physical	Physical	Physical	Team Conflict	Physical	Team Conflict	Confidence Lapse	Burn Out	Physical
Resiliency Outcome	Reintegrate Back to Homeostasis	Reintegrate with Loss	Reintegrate back to Homeostasis	Reintegrate with Loss	Resilient Reintegration	Reintegrate with Loss	Dysfunctional Reintegration	Reintegration with Loss	Reintegrate with Loss	Reintegrate back to Homeostasis

Athletic Coping Skills (M = 76.97, SD = 9.74); Social Support (M = 32.40, SD = 4.60); Degree of Spirituality (M = 5.59, SD = 1.61).

Discussion

Though our results, in regards to the process of resiliency (hypothesis 2), seem counter-intuitive to the findings of previous studies (Reese, 2000; Galli and Vealey, 2008), since those who generally scored high on athletic coping skills, perceived social support and degree of spirituality were farthest from experiencing resilient reintegration, while those who scored low on all three in fact experienced resilient reintegration, (i.e., student-athlete with ID No. 5 scored the lowest in ALL three categories yet was the only one to experience resilient reintegration), we must recognize the limitations of our study – namely, sampling out of convenience and operating with a small sample size.

On the other hand, results from our hypothesis 1 suggests a positive association between athletic coping skills and spirituality. If third wave resiliency inquiry is to hold true, future empirical studies utilizing these two variables may be able to further support efforts of identifying the motivational force(s) within individuals and groups that render resilient reintegration among college student-athletes.

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