Exploring adversity and the potential for growth among Iron[wo]man competitors: A focus on gendered labor and (dis)empowerment

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Introduction

The Ironman triathlon is one of the most famous endurance races in the world. Consisting of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride, and a 26.2-mile run, it requires significant physical and mental fitness training (Atkinson, 2008) as well as substantial investments in equipment, time, and emotional energy. As opposed to more casual leisure pursuits, the Ironman triathlon can be considered a serious leisure pursuit (Stebbins, 1982). Like other serious athletic leisure pursuits, participation in triathlon can facilitate personal growth experiences, especially through overcoming sport-related adversity (e.g., Atkinson, 2008; Connaughton et al., 2010; Galli & Reel, 2012). In fact, researchers have reported self-discovery, empowerment, agency, and mental toughness as potential benefits of sport-related growth through adversity (Atkinson, 2008; Cronan & Scott, 2008; Galli & Vealey, 2008; Granskog, 1992, 2003; Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Howells et al., 2017; Sarkar et al., 2015).

Previous researchers exploring female triathlete experiences have suggested that such empowerment, self-discovery, and growth are evidence of resistance to "typical male ideas of sport" (Cronan & Scott, 2008, p. 33), reflective of the ways that women contest the dominant meanings of athletic participation and performance. For example, Lloyd and Little (2010) asserted that women's participation in triathlon enhanced their well-being, promoted increased confidence as they learned new leisure skills, and facilitated empowerment.

While these reported benefits seem overwhelmingly positive, feminist research shows that serious leisure—like the world of athletics more broadly—is experienced in deeply gendered ways (Dilley & Scraton, 2010; Shaw, 1994; Wearing, 1998) including for women triathletes (Lamont et al., 2019). We have chosen to use the serious leisure literature because the female Ironman competitors in the current study are not professional triathletes; however, they spent an inordinate amount of time in the three disciplines of the sport. According to Stebbins (2007), "serious leisure" consists of the "...systematic pursuit of an amateur, a hobbyist, or a volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (p. 5). Using recent feminist theory on popular and neoliberal feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Banet-Weiser, et al., 2020; Rottenburg, 2014) to frame our discussion and analysis, our study combines feminist leisure studies (e.g., Dilley & Scraton, 2010; Lamont et al., 2019; Lloyd & Little, 2010; Shaw, 1994; Wearing, 1998) and sport psychology (e.g., Galli & Reel, 2012; Howells et al., 2020; McCormick et al., 2018; Roy-Davis et al., 2017; Sarkar et al., 2015; Tamminen et al., 2013; Wadey et al., 2013) to examine the experiences of seven women Ironman athletes.

Literature Review

Women, Triathlon, and Serious Leisure

As a leisure pursuit, triathlon requires substantial training. Participants commonly train for multiple hours daily and often employ coaches to help maximize performance. Triathlon also requires special equipment and apparel for each sport discipline. One survey administered by USA Triathlon in 2009 reported average expenditures of

more than \$2,800 on bicycles and race fees in a 12-month period, with additional spending on bicycle equipment, training/coaching, footwear, and nutritional supplements (Adams, 2015). Since Ironman triathlon requires intensive physical and mental training, and significant financial investment, we consider Ironman triathlon a serious leisure pursuit in addition to a competitive sport.

Researchers (e.g., Kennelly et al., 2013; Lamont et al., 2014; Lamont et al., 2019) have examined triathlon (and other endurance pursuits) as serious leisure as well as the impact it has on the lives of individuals participating in such endeavors. Kennelly and colleagues (2013), and Lamont and colleagues (2019), noted that amateur triathletes faced distinct social costs for participation. In both cases, athletes negotiated constraints by prioritizing triathlon training over other obligations (e.g., family obligations).

Raisborough (2006) specifically examined women's experiences of serious leisure and noted that women were particularly affected by issues of access and "are critically aware of the 'threats' to their leisure... negotiation of these form an integral and on-going aspect of their serious leisure participation" (p. 258). Cronan and Scott (2008) identified triathlon as one site of resistance to dominant gender discourses, specifically those about women's bodies, sociality, and the meanings they ascribe to triathlon participation. Collectively, therefore, leisure studies literature indicates that women experience gendered barriers to triathlon participation, but that women also exercise a degree of agency to negotiate these constraints and, in the process, are able to "recreate and reappropriate their bodies and their sport" (Cronan & Scott, 2008, p. 17).

Sport-Related Adversity and Growth

In the sport psychology literature, it is established that sport-related adversity can catalyze athlete growth and facilitate elite performance (Galli & Reel, 2012; Howells et al., 2020; McCormick et al., 2018; Roy-Davis et al., 2017; Sarkar et al., 2015; Tamminen et al., 2013; Wadey et al., 2013). For example, Connaughton and colleagues (2010), and Galli and Reel (2012), examined the impact of sport-related adversity on athletic performance for both men and women elite athletes. They found that not only do experiences of critical incidents act as catalysts for the development of mental toughness (Connaughton et al., 2010), but that growth occurred as a result of stressful sport-related experiences (Galli & Reel, 2012). Tamminen and colleagues (2013) posited that social support played a complex role in female athletes' experiences of sport-related adversity and growth. Similarly, Cronan and Scott (2008) indicated that group training for female triathletes provided opportunities for women to reinvent the female body, themselves as athletes, what athletic competition meant to them, and the sport itself. Despite the extensive literature on athlete growth through adversity, apart from a few studies (e.g., Cronan & Scott, 2008; Meir, 2010; Tamminen et al., 2013), there is a dearth of literature regarding how experiences of growth through adversity might be gendered. While Howells and colleagues (2020) suggested that exploratory studies pertaining to growth through adversity have been exhausted as an area of research, they urged future researchers to focus on building knowledge in significant and meaningful ways. As such, we contend that researchers have yet to fully consider the impact of sport-related adversity and growth through the lenses of critical theories, such as critical race theory, feminist and postfeminist theory, and critical disability theory. This is significant, given

the extent to which both sport participation itself (Birrell, 2000), as well as critical incidents like injury, are often experienced as gendered (Laurendeau, 2008; Messner, 1990; Schacht, 1996; Theberge, 2006; White & Young, 1999; Young et al., 1994).

Popular Feminism

Results from the growth through adversity and leisure studies literatures have suggested that women experience sport and adverse experiences in gendered ways. For example, growth, empowerment, and resistance are identified as positive outcomes of adverse experiences. Yet, critical theorists deploying postfeminism (e.g., Gill, 2016), popular feminism (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2015), and neoliberal feminisms (e.g., Rottenberg, 2014) call for a critical re-evaluation of these concepts and the extent to which they function to challenge structures of patriarchal power or work instead to assuage the individual while reinforcing these same structures and the status quo.

Describing this shift in popular meanings of empowerment, Heineken (2020) noted that early feminist formulations of empowerment called for social action to change unjust power relations. In contrast, as is often deployed in popular discourse, empowerment is promoted as a focus on self-improvement, self-efficacy, and personal transformation. This directs attention away from structures that perpetuate inequality and toward the individual (Heineken, 2020; McClearen, 2018; Toffoletti, 2016). These discourses are powerfully interpellated with the logics of neoliberalism (Rottenburg, 2014) and “add women and stir” liberal feminism (Banet-Weiser, et al., 2020; Hall, 2001; Scott, 1991), which are increasingly visible as public and popular practices (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Banet-Weiser, et al., 2020). The result is that through personal growth, self-care, and empowerment, “young women are encouraged to eschew collective feminist politics and coalition as a route to political change and focus instead on themselves as individual empowered entrepreneurs” (Banet-Weiser, 2015, p. 190; emphasis in original text). This focus on the individual “fail[s] to offer structural critiques, contest bodily discipline, challenge the hegemony of Whiteness, or provide solutions outside the neoliberal marketplace” (McClearen, 2018, p. 48). This is problematic in that it is ultimately up to a woman to engage in the pursuit of establishing the coveted work-family balance, which has become a popular feminist ideal. A “happy work-family balance, has helped render feminism palatable and legitimate” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 8). Throughout serious leisure and growth through adversity literature, there has been significant information pertaining to the function and positive benefits from such ambitious pursuits and experiences. Yet, there is limited research pertaining to the problematic outcomes of such experiences of women engaging in Ironman triathlons.

Therefore, using these theoretical lenses, we took real-life embodied experiences of “growth” and “empowerment” through participation in Ironman training and competition as critical objects of the study of popular neoliberal (post)feminist discourse and practice. Situating these within the context of serious leisure and theorizing “growth” and “empowerment” as potentially gendered undertakings, we sought to explore sport-related adversity and growth among female Ironman competitors.

Purpose

The original purpose of this study was to explore adversity and the potential for growth among female Ironman competitors. By utilizing crystallization (see Ellingson, 2009), the researchers were later also interested in examining the (potentially) gendered nature of these experiences by theorizing them as representations of popular and neoliberal White feminism in our analysis. As Ellingson explained, Richardson (2000) originally coined the term "crystallization" to represent "...the capacity for writers to break out of traditional generic constraints" (Ellingson, 2009, p. 3) and engage with "...different takes on the same topic, what I think of as a postmodern deconstruction of triangulation" (Richardson, 2000, p. 934, as cited in Ellingson, 2009, p. 3).

Method

Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR)

Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill, 2012) informed our second analysis of the lived experiences of seven female Ironman triathletes. Developed by Hill (2012), CQR is designed to capture "how the participants (not the researchers) view the world" (p. 27) and is informed by constructivism and postpositivism. Those who utilize CQR claim constructivism as they recognize that there are multiple socially constructed "truths" among research participants; we also claim a postpositivist stance because we believe that these multiple "truths" can ultimately be co-constructed to represent a "truth" representing the data. By positioning ourselves with both constructivist and postpositivist underpinnings, we seek to find the balance between rigor and relevance. We believe this is achieved through reporting observations with our own positionalities in mind while also preserving the richness of the lived experiences of the participants. CQR is relevant for this study because it "emphasizes the empowerment of the individual research participant...while attempting to understand the person in the context of the whole" (Hill, 2012, p. 30-31). Researchers who utilize this qualitative method employ open-ended interview guide questions, account for participants' embodied contexts, engage a research team during data analysis and thematic construction, and include an external auditor to help examine those constructed themes (Hill, 2012).

Participants

Upon institutional IRB approval, seven female Ironman athletes, who met the following criteria, were interviewed for the current study. They: (1) had participated in at least one Ironman competition, (2) were at least 18 years old, and (3) identified as female (see Table 1). Each also selected a pseudonym to represent herself. Considering the potential for personal and relational sacrifice (Cronan & Scott, 2008), the lengthy training process, and the distance of the race, these athletes were also assumed to have had intense emotional experiences. According to Raglin (2007), athletes participating in ultra-endurance events experience significant emotions before, during, and after the event. Additionally, completing an ultra-endurance event also requires overcoming emotional barriers such as intense fatigue, unpleasant emotions, and gastrointestinal distress (Buman et al., 2009; Micklewright et al., 2009; & Stevinson & Biddle, 1998).

Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was adapted, with permission from Tamminen, Holt, and Neely (2013). This is because they conducted a study focused on growth through adversity in sport for elite female athletes; however, that study did not include Ironman female athletes. The adapted interview guide contained questions about previous sport and triathlon experience, why participants got involved in triathlon, significant stressful events, and their Ironman journey. Also included were some open-ended questions (i.e., "Can you tell me how you thought of yourself as an athlete after this stressful event?"), allowing the researchers to understand the participants' points of view more fully (Creswell, 2013).

Procedures

Prior to conducting any interviews, the first author underwent a bracketing interview (Hill, 2012) with the second author using the adapted interview guide (i.e., Tamminen et al, 2013). As a female Ironman competitor herself – and following Hill's (2012) recommendation that researchers explore the ways that their own experiences may intersect with participants' experiences – she reflected on her assumptions going into the study regarding female Ironmen competitors. These included: injuries are common within endurance sports, completing an Ironman triathlon is empowering, and engaging in ultra-endurance events evokes a sense of spirituality. The first author also kept a reflexive journal detailing thoughts, feelings, reactions, and observations related to the interviews. An example of one reflection is, "Her [the participant's] experiences were pretty incredible. I was experiencing the temptation of engaging in conversation."

Then, the first and second authors contacted an informant (also a triathlete) who was asked to send information to other female Ironman competitors who might be interested in being interviewed for the study. Through this informant, seven female Ironman athletes contacted the first author and agreed to participate in the study.

After completing an informed consent form, participants were interviewed via telephone by the first author. Interviews averaged 58 minutes in length, were audio-recorded, and then transcribed verbatim. Participants were then emailed their transcripts and asked if their stories were represented accurately (Hill, 2012). One participant requested changes to her transcript to address grammatical corrections, personal location clarifications, and identification concerns. The transcript was amended to reflect those changes. No other changes were requested by participants.

Data Analysis

The first and second authors undertook an original analysis of the seven female Ironman interviews using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 1999). However, because of the first author's growing understanding and interest in popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), additional analyses were deployed such

as a five-member research team using CQR (2012) as well as the concept of crystallization (Ellingson, 2009). As Ellingson (2009) wrote, "...crystallization provides another way of achieving depth, through the compilation not only of many details but also of different forms of representing, organizing, and analyzing those details" (p. 10). A five-person research team – including the first and second authors as well as an external auditor – signed a confidentiality agreement prior to independently reviewing the transcripts. Before their first meeting, each research team member provided all others with a positionality statement and set of assumptions with which they were entering the data analysis process. The research team consisted of five U.S. citizens: one professor and one associate professor in sport psychology, one third-year and one first-year doctoral student in sport studies, and one first-year doctoral student in leadership studies. All five self-identified as Caucasian and cisgender. All five had participated in running and/or triathlon; one had participated in Ironman competitions. Two indicated experiencing significant injury as a result of running. All were interested in how psychological and sociocultural factors played into participants' experiences.

After multiple independent readings of the transcripts, as well as research team meetings, consensus was reached by engaging in the development of: (a) overarching themes or domains, initially created by starting with the major topical headings on the interview guide and then refining over multiple meetings; (b) subthemes under each domain (i.e., categories) which best represented the different facets of the experience of the major themes; and (c) the use of core ideas (i.e., raw data or participants own words) to really illustrate all the facets of each domain of Ironman experience (Hill, 2012). After consensus was reached among the four data analysis team members, the domain table and interview transcripts were sent to an external auditor (i.e., the fifth member; Hill, 2012).

The external auditor's role was to independently review the interview transcripts before reviewing the domain table the research team created. The external auditor then provided feedback and suggested changes to the domain table based on their comparison of the research team's findings and participants' own words from the original transcripts. An additional team meeting took place to review the external auditor's feedback and decide upon what changes to make to the domain table based on external auditor feedback. Finally, the first and second authors completed a cross-analysis to determine whether each category was either general (all or all but one of the participants had the experience as described in a category), typical (more than half of the participants had the experience as described in a category), or variant (at least two participants had the experience as described in a category) (Hill, 2012; see Table 2).

Results and Discussion

There are significant similarities and differences between the results Tamminen and colleagues (2013) found in their initial study – using the same interview guide that we did, with minor modifications – compared to the current study. The initial point of departure is the demographics of the participants in each study. For example, in Tamminen and colleagues' study, elite female athletes from a variety of sport backgrounds were interviewed while our study only interviewed amateur female Ironman competitors. This is an important initial consideration

as serious and competitive leisure pursuit female Ironman athletes may experience adversity in different ways than elite-level female athletes from a variety of sports (Anderson et al., 2014).

Following CQR procedures outlined by Hill (2012), three main domains with twelve categories were initially constructed to represent participant experiences: (1) incidents; (2) essential features of experiences of adversity; and (3) meaning making. However, during the analytic process as outlined by Hill (2012), the research team "remained open to modifying the domain list" (p. 104) and moved away from the interview guide to better reflect participants' experiences in the current study. As a result, three domains with seven categories were constructed: (1) catalyst to Ironman participation; (2) experiences of adversity in Ironman participation; and (3) meaning making – growth through adversity.

Domain I: Catalyst to Ironman Participation

In Domain I, catalyst to Ironman participation, seven female Ironman competitors described two major categories when talking about how they became involved in, and moved through, their Ironman triathlon experiences. These categories included: (a) start of journey; and (b) participation motivation. Domain I and its related categories in the current study are different from Tamminen and colleagues' (2013) findings in that the majority of participants in the current study started their Ironman journey later in life whereas those in Tamminen and colleagues' (2013) study had all begun their elite athletic journey under the age of 23.

Category (a): Start of Journey

Entrance into the sport seemed to stem from injury recovery and cross training for many Ironman participants in this study, while others referenced social motivations. For example, Gigi, Sam, Alice, and Rachel all referenced their running injuries as a catalyst toward their Ironman participation. Sam described her introduction to Ironman saying, "I started off as a runner, but I had an injury that led me to cross training on the bike and in the water, so I became a triathlete." Alice expanded, explaining that in addition to her running injury, "I met up with a group of girls who were training for an Ironman and I started doing their intervals. I guess, in training with those girls, I kind of caught that full Ironman bug." For Rachel, she mentioned that as "a stay-at-home mom, you have some time to yourself so I picked up running...I started getting injured. I went to cross-train and looked into triathlon through a friend's encouragement."

Suzie, on the other hand, did not reference an injury, but rather social motivations: "A friend of mine... was looking for a challenge and she said, 'Hey, I want to do a triathlon. Why don't you do it with me?' And I was like, 'Okay.'" Sally, too, was influenced by her social circle. She said,

I was running one day with the running team, and a friend of mine who owned a running shop here said to me, 'I have just the thing for you.' And I said, 'What?' And he said, 'Triathlon.'...He was putting on the first triathlon here in (city)...I managed to win, and I was 42 years old at the time... I thought to myself,

‘Well, you know I finally found my sport’.

Alice added, “I think having some people to train with that are at your same, or close to, your same level is huge. So I knew I had them. I signed up and we trained together and it was amazing!”

Researchers have found that a training community is essential to the training experience (e.g. Cronan & Scott, 2008). Furthermore, female training groups offer an environment to reinvent the female body and athlete, athletic competition, and the sport (Opffer, 2010). In other words, female athletes seem to benefit from female-only training groups. It also appeared that participants in the current study were introduced to the sport of triathlon and, more specifically, Ironman triathlons after specializing in one discipline (i.e., running) or through their friend groups. For several, injury from running was a catalyst toward cross training, which organically transitioned to triathlons. Ultimately, each participant did not start their athletic pursuits within the triathlon context but found themselves there through other avenues.

Category (b): Participation Motivation

All seven participants expressed various reasons for why they were motivated to participate in Ironman triathlons. They described doing it for themselves, the enjoyment of the physicality of the event, specific personality traits, and feeling empowered.

For example, in terms of doing it for herself, Sam expressed that she “started off as a runner...I had four very young kids, and I just needed a break for myself.” The importance of taking time for oneself amidst motherhood as physical activity is often a necessary component of an athletic woman’s life (Appleby & Fisher, 2009). On the other hand, Gigi explained that it was the physical feeling that she liked, “You know, I kinda got addicted to that feeling. That feeling of being totally exhausted.” Rachel felt the same way, saying, “I know that there is a physiological release of hormones, and I do experience the ‘runner’s high’ and the exercise high...I think you get a bit addicted to it.” She was referring to the “runners’ high” mechanism in the human brain – the release of endorphins – which is the experience of positive hormonal changes in the brain following running (see, Boecker et al., 2008).

Rachel also offered a description of what she thought Ironman athletes possessed as personality traits: “I guess a lot of us are very isolated, more loner types;” she also mentioned being competitive: “the competitive drive is really within” before describing being Type A as well:

The people it attracts are typically very high intensity in terms of life, career, and everything else they do. They are usually A personality; you’ve heard of all those. So you’ve found a sport where people are just as intense as you are...Even during your recreational time...I think I am type-A.

In addition, through their continued participation in Ironman triathlons, participants in the current study reported

feeling more empowered. Sam said, "It became kinda a lifestyle and a very empowering thing for me." Suzie then explained why she participated in Ironman in this way:

What I love about triathlon for me, how it really helped me a lot, is I love that it became...really just a focus on being strong and having the energy to do what I wanted to do sport-wise...it was a way I could still meet that competitive outlet for myself...I think it's really empowering for a lot of women...It makes me a better mom, to have this outlet for myself.

Alice described feeling empowered in this way, "It really does teach you so much about yourself and what you can do, push through...it just transfers so much into life. If I can do that what else can I do?" She continued to say, "I think as you accomplish those small goals, you start to see yourself a little differently." As a result of taking control of their athletic selves, enjoying the physicality of the experiences, embodying personality traits, and feeling empowered, participants were able to remain motivated to continue training for and racing in Ironman triathlons. While maintaining the importance of preserving the participants' voices, the researchers recognized that these notions of taking control of their athletic selves, becoming better moms, and believing they "can" recapitulated what Banet-Wiser (2018) described as a mere "convincing oneself to be confident" (p. 54). In her reflection of culture, Banet-Wiser suggested that girls and women are told they can individually attain self-confidence and empowerment by just reaching for it; yet, this does not dismantle asymmetries of power nor does it critique structural barriers (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Domain II: Experiences of Adversity in Ironman Participation

In Domain II, Experiences of adversity in Ironman participation, we constructed three major categories to describe how female Ironman competitors experienced adversity: (a) physical suffering; (b) mental suffering; and (c) balancing training with relationships. Domain II and its related categories are, in fact, consistent with the findings from Tamminen and colleagues' (2013) previous study, particularly regarding the experience of injury as an adversity followed by growth; however, injury appeared as both a catalyst to participation (see Domain I) as well as an adverse experience for competitors in the current study. Furthermore, participants discussed the challenges of balancing training with their relationships, which was a unique finding to the current study.

Category (a): Physical Suffering

Despite no questions pertaining to injury on the interview guide, injury experiences were a common topic of discussion for participants in the current study. In fact, three competitors shared stories of bike accidents that resulted in significant injuries, two described overuse injuries as a result of increasing training load too quickly, and one suffered an injury outside of triathlon that led to significant recovery time. In each case, participants put a positive spin on their injury experience; in other words, while they did not "sugarcoat" the magnitude of their injuries, they seemed proud of how they overcame them.

Ironman triathlon is physical demanding in addition to extreme weather challenges. All seven participants detailed

their physical experiences of Ironman competition which included blisters, gastrointestinal distress, and injury. As Sam explained:

Physical is when you are hurting. Like my last Ironman I did, my glycogen was completely depleted, so it was very hard for me to keep conscious and keep running. I was wanting to fall over, but you just have to gut it out and keep going...So by suffering I mean physical and mental, and sometimes it's just physical. It may sound silly, but a blister can bring you down...Blisters, knee pain, stomach – in the long course you have lots of issues with stomach – you start vomiting.

Leira stated:

I collapsed 3 miles to go...[it] was probably the scariest moment I've ever had in a race. Ever. My left calf muscle just felt like it was going to explode. It felt like someone had pumped concrete into it. It was just so tight and I fell over on the spot and was just rocking back and forth screaming in pain...I was finally able to get up and limp to the finish line.

Gigi recalled:

It rained hard all day long, so I'm biking 112 miles in a hard rain that felt like needles." In another race Gigi completed, "there was no water...when I got to the last special aid station on the bike...probably at mile 80 and they had no water.

Researchers have found that triathletes appear to exhibit greater motivation to endure pain both within triathlon activities and in everyday life (Geva & Defrin, 2013). Additionally, among athletes, it is acknowledged that pain is an inseparable part of sport and even as an expression of overall development (Roessler, 2005). Even injury, while not accepted as "good" pain, can be utilized to generate positive outcomes (e.g., personal growth, psychological performance enhancement, and development) based on the ways the athlete appraises their injury (Wrisberg & Fisher, 2004). For example, Sam described a horrendous experience of getting seriously injured in the middle of an Ironman, yet persevering until the end of the race:

I had a wreck on a bike once. I got hit by another cyclist. It happened during Ironman, and I got hit at mile 60 on the bike. I didn't know how badly I was injured, so I got back on the bike and I rode, and I finished it. I had to walk the marathon...Had 7 broken ribs, cracked sternum, lacerated liver, punctured lung, collapsed lung. Spent 12 days on a chest tube...That happened to me 4 years ago, and it has had a tremendous impact on me. For one thing, you never know how strong you are until you go do something like that. I just got back on the bike and kept riding. Who the hell does that? But it told me a lot about myself in a good way because it taught me that I'm stronger than I thought I ever was.

Suzie's injury also derailed her from training for Ironman for a period of time:

I got in a bad bike accident one time and I broke my sacrum...It took me back to being grateful just to walk...It was difficult, but I would also say the hardest things always turn into the most positive things... To rebound from that and then do the biggest physical event I've ever done was pretty, was humbling and very exciting.

According to Atkinson (2008), "Pushing a body in triathlon induces a liminal state for many participants. Triathlon is physiologically exhilarating...and becomes even more exciting when one enacts heretofore habituated abilities for self-restraint to push the body harder and longer" (p. 178). Many athletes in the current study – including both Sam and Suzie – described their experiences in a way that conveyed their excitement about overcoming such intense physical suffering.

Category (b): Mental Suffering

Along with the physical suffering, mental suffering was a common point of discussion for five of the seven participants. As Sam stated,

There is also mental suffering where you just want to be done, you're bored. You've been out there all day...for Ironman, you have 17 hours to do it, and it'll take me 11 or 12, so that's all day. At some point you just want to call it a day...It's mentally exhausting to stay out there, stay focused, and concentrate... When I mean suffering, that's what I mean, you're either sick or ill or just plain mentally tired, and you go through all this emotion of being angry and sometimes you're angry at yourself because you should have trained harder than you did, or you're angry at the elements because the wind is blowing like a bat outta hell.

Gigi, too, explained, "It was the hardest thing I've ever done from a mental perspective...to deal with the mental fatigue and the obstacles that came my way throughout the day was incredible. It was extremely hot and humid day, and they ran out of water on the course." Leira and Suzie also remembered the difficulties of persevering during moments of mental suffering. Leira said, "People are passing me, and it gets in your head just watching person after person go by you when your body literally will not let you." Further, Suzie described, "My foot was hurting and I couldn't [do anything about it], so I just played a ton of mental games to try and detach from it to try and keep going...so I think my definition of suffering in an Ironman can either be controllable suffering...or suffering like in this case where it was not going to heal during the race, so it was just something I had to deal with."

According to Brady (2019), "Suffering has instrumental value...overcoming physical adversity has clear psychological benefits...become the kind of character that welcomes and embraces difficulties and challenges" (p. 118). In each grueling Ironman competition that participants in the current study described, they acknowledged

their mental suffering yet also detailed how they persisted toward the finish line.

Category (c): Balancing Training with Relationships

When asked about the various stresses experienced in relation to their Ironman experiences, all seven participants in the current study indicated the challenges of balancing family needs and training. All seven self-identified as heterosexual and six of the seven were married with children. The experiences of athlete-mothers and the challenges they face have been studied by several researchers (see, Appleby & Fisher, 2009; McGannon et al., 2017; McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Miller & Brown, 2005; & Palmer & Leberman, 2009). This balance for Ironman competitors consisted of configuring their training around their responsibilities as mothers and wives. As Rachel said, "The family felt a little bit isolated from my training...I felt guilty when things didn't involve the family." To counteract this guilt, she expressed:

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

Rachel was not unique in her views about balancing training with relationships. For example, Alice, too, linked the difficulty of being a mother while balancing her training:

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

Additionally, Rachel voiced a concern about the dangers of training and being a mom: "Biking...tends to be the longest leg in the triathlon, which can make it a little more inconvenient for stay-at-home moms 'cause...you need to be out for a long time, and there are always the roads that are dangerous".

The experience of guilt was apparent in the current study, as well as in both Palmer and Leberman's and McGannon and Schinke's (2013) studies. For example, Palmer and Leberman (2009) identified a major theme in their research regarding elite athletes as mothers as managing guilt; their participants mentioned they felt "guilty at times" (p. 246) in their process of negotiating their multiple roles and identities. In the case study conducted by McGannon and Schinke (2013), they found that the female participant opted to structure her training to take place in a narrower time frame to put the family's needs before her own. Despite balancing and navigating feeling selfish, guilty, and juggling multiple roles/identities/responsibilities, many of the Ironman competitors in the current study, however, felt their Ironman participation was a benefit not only to themselves but potentially to those within their sphere of influence.

Yet again, the researchers found themselves wrestling with the manifestations of popular and neoliberal

feminisms interwoven throughout the participants' reports of their lived experiences. As is demonstrated by their quotes, it was apparent that they accepted full responsibility for their Ironman participation while also striving for and feeling conflicted about maintaining their home lives. In her critique of neoliberal feminism, Rottenberg (2014) explained the conversion of gender equality from a structural to an individual problem. She stated, "she [the subject] accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work-family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus."

Domain III: Meaning Making – Growth Through Adversity

In Domain III, meaning making – growth through adversity, the research team constructed two major categories: (a) warrior spirit; and (b) navigating social support and expectations. When comparing the results of the current study to results from Tamminen and colleagues (2013), finding meaning through adverse experiences was a commonality, especially the experiences of social support and finding strength through that adversity. However, the description of a warrior spirit is entirely our own.

Briefly, postfeminism was coined in the 1990s and used to make sense of the "paradoxes and contradictions in the representation of women" (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2020, p. 4). Essentially, women were being scrutinized at the same time they were being celebrated; inequalities were explained as not the result of sexism, but of women's own choices and/or because of natural differences (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2020). Deploying a postfeminist lens (Banet-Weiser, 2018), we (re)interpret what is represented in these categories as instances of negotiating persistent hegemonic culture and gendered labor (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Category (a): Warrior Spirit

This first category focused on the warrior spirit of participants in the current study. Through many of their grueling mental and physical Ironman experiences, they described utilizing perseverance, mental toughness, grit, and determination to keep going through the pain. As Suzie stated:

Ironman is like a life metaphor, and in that first one there were times it felt so terrible and so painful, and in that last mile that I was going to finish, I really had this sense that if I can do this I can do anything! Because it was like a whole lifetime worth of, in a tangible, physical way, of pain and struggle and then happiness and sadness and emotion and all of that. I would say that's how it felt the last mile. I just couldn't believe that I had done it.

According to Connaughton and colleagues (2010), when athletes experience situations in which they have to learn how to cope with challenges, they become more self-aware and empowered; this is often how mental toughness is developed in elite athletes. Mental toughness is also the by-product of enjoyment, skill development, a sense of achievement, focus, and a desire to win. Connaughton and colleagues (2010) asserted further that the experience of a critical incident may act as a catalyst for the development of mental toughness; participants in the current

study displayed what researchers have called grit (e.g., Duckworth, 2016) and determination to succeed in a sport that requires great courage to prove to oneself that anything is possible. As Suzie indicated, "The mental strength is huge, that pressing onward and looking for the positive."

Moreover, surviving setbacks appeared to be self-reinforcing. As Alice stated, "Any setback makes me want to succeed that much more." As a result of Ironman, she learned about her own strength: "It really does teach you so much about yourself and what you can do, push through." Reflecting back about when she was just a spectator of the sport, Alice did not see herself as an Ironman athlete; she "just thought it was so amazing what these people were doing." However, as she trained with a group of women preparing for an Ironman, she started to see herself differently; Alice believed that if they could train and participate in an Ironman triathlon, so could she.

Sam, too, indicated the impact the sport had on her mental toughness and her growth through adversity, particularly her injury experience: "You learn so much about yourself when you go through something like that... it's like you've come to another level mentally. You just, adversity makes you really strong. I think." Through this reflection, she provided an additional self-analysis:

I'm drawn to the path of kind of breaking yourself down to where you're just really kind of raw, but you keep going. I think there is a lot to be said to that. People, for some of us, there's something attractive about that...What do you call it even? ...I keep saying broken down, but that's the way I really feel. Like you're just kind of raw and you keep going and you kind of find something in yourself that you didn't know was there.

Sam indicated that she also learned that her mind was stronger than her body. In the end, she said, it came down to, "How much are you willing to gut it out and suffer?" As a result of pushing past her limits, Sam described being more "self-assured" and more likely to take chances in life in other areas of life, in terms of "saying what's on your mind, and speaking up when you think something needs to be said." The warrior spirit included pushing oneself past their limit and then gaining the self-assurance that one could do it again (see, Jones, 2002; Jones et al., 2007).

To elaborate, Suzie reported, "It's that perseverance when nobody's looking that has helped me in triathlon and in life...I think for me there's something about the meaning of life that is in there. It's really about your personal perseverance." For Suzie, the warrior spirit came from the long hours of training when nobody was looking; this was particularly evident when she became mentally strong after she suffered the significant injury she sustained to her sacrum. Even though Suzie sustained her injury in October, she finished an Ironman triathlon in May: "It made it even sweeter. It was amazing, just like that you can heal and I can still do this...To rebound from that and then to the biggest physical event I've ever don't was...very exciting." Roy-Davis and colleagues (2017) described this growth after injury as Sport Injury-Related Growth (SIRG), which explains the "perceived changes that propel injured athletes to a higher level of functioning than that which existed prior to their injury" (p. 4).

Similar to Suzie and Sam, Leira also experienced an injury where she kept going and demonstrated to herself that she was stronger than she thought: "It humbled me and showed me that I'm not invincible, but it also showed me that you're stronger than you think. Even when you are on the verge of giving up you can keep going." Leira was also the only participant who referenced her evolving spirituality as a positive coping strategy in the face adversity; she spoke about how she, in fact, never felt closer to God than when she was humbled, in pain, and praying in the middle of a race: "I don't feel that closeness to myself or to God at any other time, to that degree at least, as I do when I'm out there." She described being able to pull through adverse experiences with the support of her relationship with God. According to Galli and Reel (2012), athletes commonly use religious practices to cope with their adversity (see also, Czech et al., 2004; Egli & Fisher, 2017; Mosley et al., 2015; Waller et al., 2016).

Finally, for Gigi, experiences of the warrior spirit included dealing with heat and dehydration during her first Ironman. She said, "The thing I proved to myself was that I am stronger mentally than I thought I would or could be." She learned how to better "overcome the negative self-talk" and focus on her "three things to come back to when things are getting rough," thus demonstrating a thorough understanding of the importance of self-talk and its effects on performance (see, Hardy et al, 2019; Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2011; Tod et al., 2011). Again, Gigi's story – like Alice, Suzie, Sam, and Leira's – demonstrated experiencing growth through adversity and self-evolution as a warrior; without the experience of her first Ironman, she may not have proven to herself that she was strong enough to handle additional Ironman triathlon finishes.

Category (b): Navigating Social Support and Expectations

Navigating social support and expectations built on Domain II, in that it described the growth the participants in the current study experienced as a result of their adverse experiences. Consistent with previous literature (Galli & Reel, 2012), participants stated that social support at its best was one of the many components of growth through adversity. This was particularly noted in training groups and in race day support; six out of seven talked about how much they enjoyed their training and racing groups because of the social support they received (i.e. Sam, Leira, Sally, Gigi, Alice, and Suzie). Sam especially enjoyed the bonding experience she felt while training: "When you are on the bike or running, there are no distractions...you talk and you communicate and you suffer together. It's an enormous opportunity to really develop a strong relationship with someone." For Sam, the bond that developed between training partners was based on experiences of adversity and suffering together.

Leira also enjoyed sharing her experiences with fellow competitors during her races. As she stated:

When you line up with your age group, there are tons of really strong girls your age... You get up there and you just have these casual conversations where you're like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so nervous" and she'll be like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so nervous too." And you just encourage each other.

Sally experienced a significant amount of social support during her time as a competitor that came from her family as well as the triathlon community. For example, her family went with her to Ironman Hawaii and her community

raised money so she could travel around the world. Sally is now giving back to this community through social support of her own. "I've made my garage into a gym with trainers for our bikes...so they don't have to pay money to belong to a gym. We can do the training right here, so it's a bond with some real special people."

For Gigi and Alice, the social support from their families was also priceless during Ironman races. For example, it was motivating for Gigi to see her family waiting for her in the transition areas between the swim and the bike as well as between the bike and the run; as she said, "My grandchildren made signs." Social support appeared especially significant for Gigi's first Ironman experience because the conditions were less than ideal. She stated that it was very hot outside and there was a shortage of water on the bike and run courses; further, it was her family and a fellow competitor who encouraged her to keep going: "One of the things that got me through that crazy marathon was [also that] I found someone that I knew...we were going to get through it and we were going to do it together" (Gigi).

When Alice described the familial social support she experienced during her race, she got very emotional. Her family and friends sacrificed their entire Saturday to support her on Ironman race day and it appeared to mean a lot to her:

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

It appeared, therefore, that female Ironmen in the current study experienced social support as an aid in overcoming adversity because it acted like a buffer from the direct effects of the stressor (see Rees, 2007, for example, stress-buffering model).

However, social support was not always positive. In another unique finding from the current study, participants described the process of navigating social support and expectations. When attempting to balance the expectations of others and themselves, they reported balancing training and relationships as a stressor (see Domain II) and, as a result, found the need to negotiate those experiences in order to maintain involvement in Ironman triathlons. For example, Rachel experienced a lack of social support for her training and being a triathlete, especially from her husband. As she stated, "My husband is not supportive...the amount of stress and time, and he thinks it's a very selfish sport." This lack of social support created a lot of stress for her during her training. In fact, Rachel explained how she made her family t-shirts with her own name on it to try to create buy-in for her training:

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

Additionally, several other participants described the burden Ironman training and racing put on their families. In another comment from the interviews, Gigi mentioned that in order for her to sign up for another Ironman, she had to "sign a contract with [her] husband: "...I mean, it's at that level...he's ready for me to be done with it." She was painfully made aware of the sacrifices her family made as a result of her Ironman participation, like leaving her husband alone on the weekends and not being available for her grandchildren.

Alice negotiated a similar situation:

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

Rachel, however, intimated about the isolation she felt from female training partners:

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

However, she continued: "[You have to be] careful of what you say. Not too competitive and at the same time supportive...Like being a woman still, but not too much aggression." Rachel's comments about her experience appear to reify stereotypes about how women behave when they are together and also how they are supposed to behave in general. As Adichie (2012) wrote: What struck me is how invested [women] are in being "liked." How they have been raised to believe that their being likable is very important and that this "likable" trait is a specific thing. And that specific thing does not include showing anger or being aggressive or disagreeing too loudly (p. 23-24).

In fact, Leira – the youngest competitor – was the only woman to challenge hegemonic gender ideology related to how a woman should behave in the sporting world. She expressed:

We're told that we're weak and we can't be as strong as men, that there are certain sports we can't participate in because we're women...there's only pink shoe options...there's just very limited space for women it seems in sports. So I think just being a woman and being in this sport is actually really empowering for me to... stick it to 'em and say 'no, women are capable of doing this, and there are some really badass women out there.'"

As Bridel (2013) suggested, women need to be careful with how they present themselves in sport; they can only be successful within the bounds of heteronormative femininity. Yet, Deem and Gilroy (1998) asserted that leisure activities like triathlon provide women with a way of resisting pressure to behave in certain, socially acceptable ways while also potentially enhancing individual empowerment and bringing about collective social change (Cronan & Scott, 2008).

Through the reanalysis, the research team turned a critical eye to the notions of empowerment and negotiations that female Ironman participants in the current study described, particularly since they supported popular neoliberal notions of feminism. Furthermore, while Ironman triathlon participation was important to these participants individually, the stories they told clearly fit the contours of neo-liberal feminism. That is, while they felt personally empowered, these feelings should not be conflated with counterhegemonic formations. As apparent in the interviews, their experiences of empowerment reflect the popular meaning of empowerment in that the focus is entirely on self-improvement, self-efficacy, and personal transformation. According to Heineken (2020), McClearen (2018), and Toffoletti (2016), this focus directs attention away from the structures that perpetuate inequality and limits the call for social action to change unjust power relations in women's personal lives. One example of this is the obvious juxtaposition of the title, Ironman, and the desire female participants within Ironman triathlon culture have to attain that title for themselves.

It was made clear in the quotes from Rachel, Gigi, and Alice that they actively pursued the coveted work-family balance, which has become a popular feminist ideal. As Banet-Weiser and colleagues (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020) wrote, by: positing balance as its normative frame and ultimate ideal, neoliberal feminism helps to maintain a discourse of reproduction and care work while at the same time ensuring that all responsibility for these forms of labour...falls squarely on the shoulders of so-called aspirational women" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 8; emphasis in original text). In other words, as the participants in the current study were negotiating their involvement in Ironman, they were also striving for the work-family balance in a way that actively increased their gendered labor. For example, Alice described the challenge of prioritizing her role as caregiver and feeling selfish when the demands of her training pulled her away from her family obligations. Yet she also expressed how Ironman changed her in a powerful and positive way. As described in her quote above, these competing identities (caregiver versus Ironman athlete) led her to train early in the morning or late at night, so she was able to do everything. Alice said, "You on some level feel a little bit selfish for wanting to do this because it is all about you. For me, I have all these other roles and people who are relying on me. There are points where you have to say, "No, I'm important..." The contrast of her feelings of empowerment, alongside her feelings of selfishness and moral obligation to her role as caregiver, was jarring. This led the researchers to question the extent to which participation in Ironman triathlon is truly empowering.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Directions

In conclusion, while we tried to honor female Ironman competitors' experiences of growth through adversity in the current study, we also wrestled with their notions of empowerment as well as how emancipatory the Ironman triathlon space really was for them. The original purpose of the study was to explore adversity and the potential for growth among female Ironman competitors. Using CQR (Hill, 2012) and a critical second analysis, while we saw evidence that participants experienced a variety of stressors throughout their Ironman involvement and viewed coming through them as moments of growth, upon further investigation, we determined that these "positive" findings were overshadowed by elements of persistent gendered labor, hegemonic family culture, and the pursuit of an unattainable work-family balance. These elements complicate a straightforward

reading of empowerment and growth through adversity for these women and show how these conceptions are themselves reflective of popular neoliberal notions of feminism. Thus, while the goods engendered by triathlon may be partially positive and individually empowering, we question the extent to which these can be considered counterhegemonic and emancipatory and call for future work to explicitly take up additional postfeminist concerns.

Limitations of the study were largely centered around the lack of diversity of the participants. All but one identified as Caucasian, all identified within the Christian tradition, and all identified as having a nuclear family structure. Additionally, it is assumed all participants identified as physically-able; however, they were not asked this in the demographic section of the interview guide. Our critical re-engagement with the data shed light on additional critical questions to explore such as: Are these findings unique to European-American, middle-class, cisgender women? If so, why? A focus on the relationship between socioeconomic status, other identity markers, and triathlon participation should, therefore, be highlighted in future studies. In addition, if the first author were conducting this study over again, she would have changed some of the interview guide had she been exposed to neoliberal feminism at that point in her scholarly career. In this way, the study could be enriched with a more explicit focus on such issues in the design phase. Further, the fact that she had not been exposed to such ideas may shed light on the state of "critical" research in growth through adversity literature. Perhaps our final recommendation, therefore, is that those researchers who focus on growth through adversity adopt more of a critical/cultural studies view looking at social differences, distribution of power, and social justice (e.g., Fisher, Butryn, & Roper, 2003; Fisher, Roper, & Butryn, 2009).

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Age	Years of Triathlon Experience	Race and Ethnicity	Spirituality/Religion	Family Structure	SES
Suzie	Female	44	17	Caucasian	Protestant	Married with 2 kids	Upper middle class
Rachel	Female	44	6	Asian American	Christian	Married with 3 kids	Upper middle class
Sam	Female	50	7	Caucasian	Episcopalian	Married with 4 kids	Upper class
Alice	Female	46	4	Caucasian	Catholic	Married with 2 grown sons	Upper middle class
Leira	Female	25	5	Caucasian	Universalist	Married	Middle class
Sally	Female	79	42	Caucasian	Episcopalian	Widowed with kids and grandkids (number unknown)	Middle class
Gigi	Female	62	10	Caucasian	Christian	Married with kids and grandkids (number unknown)	Upper middle class

Table 2

Domain Table

Domains	Categories	Illustrative Core Idea	Illustrative Quotes	Frequency
Catalyst to Ironman Participation	<i>Start of Journey</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Injury - Cross training - Social reasons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "I started off as a runner, but I had an injury that led me to cross training on the bike and in the water, so I became a triathlete." (Sam, line 64) - "A friend of mine...was looking for a challenge and she said, 'Hey, I want to do a triathlon. Why don't you do it with me?' And I was like, 'Okay.'" (Suzie, line 70) 	7 out of 7 (general)
	<i>Participation Motivation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why am I doing this - As a result of doing this I am feeling empowered - Personality traits (Type-A, competitive, loner) - Self-care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "What I love about triathlon for me, how it really helped me a lot, is I love that it became...really just a focus on being strong and having the energy to do what I wanted to do sport-wise...it was a way I could still meet that competitive outlet for myself...I think it's really empowering for a lot of women...It makes me a better mom, to have this outlet for myself." (Suzie, line 314) 	7 out of 7 (general)
	<i>Physical Suffering</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Talk about the experience of IM (think blisters, GI distress) - Injury as a result of training/racing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I had a wreck on a bike once. I got hit by another cyclist. It happened during Ironman, and I got hit at mile 60 on the bike. I didn't know how badly I was injured, so I got back on the bike and I rode, and I finished it." (Sam, line 227) 	7 out of 7 (general)
Experiences of Adversity in Ironman Participation	<i>Mental Suffering</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Isolation - Boredom - Uncertainty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "You're comparing, not competing, comparing each other during training" (Rachel, line 681) - "but there is also mental suffering where you just want to be done, you're bored. You've been out there all day" (Sam, line 248) - "So I just played a ton of mental games to try and detach from it to try and keep going" (Suzie, line 727) 	5 out of 7 (typical)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The reason I am doing this training so early is so I can stay connected to my family - Maintaining relationships - Balancing roles, training, and relationships - Sacrifice/self-sacrifice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "The family felt a little bit isolated from my training...I felt guilty when things didn't involve the family." (Rachel, 516) - "My husband is not supportive...the amount of stress and time, and he thinks it's a very selfish sport." (Rachel, line 461) - "I'm more of a caretaker in my family, so that's my role. So, trying to take care of everyone while training can be a challenge." (Alice, line 293) - "You're up when it's still dark and you're hitting the pool at 9pm trying to get in there before they close the doors, so you find out where you can train that's open early or 24-hours. You work it out so you can still fulfill those other roles during normal waking hours" (Alice, line 315) - "I fit in my workouts, fit in my work. Make time for my hubby, make time to go out with friends a couple times a week" (Leira, line 595) 	7 out of 7 (general)
	<i>Balancing Training v. Relationships</i>			

<p><i>Warrior Spirit</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Through the experience of physical and mental suffering, mental toughness, perseverance, grit, stronger than thought possible is developed - There is something in here for me, too. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "It really does teach you so much about yourself and what you can do, push through." (Alice, line 544) - "You learn so much about yourself when you go through something like that... it's like you've come to another level mentally. You just, adversity makes you really strong. I think." (Sam, line 251, 254) - "It's that perseverance when nobody's looking that has helped me in triathlon and in life... I think for me there's something about the meaning of life that is in there. It's really about your personal perseverance." (Suzie, line 415, 453) - "It humbled me and showed me that I'm not invincible, but it also showed me that you're stronger than you think. Even when you are on the verge of giving up you can keep going." (Leira, line 181) 	<p>7 out of 7 (general)</p>
<p>Meaning Making – Growth through Adversity</p>	<p><i>Navigating Social Support and Expectations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Through the balancing act of training and maintaining relationships the participants make meaning through questioning participation, negotiating training with family time, establishing rules of engagement - Establishing and rationalizing why this is important for themselves - Wrestling with lack of support in some cases - In other cases, find the significance of building bonds, suffering together, family support at races 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "I spent more time getting my family involved and that required time. The focus is a little less on myself; it's still <i>my</i> race, but I focus more on the family and how they feel about it. Make sure I'm with them. I'm mentally with them." (Rachel, line 611) - "I'm really hoping that I'm setting an example for my grandchildren." (Gigi, line 1086) - "sign a contract with my husband... I mean, it's at that level... he's ready for me to be done with it." (Gigi, line 961, 966) - "setting an example for other women to encourage them that they could do these things." (Sally, line 196) - "When you are on the bike or running, there are no distractions... you talk and you communicate and you suffer together. It's an enormous opportunity to really develop a strong relationship with someone." (Sam, line 141, 147) - "I find it interesting that for them to be your friends in some way, you have to beat them. You really have to beat them (laughing). You have to be stronger than your friends." (Rachel, line 682) - "There are certain things I have to reflect on in my real life. If I keep pushing it this way. Is this going to benefit my family, my real life. It's a different life almost. How do you put it together?" (Rachel, line 125) - "I have so much respect for people who go out and do this, are working out three hours a day, have a full-time job, have kids. I truly don't know how they do that. But it's very inspiring to me" (Leira, line 602) 	<p>7 out of 7 (general)</p>