

# The Social Empowerment of Difference

## The Potential Influence of Para sport



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### KEYWORDS

• Ableism • Difference • Disability studies • Empowerment • Para sport

### KEY POINTS

- The recognition, acceptance, and valuing of difference within Para sport cultures must naturally drive the emergence of new sports and sporting ethos that are more attuned with this attitude and understanding.
- In attempting to critically educate wider society on the value of difference and pluralism, Para sport culture needs to proactively promote the participation of all people with disabilities.
- Fostering an empowering understanding of the difference associated with disability demands increased participation of people with disabilities as the active creators of Para sport cultures, rather than as mere recipients of services for them.
- All athletes, including athletes with impairments, should be considered differently abled, rather than disabled, because neither difference nor disability are absolute categories.

### INTRODUCTION

A year after the 2012 London Paralympic Games, the *Guardian* newspaper brought to public attention the failure of Paralympic Games in changing how society views so-called disabled people, “British Paralympians’ success in 2012 brought celebrity status but has done little for the daily life of the disability community.”<sup>1</sup> This assertion is hardly surprising; despite claims made by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) regarding the empowering potential of sport, which have mostly have been unsubstantiated.<sup>2–4</sup> It is, of course, extremely difficult to evaluate to what extent sport events ignite social change, let alone the potential of empowerment, due to both conceptual and methodological weaknesses. Conceptually, it is difficult to clearly define

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the sphere of influence of mega sport events and to theoretically support the causal relationship with social change. Methodologically, the difficulty lies in defining indicators of empowerment, as well as in using reliable methods to measure the extent of those outcomes, asserting a relation of causality between them.<sup>5,6</sup>

The potential of sport for social good is limited because the scope of interventions and evaluations fail to consider the multidimensional nature of social exclusion, the structural cause of systemic systems of social inequality.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is very rare that significant social change can be correlated with specific sport events or programs in isolation from concerted interventions in other dimensions of social life, such as welfare, employment, or education.<sup>8</sup> As such, to assume that the Paralympic Games should be any different is misguided. Although the authors believe in the social power of sport, the uncritical view that positive social change is intrinsic to sport detracts from realizing this potential. Believing in the magical power of sport prevents the active drive toward positive change in the form of well-designed, purposeful action that effectively reduces the social exclusion of people identified as socially marginal, such as participants in Para sports. Para sport culture refers to the practice community<sup>9</sup> of disability sport, from the grassroots to high-performance levels, which engages in sport as governed by the rules and regulations of the IPC.<sup>10</sup> We believe that to effect sustainable positive social change, it must be initiated within the grassroots of Para sport culture if the rhetoric of the IPC around empowerment is to be achievable.

This article draws on disability studies literature to identify the most significant sources of disability exclusion and discrimination, and discusses to what extent Para sport culture replicates or challenges this status quo. It examines whether Para sport culture has the potential to truly contribute to the social empowerment not only of athletes but of people with disabilities more generally. Central to this reflection, should be a recognition, acceptance, and valorization of difference. The focus on difference is critical in any effort to foster the social emancipation of groups identified as socially marginal because the source of all discrimination lies in the social cultural meanings ascribed to difference. In alignment with Iris Young<sup>11</sup> (p163), in our vision, a good society does not eliminate or transcend group difference. Rather, there is equality among socially and culturally differentiated groups who mutually respect each other and affirm each other in their differences.

The goal of this article is to urge actors to engage with Para sport culture critically and reflect on their own system of beliefs and associated practices, searching for signs of engrained discrimination. This difficult process demands a willingness to suspend old beliefs and be open to self-appraisal, criticism, and pluralist democratic discussion within its own boundaries. It is simply impossible for an institution, such as the IPC, to promote positive change in the lives of people with disabilities without addressing its own responsibility in the perpetuation of their social disadvantage. After recognizing the existence of cultural traits that work against the IPCs self-proclaimed goal of empowerment, it is essential to promote and enact the necessary changes in ideologies and practices so that these are more attuned to achieving this aim for all people with disabilities. We hope this work offers useful guidance to initiate this process of self-reflection and regeneration.

Ableism is the primary source of social disadvantage for people with disabilities. Because the process of dismantling ableism presupposes a reconceptualization of difference, this article draws on various authors' theorization of difference to explore some of the ways in which Para sport culture can promote this emancipatory shift.

This article concludes with recognition of the challenge that our suggestion to invest in difference as a positive and fundamental tenet of Para sport identity imposes on the IPC and the whole Para sport community. This challenge, using Minow's<sup>12</sup>

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