



Stories that move? Peer athlete mentors' responses to mentee disability and sport narratives



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ABSTRACT

Background: How people respond to the stories people tell matters. Past research demonstrates that there are varied responses to the narratives individuals with spinal cord injury (SCI) use. Yet, no research has explored how peer athlete mentors with SCI respond to their mentees' stories about sport participation that are framed in different disability narratives.

Purpose: To explore how peer athlete mentors respond to four mentees' vignettes representing various attitudes towards adapted sport.

Methods: Thirteen peer athlete mentors discussed these vignettes in hour-long interviews; their responses were analysed using a dual narrative analysis.

Results: Peer athlete mentors tailored their responses to each individual vignette. Specifically, responses to the most open vignettes were tailored to the mentees' disability narratives and provided a variety of resources and sport information. This type of response to mentees' stories can support and validate these mentees' experiences and increase the likelihood that mentees will try sport. In contrast, peer athlete mentors' responses to the heavily resistant vignettes contained limited information about sport. These responses also challenged the mentees' disability narratives. These types of responses may be counter-productive as they invalidate the mentees' experiences with sport and SCI and may further deter sport participation.

Conclusion: While peer athlete mentors tailored the information they would provide to mentees who use different disability narratives, they expressed difficulties responding to the heavily resistant narrative. Future peer athlete mentor training should address this difficulty by providing practice around how to communicate with individuals expressing resistant narratives.

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Spinal cord injury (SCI) is a life-altering event that can change the way people experience the world around them (e.g., Seymour, 2002). In addition to a number of negative health outcomes, such as increased risk of chronic disease (e.g., Warburton, Sproule, Krassioukov, & Eng, 2012), individuals with SCI also have a higher risk of negative psychosocial outcomes including increased rates of depression, decreased community integration, and lower life satisfaction (e.g., Tonack et al., 2008). Engaging in leisure time physical activity (LTPA) can mitigate these negative health outcomes. When compared to sedentary individuals, individuals with SCI who engage in LTPA have lower risks of cardiovascular disease

and pain, as well as higher subjective well-being and life satisfaction (e.g., Galea, 2012; Latimer, Martin Ginis, Hicks, & McCartney, 2004; Martin Ginis, Jetha, Mack, & Hetz, 2010). Furthermore, individuals with SCI who engage in sport participate in longer bouts of LTPA and at higher intensities than individuals who do other types of LTPA (Martin Ginis et al., 2010). In addition to longer durations and greater intensities, there are unique benefits of sport participation including the development of new and important friendships and a greater likelihood of being employed post-injury (Blauwet et al., 2013; Giacobbi, Stancil, Hardin, & Bryant, 2008). Despite these benefits, only 4% of people with SCI engage in sport (Martin Ginis, Arbour-Nicitopoulos et al., 2010).

People with SCI state that access to information is one of the many barriers to LTPA (e.g., Williams, Smith, & Papathomas, 2014). When asked who they would prefer to receive LTPA information

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from, peers are cited as one of the most preferred sources (Letts et al., 2011). Peers have a unique understanding of life with an SCI and as such, can provide meaningful tips on how to be physically active post-injury. When considering the use of peer mentorship for sport and physical activity promotion, a recent systematic review by Martin Ginis et al. (2013) suggested that peer mentors can be as effective as professionals with respect to physical activity counselling in the general population. However, little is known about how to use peer mentorship to promote sport among people with SCI.

In general, peer mentors play a vital role in assisting newly injured individuals adjust to life post-SCI. As individuals who have successfully overcome life challenges, peer mentors can support their mentees as the mentees confront these same challenges. Peer mentors have been found to be a significant source of social support, providing their mentees with information about life with SCI, emotional support, as well as companionship (Balcazar, Hayes, Keys, & Balfanz-Vertiz, 2011). Moreover, peer mentors can assist their mentees by teaching necessary life skills, such as wheelchair skills, connecting individuals with community programs, and facilitating social participation (e.g., Balcazar et al., 2011; Ljungberg, Kroll, Libin, & Gordon, 2011; Sherman, DeVinney, & Sperling, 2004). Furthermore, Veith, Sherman, Pellino, and Yasui (2006) found that mentees valued the support they received from their peer mentors. Given the positive outcomes of engaging in both sport and peer mentorship after SCI, examining how peer athlete mentors discuss sport with their mentees and provide information about sport is essential for first understanding the process of sport promotion in these relationships, as well as highlighting the current strengths and weaknesses in sport promotion and adapted sport programs.

Narrative inquiry is one approach that can be used to explore peer mentorship. Although narrative is difficult to define, scholars generally agree that narratives are a form of discourse that contains specific meaning, with characters and a plot, connecting events over time to provide an explanation for, or consequences of, a phenomenon (Smith & Sparkes, 2008a). In the context of SCI, narratives influence how individuals understand their lives post-injury; call individuals to respond to others in ways that are consistent with these narratives; and shape the stories that individuals share with others (Frank, 1995; 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2008b). Frank (1995) describes three dominant narratives that people use to understand their experiences with SCI. With respect to SCI, the restitution narrative has the following structure: “yesterday I could walk, today I can’t, but tomorrow I will walk again” (Smith & Sparkes, 2004, 2005). Individuals that construct their experiences with SCI using a chaos narrative cannot see life ever improving, experience extreme suffering, and describe a loss of hope (Frank, 1995; Smith & Sparkes, 2005). In contrast to chaos and restitution narratives, the quest narrative constructs SCI as a challenge to be overcome. The individuals drawing upon this narrative construct SCI as a chance to remake the self and enhance the lives of others post-SCI (Frank, 1995; Smith & Sparkes, 2004, 2005). Thus mentees’ needs, and how they construct disability, will be evident in the stories that they share.

Given that peer athlete mentors are an important source of sport and physical activity information for people with SCI, understanding how peer athlete mentors respond to mentees’ stories is essential. Scholars have stressed the importance of investigating responses to stories given that stories are not passive talk, but rather call for responses from others (Frank, 2010). Responses to stories have consequences *on* and *for* the storyteller (Charon, 2008; Frank, 2007; 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2011). As Frank (2007) suggested, people put emotions like fear and anxiety into the stories they share. People’s responses to these stories can either “take care of people” by affirming and validating their experiences and

emotions, allowing them to feel heard and understood. Alternatively, people’s responses to these stories can potentially harm the storyteller by invalidating their experiences, leading to feelings of disconnection and isolation from others (Charon, 2008; Frank, 2007; Smith & Sparkes, 2011). Furthermore, stories act as a system that enables people to attend to specific events and make sense of the world around them (Frank, 2010). As such, the stories that peer athlete mentors share can shape and contribute to this system, shaping how people with disabilities understand and think about sport post-injury (Frank, 2010).

Despite the widespread use of peer mentorship in disability and sport organizations, no empirical research has examined how peer athlete mentors respond to different disability narratives. Outside of peer mentorship, two studies have explored how different audiences respond to disability narratives. Soundy, Smith, Cressy, and Webb (2010) examined physiotherapy students’ perceptions of disability narratives. Students held positive perceptions of the person who constructed his experiences using a quest narrative; however, people that constructed their experiences with SCI using a restitution narrative were seen as being unrealistic in their expectations (Soundy et al., 2010). Furthermore, research by Smith and Sparkes (2011) found that a person whose life story drew upon the chaos narrative elicited very different responses from a variety of audiences, including scholars and practitioners. While some participants expressed support and understanding for the individual whose vignette they read, other participants’ responses marginalized the individual’s experience with SCI by imposing a narrative of therapy. As such, these participants felt that treatment from a psychologist would be necessary for this person to accept his SCI and think positively about life post-injury. Given that past research demonstrates that audiences have different affinities and reactions to stories based on different disability narratives, peer athlete mentors’ responses to the stories that people with SCI share are fundamental to understand as these responses hold implications for sport promotion. As such, the objective of this paper was to explore how peer athlete mentors respond to vignettes that represent diverse disability narratives and attitudes towards sport. To meet this objective, our research questions focused on the resources that peer athlete mentors use to construct responses to the vignettes, if and how these resources differ, and the content of these responses.

Methods

Theoretical background and approach

This study approaches peer mentorship using narrative inquiry, a qualitative approach that is focused on stories. Narrative inquiry is founded on interpretivism, a philosophical paradigm that views knowledge as constructed by individuals; as such, knowledge cannot be theory-free or exist independent of people (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Furthermore, a second key aspect of interpretivism is ontological pluralism, such that there is the existence of multiple realities and truths that are constructed through relationships and dialogue with others (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Thus, narrative inquiry views people as storytelling beings that construct knowledge and realities through stories (Smith, 2010). Stories enable people to make meaning by interpreting the events that occur in their lives according to the narratives that circulate in the sociocultural, political, and historical contexts in which they live (Smith, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Furthermore, stories operate within relationships and as such, the responses to the stories that others share are equally as important as the stories themselves (Frank, 2007, 2012; Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

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