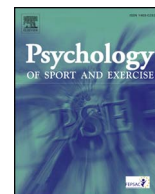




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## Narratives of participation among individuals with physical disabilities: A life-course analysis of athletes' experiences and development in parasport

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Efforts to promote full participation in parasport are vital not only for the potential physical and psychosocial benefits, but also as a means of enacting social justice. Until recently, there has been little empirical consideration of the experiential aspects that make participation satisfying or meaningful throughout the life-course. The purpose of this study was to explore the meanings that athletes with physical disabilities attribute to their participation in parasport over time.

**Method:** Two-part life history interviews were conducted with 21 current or former athletes with a physical disability. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a dialogical narrative analysis, which enabled an in-depth examination of the common stories told by athletes and the effects of these stories on their past, present, and future participation.

**Results:** Five distinct narrative types were identified, representing differential developmental trajectories and meanings of participation in parasport. Athletes drew on existing narratives of disability (i.e., restitution, quest) and sport involvement (i.e., performance, discovery, relational) to frame these narrative types. The core of each narrative type was formed by the specific meaning or value associated with parasport participation (e.g., sense of purpose, social acceptance).

**Conclusion:** The resulting narratives offer a unique understanding of the developmental pathways of parasport athletes and what it means for these athletes to participate. The narratives are useful for informing strategies and programmes that optimize participation and enhance participation rates.

Over the past several years, research on disability has received growing attention in the field of sport psychology. While participation in sport may offer a variety of potential physical and psychosocial benefits (e.g., Slater & Meade, 2004), sport participation rates among people with disabilities remain much lower than rates reported by their able-bodied counterparts (e.g., Martin Ginis et al., 2010; Sport England, 2017). Efforts to promote full participation in sport are vital not only for the potential benefits. Recent calls within sport psychology (Schinke, Stambulova, Lidor, Papaioannou, & Ryba, 2016) and research with disabled athletes (Smith, Bundon, & Best, 2016) has also emphasized the significance of understanding participation in terms of social justice. Supporting these calls, the United Nations (2006) has declared that individuals with a disability have a basic right to “full and effective participation” in society, including in sport. According to the World Health Organization (2001), participation is defined as an individual's involvement in life situations. Expanding this definition, full and effective participation considers both the quantity and quality of an

individual's participation (Hammel et al., 2008; Martin Ginis, Evans, Mortenson, & Noreau, 2017). In other words, an individual is fully and effectively participating when he or she engages in an activity to the extent to which he or she pleases (quantity) and has a positive subjective experience (quality).

In order to promote full and effective participation in sport and determine whether people with a disability experience this basic right, researchers must focus their attention on both the quantity and quality of participation. Although there is a growing body of literature focused on athletes with disabilities, there is very little research focused on the quality of athletes' participation in parasport (e.g., Turnnidge, Vierimaa, & Coté, 2012). To date, significant resources have been dedicated to understanding the barriers and facilitators associated with physical activity participation, highlighting factors at the intrapersonal (e.g., self-perceptions, body functions), interpersonal (e.g., social support, societal attitudes), institutional (e.g., rehabilitation, building design), community (e.g., products and technology for education, sport,

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etc.), and policy (e.g., health, transportation) levels (Martin Ginis, Ma, Latimer-Cheung, & Rimmer, 2016). As demonstrated, a complex and extensive array of barriers have the potential to preclude participation in parasport. However, without knowledge of what quality means or how quality is experienced over time in parasport, our understanding of how to develop and deliver quality sport programmes for people with disabilities will remain limited. It is therefore vital that researchers address the knowledge gap concerned with the quality of participation in parasport.

According to Martin Ginis et al. (2017), a holistic operationalization of participation should encompass “the meanings and satisfactions that an individual derives from participating” (p. 2). These authors completed a configurative review of the participation literature focused on individuals with physical disabilities in which six common themes were identified and recommended for inclusion in future conceptualizations of participation. These themes include: autonomy – having independence, choice, or control; belongingness – a sense of belonging or acceptance in a group; challenge – feeling appropriately challenged; engagement – feeling engaged, focused, and motivated; mastery – experiencing achievement, competence, and self-confidence; and meaning – contributing towards obtaining a personal or socially-meaningful goal (Martin Ginis et al., 2017).

Although the quality of participation has yet to be examined explicitly within parasport contexts, efforts to understand the sport and physical activity experiences of individuals with physical disabilities have emerged in recent years. For example, Turnnidge et al. (2012) interviewed swimmers in an acclaimed swim program for youth with disabilities. Swimmers discussed how their participation in the program contributed to redefined capabilities, an affirmed sense of self, strengthened social connections, and enhanced acceptance (Turnnidge et al., 2012). Outside of the youth sport context, more recent work has examined the quality of physical activity experiences among military veterans with a physical disability – highlighting challenge, group cohesion, individual roles, and independence and choice as key contributors to quality experiences while participating in physical activity (Shirazipour et al., 2017). Thematic overlap between these findings and themes identified within the participation literature offer support for the conceptualization of participation proposed by Martin Ginis et al. (2017).

One methodological approach that has been used to understand the diverse, complex, and nuanced lives of athletes with disabilities is narrative inquiry. By viewing people as storytelling beings, narrative inquiry is a tradition of qualitative research that uses stories to understand life experiences and assist in the production of meaning (Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). To demonstrate, narratives have been used to understand athletic identity after acquiring a permanent physical disability (Perrier, Smith, Strachan, & Latimer-Cheung, 2014), the role of sport in promoting posttraumatic growth following permanent acquired disability (Day & Wadey, 2016), and meanings of hope after experiencing a spinal cord injury through sport (Smith & Sparkes, 2005). Day (2013) highlights physical activity participation as an arena for meaning-making after acquiring a permanent physical disability. In telling stories, people make meaning and communicate in intelligible ways to other people; thus, the telling of stories helps athletes to make better sense of their participation and share personal knowledge about it. In telling such personal life stories, people also shape their identities and the ways in which they choose to participate. For example, the identities formed through the stories that people tell after acquiring a permanent physical disability can either impede or facilitate the trauma recovery process (Day & Wadey, 2016; Day, 2013).

For these reasons, narrative inquiry may offer a useful medium for the communication and interpretation of athletes' personal stories about their participation in parasport – enabling in-depth perspectives on the elements that contribute to meaningful parasport experiences. Considering the relative dearth of literature focusing on the quality of

athletes' participation in parasport, the purpose of this study was to explore the meanings that current and former athletes with physical disabilities attribute to their participation, and the quality of this participation, in parasport over time. Using a narrative approach, we sought to address the following objectives: (a) to explore and typify narrative types that athletes with physical disabilities draw on from culture to represent their participation in parasport, and (b) examine the meanings and conditions that shape parasport participation over time within each narrative type.

## 1. Methodology and methods

### 1.1. Narrative inquiry

Within narrative inquiry, people are viewed as meaning-making creatures, and a crucial way to make meaning, as well as communicate these meanings, is through stories (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). This research was underpinned by two assumptions: ontological relativism (i.e., reality is multiple, subjective, and mind-dependent) and epistemological constructionism (i.e., knowledge is subjective and socially constructed) (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). We adopted narrative constructionism as the specific methodology – a socio-cultural approach that conceptualizes human beings as storytellers who draw on the narratives made available to us through social relations and culture (Smith, 2015). As such, narratives are broad cultural resources that can be classified as a certain type (e.g., “rags to riches”) that is crucial for helping to structure our personal stories, make meaning, and communicate experiences. Narrative inquiry considers language to be constructive, meaning that stories constitute our psychological realities (e.g., Smith et al., 2016). Thus, the stories athletes tell about their participation in parasport may offer key insights into the subjective or experiential aspects of participation, as well as the broader social and cultural resources that inform such perspectives. Language also offers a performative function (Wiggins & Potter, 2008). The stories we tell are not merely passive representations of our thoughts, attitudes, feelings, or actions; rather, storied language provides a medium for action (Frank, 2010; Smith, 2015). Through language we are able to accomplish “social actions and realities” (Atkinson, 2015, p. 93) with the potential for both individual and broad societal impact (e.g., full and effective participation; United Nations, 2006).

### 1.2. Participants and sampling

After obtaining ethics approval, participants were recruited using maximum variation and criterion-based purposive sampling strategies (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). While maximum variation sampling enabled a broad range of perspectives concerning the factors that comprise or shape participation in parasport activities, criterion-based sampling ensured that participants shared certain attributes that made them eligible for this study. Specifically, we sought the views of Canadian men and women, 18 years of age or older, with congenital or acquired physical disabilities and experience (i.e., a minimum of one season) participating in parasport. Parasport was further operationalized to include competition and/or training for the purposes of competition as an individual or on a team at any competitive level, from recreational to elite.

Using publically available contact information via the Canadian Paralympic Committee's online database, the first author contacted parasport clubs and organizations via e-mail. Contacted individuals (e.g., coaches, administrators) were asked to forward a letter of information about the study to athletes who met the criteria for inclusion. Interested athletes were asked to contact the first author directly. Twenty-one people met the criteria for inclusion and agreed to participate, including 9 women and 12 men ranging in age from 19 to 73 ( $M = 33.7$ ,  $SD = 14.5$ ). Nearly all of the participants identified as Caucasian, while one participant identified as biracial. Approximately

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