



Disability sport and activist identities: A qualitative study of narratives of activism among elite athletes' with impairment



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Sport and exercise psychology has recently expanded into how it can be utilized to enable social missions like activism. No research, however, has examined activist identities among disabled, elite athletes. This article is the first to engage with this new and complex issue by examining narratives of activism amongst elite athletes with impairment and their adoption/rejection of various activist identities.

Methods: Thirty-six people were recruited using maximum variation and criterion-based purposive sampling strategies. Data was collected using interviews and fieldwork observations (e.g., observation and social media material). The large data set was rigorously analyzed using a narrative thematic analysis.

Results: All participants adopted an athletic identity and an athletic activist identity. A small group also adopted a political activist identity that was concerned with challenging disablism. The athletes' reasons for adopting or eschewing activist identities are identified and connections made to organizational stressors, interpellation, feeling, emotional regulation, narrative, habitus, health and wellbeing. Also revealed is the impact that sporting retirement had on activist identity construction.

Conclusions: The article makes a novel research contribution by revealing two different activist identities within the context of disability sport and what social functions each identity might serve. It also significantly develops knowledge by revealing various organizational stressors experienced by disabled athletes, the importance of embodied feelings and emotional regulation in activist identity construction, the damage that social oppression can have on wellbeing following sporting retirement, and the positive possibilities retiring may have for developing different identities. Practical suggestions are as well offered.

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Within the field of sport and exercise psychology, research on disability has grown in recent years. As part of this growth, attention has turned to elite athletes with impairment. For example, research has examined experiences of retirement (Wheeler, Malone, VanVlack, Nelson, & Steadward, 1996), mental skills use (Martin & Malone, 2013), posttraumatic growth (Day, 2013), and autonomy supportive coaching (Cheon, Reeve, Lee, & Lee, 2015) among elite, disabled athletes. Research also exists on athletic identity, that is, the degree to which a disabled individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Along

with work on the athletic role in recreational sport (e.g., Perrier, Sweet, Strachan, & Latimer-Cheung, 2012; Tasiemski & Brewer, 2011), research has examined the relationship between athletic identity and self-esteem among elite, disabled athletes (Van de Vliet, Van Biesen, & Vanlandewijck, 2008), the effect of sports participation on athletic identity and influence on quality of life (Groff, Lundberg, & Zabriskie, 2009) and the role of para-sport in the construction of disabled and athletic identities (Peers, 2012).

Whilst disability specific research within sport and exercise psychology is a growing field, significant gaps in knowledge remain (Smith, Martin, & Perrier, 2016). One gap pertains to activist orientations or *activist identities* among elite athletes with impairment. Activist identity is broadly defined as an individual's developed, relatively stable, yet changeable orientation to engage

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in social missions (Corning & Myers, 2002). It involves collective, social-political, problem-solving behaviors that range from low-risk, passive, and institutionalized acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviors that convey what is seen is needed to make a better society (Corning & Myers, 2002). Thus, individuals with an activist identity are often advocates in the sense that they seek change for the better within society (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015; Stake & Rosu, 2012).

Examining activist identities among disabled, elite athletes' is of significance for several reasons. As Schinke, Stambulova, Lidor, Papaioannou, and Ryba (2016) have noted, "there is growing interest in how sport psychology practices and sport contexts can be crafted to enable social missions" (p. 4) and more generally how the field might be utilized to benefit human activity. For example, in position statements and ethical principles, organisations like the *International Society of Sport Psychology* (ISSP) and the *Applied Association of Sport Psychology* (AASP) have promoted social missions and called on sport and exercise psychologists to actively contribute to human welfare by condoning discriminatory practices, promoting diversity, and enabling social justice (Schinke et al., 2016). Despite this, it has been argued that too few researchers in sport and exercise psychological research explicitly focus on social missions, such as promoting diversity, tackling oppression, and examining activism (Fisher & Roper, 2015; Krane, 2014; Smith & Perrier, 2014). Examining activist identities among sports people is also of significance as athletes themselves might make a valuable contribution to promoting social missions. This is because athletes are potentially well positioned to vividly highlight injustice both within and outside sport. For example, over the years various athletes have engaged in activism by shining a spotlight on issues such as racism, LGBT rights (Krane, 2014), and, in relation to disability, inaccessible sporting programs for disabled people (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015).

A focus on activist identities is therefore important. It contributes to how the field of sport and psychology might be utilized to benefit human activity and social life. Despite this, there is a lack of empirical work within the field on activist identities in relation to disabled, elite athletes. Designed to address the aforementioned gaps in knowledge, the purpose of this paper is to examine narratives of activism among elite athletes' with impairment and their adoption and/or rejection of possible activist identities. Our central research questions were: 1) What types of activist identities, if any, are constructed and performed by elite athletes' with a disability and for what do they advocate? 2) Why, or why not, is an activist identity pertinent to them? 3) How and when do they engage in activism? 4) What social functions might their discourses serve in terms of disability, social missions and wellbeing?

Theoretically, the research is informed by narrative inquiry. Joining with approaches like symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and discursive psychology, and as also shown in discourse orientated work within sport and exercise psychology (e.g., Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb, & Kettler, 2013; McGannon & Spence, 2012), narrative inquiry considers language to be constructive. That is to say, stories constitute our psychological realities, including identity (McGannon & Smith, 2015). For narrative scholars, identity is not something an individual 'has' inside them and which emerges from their mind. Rather identities are constructed within social relations primarily through talk (Frank, 2010; Nelson, 2001). As part of this relational and discursive constructive process, identity is performed, which means that people enact identities through their talk (Cosh et al., 2013; McGannon & Spence, 2012). In addition to our identities being constructed and performed, research has shown that language is performative (Cosh et al., 2013; Smith, 2013; Wiggins & Potter, 2008). In other words, and echoing classic formulations of philosophical speech-act theory, stories,

accounts, and others forms of discourse *do* things; our talk is action-orientated. Language-in-use then is neither passive nor a neutral medium of representing thoughts, attitudes, emotions, or behavior. Rather storied language acts in, for, and on us, affecting our thoughts, attitudes, emotions, and behavior (Frank, 2010). Thus, as Atkinson (2015) argued, researchers must always "have due regard for the fact that language accomplishes social actions and realities" (p. 93). Or, as Wiggins and Potter (2008) put it, "to separate talk and action as psychologists commonly do (for example in distinctions such as attitudes vs. behavior) is to set up a false dichotomy, and to overlook the ways in which talk achieves things in itself" (p. 77).

1. Methodology and methods

The research design was rigorously developed and implemented in the following manner.

1.1. Methodology and sampling

The research was underpinned by ontological relativism (i.e., reality is multiple, created, and mind-dependent) and epistemological constructionism (i.e., knowledge is constructed and subjective). After gaining university ethical approval for the study, participants were recruited through maximum variation and criterion-based purposive sampling strategies (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The combination of two types of purposive sampling was chosen because the former ensures the representation of a variety of Paralympic sports and athletes' experiences. The latter sampling strategy ensured that participants were recruited who shared particular inclusion criteria attributes. The criteria were people a) aged 18 years or over b) with impairment and c) who were an actively competitive elite athlete. An elite athlete was defined as someone who had participated in elite talent programs, were in receipt of an Athlete Performance Award from UK Sport during their para-sport careers, competed at high level events like the World Championships or Paralympics, and/or have experienced some sustained success at the highest level (Swann, Moran, & Piggott, 2015).

To recruit a sample, calls for participants were placed on social media and websites, and letters were sent to disability sport networks inviting people who met the sampling criteria to take part in the study. The study was described as research that sought to understand people's experiences of being a disabled athlete. Participants were not then informed about the specific topic of this research. The reason for this was based on the need to recruit a diverse sample whilst avoiding recruiting a group of people who might first consider the research an opportunity to promote disability sport or their personal political views. Recruitment of participants continued until data saturation was achieved. Recognizing the complexities of data saturation (e.g. there is always the potential for 'the new to emerge') (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013), this kind of saturation best refers to an iterative process that involves collecting and transcribing initial data, immediately assessing it, and then continuing to collect and assess data until anything 'new' found adds nothing necessarily to the overall story and patterns. The result was a recruited sample of 36 people (20 males and 16 females aged between 23 and 40 years) who had been competing in their sport for an average of 8 years. The participants reported a range of impairments (e.g., amputation, cerebral palsy, spinal cord injury, visual impairment) and represented a diversity of sports (e.g., athletics, canoe, cycling, swimming, triathlon, wheelchair basketball). Nine individuals described their impairments as congenital or acquired during childhood and 27 acquired their impairments in adulthood. The sample was also diverse in terms of

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