

PERMISSIBLE PREJUDICE

A meta-synthesis of systemic ableism in disability sport



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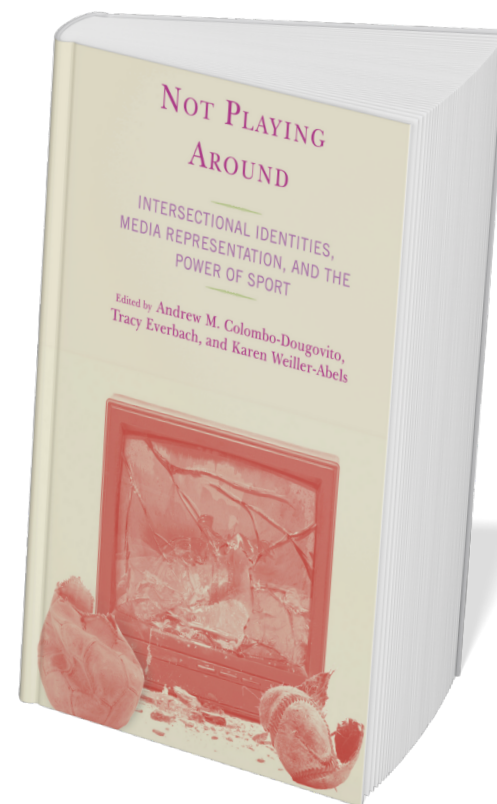
DISCLAIMER

My language use will be intentional.
I have biases; this work is guided by that bias.
I don't intend to be declarative.

♦ Data originally published in:

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**A 2023 Choice Reviews “Outstanding Academic Title”*



We Live in a Disabling Society ... But We Don't Have To TEDxUNT



Watch @ <https://youtube.com/watch?v=iAiV2ya1idM>

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BACKGROUND

What is the problem?

- ✦ Between 13.7% (Houtenville et al., 2026) and 25.7% (Okoro et al., 2018) of adults in the US have *some* type of disability; nearly 1/3 of adults in *rural communities* identify as disabled (Zhao et al., 2019).
- ✦ Limited engagement in physical activity is prevalent among individuals across nearly every category of disability; increasing risk for poorer health, wellbeing, and negative quality of life.
- ✦ Disabled individuals, disproportionately, must confront barriers to their physical activity engagement.

“Operating as a form of privilege, *ableism* encompasses a complex and enduring network of beliefs, processes, and practices that place value on nondisabled embodiment and shape our collective understandings of the self, our bodies, and our relationships, and how we perceive, and are perceived by, others.”

Townsend et al. (2026, p. 88)

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**“...you do not have to be disabled to
experience ableism.”**

Tahlia A. Lewis (2021)

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Chodorow (1999)

- ♦ In critiquing the *laissez faire* cultural response to homophobia, Nancy J. Chodorow was first to define *permissible prejudices* and identify them as “natural” in society.
- ♦ *In other words: society excuses* any reason for the dislike, or discrimination, or hatred of another as a rational, and expected, (re)action. Hatred and discrimination are *excused or rationalized*, in a way, to continue to prioritize the unoppressed.
- ♦ Socially constructed definitions are not static—they are active reflections of societal values (Schalk, 2016).

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METHOD

What we did?

- ♦ To better understand the *imposed barriers that ableism* enacts upon disabled persons attempting to engage in sport or leisure activities, and *the role of sport* in navigating such inclusive barriers, we conducted a *thematic meta-synthesis*, following prescribed measures of trustworthiness (Walsh & Downe, 2005).
- ♦ *Identified literature*: “focused on the perspectives and experiences of disabled persons attempting to participate in physical activity, whether it be organized sport, leisurely recreation, or anything in between.”

- ♦ Journal articles published between 1990 and 2021 were generated using the following search terms: *disability* or *disabled* or *impairment* or *impaired* or *handicap* or *special need*; *physical activity* or *exercise* or *sport* or *recreation* or *sports for persons with disabilities*; and *perceptions* or *experience* or *barrier* or *access*.
- ♦ Articles were included if: (a) published between January 1990 and May 2021; (b) published in English language journals; (c) located in peer-reviewed periodical publications; and (d) used a qualitative research design (i.e., qualitative or mixed methods design).

- ♦ Title and abstract review were conducted using Rayyan software (Ouzzani et al., 2016).
- ♦ 701 potential articles were reviewed, through two rounds, resulting in 66 articles for full text review.
- ♦ After independent review, 34 articles were included. During data extraction, 3 additional articles were excluded (31 included).
- ♦ Data extracted resulted in 678 individual quotations.
- ♦ Following an independent heuristic analysis of the data resulted in 45 individual codes.
- ♦ Codes were explored for credibility, auditability, fittingness, and confirmability (Jensen & Allen, 1996).

FINDINGS

Three overarching themes:

1. Ableism within and about sport and physical activity is rampant and pervasive...or...“Sometimes you figure you got to become a second-class citizen.”
2. Sport can serve as a mediator to psycho-environmental barriers yet is missing justice-oriented approaches...or...“Tak[ing] a break from pretending to be normal.”
3. Intersectional examinations of disability are absent and study samples are homogenous, prioritizing certain disabilities thus reinforcing an existing disability hierarchy—or—“They simply cannot help being prejudiced.”

FINDINGS

Descriptive overview of included articles.

- ♦ Twenty-seven (27; 87%) articles were from researchers in or data that were situated in global North countries: *Canada* (7), *England* (7), *Netherlands* (2), *Sweden* (2), *United States* (8), and *multi-site* (UK, Can, US)(1).
- ♦ Those from the global South: *Brazil* (Haegele et al., 2018), *Australia* (Ballas et al., 2020; Mahy et al., 2010), and *South Africa* (Conchar et al., 2016).
- ♦ Nine (9) published prior to 2010; only two (2) published prior to 2000 and none prior to 1997.

- ♦ Participants ranged in age from 8 to 80; predominantly male.
- ♦ Only two studies focused primarily on female participants.
- ♦ No study identified participants outside of the gender binary.
- ♦ Sample populations were overwhelmingly 'white'—several did not include enough information to determine racial or ethnic breakdown of participants.
- ♦ Physical disabilities were primary disability category represented; others include: epilepsy (1), visual impairment (1), intellectual disability (3), autism (1).

THEME 1

Ableism within and about sport and physical activity is rampant and pervasive...or...“Sometimes you figure you got to become a second-class citizen.”

- ♦ Barriers rooted in the ableist notions of *worth* and *value* were abundant.
- ♦ Participants experienced external barriers such as a *cost burden*, *lack of opportunity*, and *limited physical access* as well as internalized barriers such as *loss of dignity* and *shame*.
- ♦ Influence of social stigma was apparent as nearly each study included examples of *policing disabled people*, *ignorance of disabled bodies*, and *bullying*—all perpetuated from the broader beliefs held by society and the representation of disability.

THEME 2

Sport can serve as a mediator to psycho-environmental barriers yet is missing justice-oriented approaches...or...“Tak[ing] a break from pretending to be normal.”

- ♦ Participants described sport and physical activity as a means to *find community* and cut through the isolation of being considered “second-class.”
- ♦ Individuals were able to use sport as a guide to support their transition from abled to disabled—it gave people perspective and hope.
- ♦ Sport and physical activity offered individuals a way to seek dignity and gain a sense of self.
- ♦ Note: *these determinations were made with groups of individuals that were, often, already socialized into sport before acquiring a disability and likely had a prior affinity with movement.*



THEME 3

Intersectional examinations of disability are absent and study samples are homogenous, prioritizing certain disabilities thus reinforcing an existing disability hierarchy...or...“They simply cannot help being prejudiced.”

- ♦ This theme is encompassing a broader critique of disability and sport scholarship, and the societal influence of ableism on *our* views and practices.
- ♦ As we consider the impacts of identity, representation, and sport across society and between cultures, *we must come to recognize that we have told ourselves fallacies regarding disability*...that our centering of able-bodied idols as definitions of sport only serves to perpetuate a dishonest definition of “ability”.

IMPLICATIONS

“Houston, we have a problem.”

- ♦ DePauw (1997) wrote, “The lens of disability allows us to make problematic the socially constructed nature of sport and once we have done so, opens us to alternative constructions, actions, and solutions” (p. 428).
- ♦ *We must assume a transformational practice that:*
 - a. ...recognizes the on-going (re)construction of disability and sport in broader society, as well as the role that we play in how those constructs are designed.
 - b. ...conceptualizes sport and disabled athletes without seeing *contradiction*, without assuming a *physical liability* or *deformity*, without giving in to *stigma*, and without assuming an *impaired athletic performance*.

“Doing nothing about inaccessibility and lack of accommodations for disabled people is not a neutral act. It is a hostile act.”

Gregory Mansfield (11/3/2021)

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Questions?



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