

A photograph of a person in a wheelchair being pushed by another person on a paved path. The person in the wheelchair is wearing a blue jacket and a blue cap. The person pushing the wheelchair is wearing a blue puffer jacket, a brown knit hat, and black boots. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with other people and structures. The overall tone is somber due to the blue color cast.

ANDREW M. COLOMBO-DOUGOVITO, PHD, CAPE
SUZANNA ROCCO DILLON, PHD, CAPE

A “PERMISSIBLE PREJUDICE”

An exploration of the systemic ableist barriers to sport and leisure activity for disabled persons.

* **DISCLAIMERS**

- * I will intentionally use identity-first language.
- * I have bias, and this work is guided by it.
- * I have financial conflicts of interest in sharing this work.

PERVASIVE ABLEISM

- * “...disability has been a cause for shame. This forced acceptance of second-class citizenship has stripped us, as disabled people, of pride and dignity.” (Huemann, 1988, p. 74).
- * “...disability, as a construct, challenges the perception of a “normal” body by “provid[ing] insight into the fact that all bodies are socially constructed” (Siebers, 2001, p. 737).
- * Athletes with impairments defined as “super” (Howe, 2011)—or more commonly “supercrip”—“implying a stereotyping process that requires an individual to ‘fight against [their] impairment’ [to] overcome it and achieve unlikely success” (Silva & Howe, 2012, p. 175).
- * Inclusion policies “illustrate a utopian vision whereby anyone can be included, but in practice due to the emphasis on market-based values who can become included is often very narrow” (Hammond et al., 2019, p. 312).

ABLEISM

a·ble·ism \ 'ābə-ˌli-zəm \
noun

A system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity.

These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism.

This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person's language, appearance, religion and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and "behave."

You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.

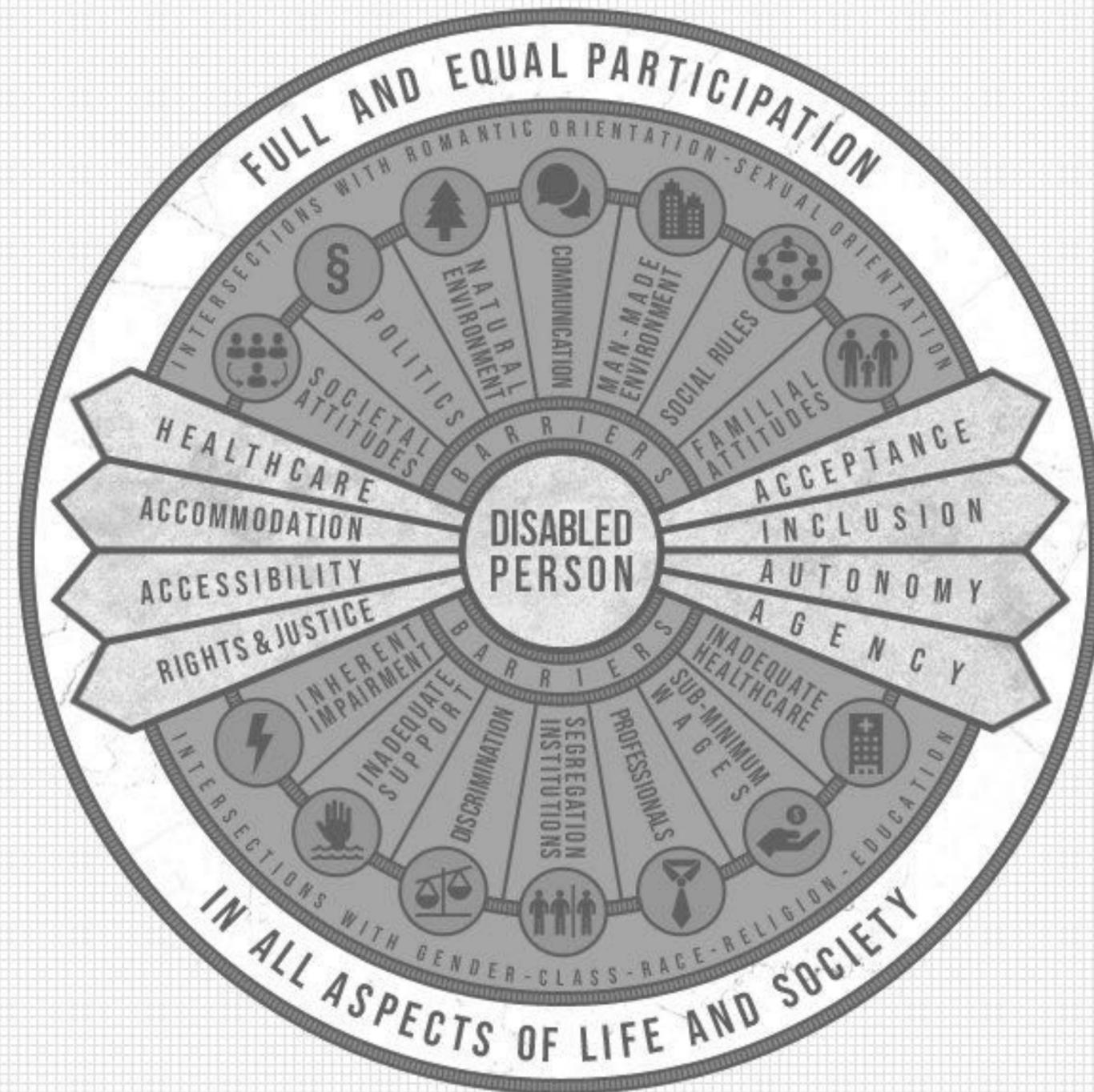
a working definition by Talila "TL" Lewis*; updated January 2021

*developed in community with Disabled Black & other negatively racialized people, especially Dustin Gibson

- * People can only participate in society if they, “manage to **demonstrate normalcy** and ability to become part of the capitalist marketplace, ready and willing to work” (Goodley, 2017, p. 177).
- * Jeanes et al. (2017; 2018) have illustrated how community sports clubs tend to support the inclusion of participants with a disability who can **most readily fit** into their existing structures and systems.
- * Silva and Howe (2012) argue that this serves to re-impose “society’s low-level expectation placed upon people with disability, which ultimately perpetuates the understanding of their **existence as a ‘problem’**”(p. 175).
- * Adding accommodations are “**extra**” (Hammond et al. 2020).
- * DePauw (1997) posited that our current institutions focus on “inclusion” only occurs when individuals **fit within existing structures without adaptation**—need to focus on shifting the praxis of what sport can be.

THE HOLISTIC MODEL OF DISABILITY

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION FOR DISABLED PEOPLE AND HOW TO DISMANTLE THEM



SPORT INFLUENCE ON SELF

- * Sport, particularly for those with disabilities, has been suggested as a **potential vehicle for navigating** the “Empire of the Normal” (Couser, 2000) and transcending its hierarchy (Berger, 2005).
- * Even among disabled athletes, “supercrip” narratives are **internalized** and athletes continue to **seek an able-bodied ideal** (Berger, 2008; Hardin & Hardin, 2004) by internalizing a presumed “hierarchy of disability” (Schell & Duncan, 1999).
- * In the last decade, there has been an **increase in the media commodification** of the Paralympics (Silva & Howe, 2012) and a hypervisibility of disability among the coverage of sport for those with disabilities (Pullen et al., 2019), drawing attention to both greater recognition to the needs of disabled persons and an increased presence of “inspiration porn” (Martin, 2019).
- * Interweaving of Paralympic sport into broader nationalistic views of identity by media outlets have led to further entrenchment of ableism and have spawned more broad depictions of the “able-disabled” (Pullen et al., 2020a, p. 727).

THEMATIC META-SYNTHESIS

- * Synthesis of qualitative findings for overarching patterns; akin to qualitative meta-analysis.
- * Systematically searched 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.
- * Inclusion Criteria: published between 1990 and 2021, qualitative or mixed methods data, peer-reviewed, English language, physical activity-oriented, first person narrative.
- * Used expert review, an audit trail, and constant comparison to ensure trustworthiness.
- * Of 701 potential articles, we analyzed 34 that met our criteria => 31 ultimately included.
- * Gathered qualitative data, resulting in 678 individual quotations. Independently coded, then discussed until consensus: 45 individual codes.
- * Codes were reframed into three themes.

ABLEISM WITHIN AND ABOUT SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IS RAMPANT AND PERVASIVE

– OR –

“SOMETIMES YOU FIGURE YOU GOT TO BECOME A SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN.”

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.”

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.”

ABLEISM WITHIN AND ABOUT SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IS RAMPANT AND PERVASIVE - OR - "SOMETIMES YOU FIGURE YOU GOT TO BECOME A SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN"

- * Participants across the included studies 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**.
 - * “There are so many spaces [...] that are inaccessible, that talk about disability [...] I was constantly showing up to events that they hadn’t made accessible.”
- * The influence of **social stigma** was apparent as nearly each study included examples of **policing disabled people**, **ignorance of disabled bodies**, and **bullying**.
 - * Rooted heavily in the idea of *dignity*, participants across the studies reflected on how their experiences left them consistently feeling less than and espoused broader internalized ableist beliefs.
- * The construction of “disability does not equal worthy” was omnipresent:
 - * The problem...a problem is that—I don't want to say this. A problem is that I don't feel, I don't always feel like a whole person. I would say like, on a whole I usually feel like not a whole person more than I do like a whole person. (Autry & Hanson, 2001).

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.
- * As suggested by Ellis and Goggin (2015), sport was **perceived as a mediator** by many of the participants that allowed them to act against the systemic structures and beliefs that typically limit physical activity for disabled persons.
 - * "I had nothing until I found swimming. I felt like a complete misfit. When I found swimming that all changed."
- * Sport and physical activity became outlets for participants to "take a break from pretending to be normal".
- * As Berger (2005) noted, disabled persons can **leverage sport** to navigate the covert and overt stigma they endure.

**INTERSECTIONAL EXAMINATIONS OF DISABILITY ARE ABSENT AND STUDY SAMPLES ARE HOMOGENOUS,
PRIORITIZING CERTAIN DISABILITIES THUS REINFORCING AN EXISTING DISABILITY HIERARCHY**

- OR -

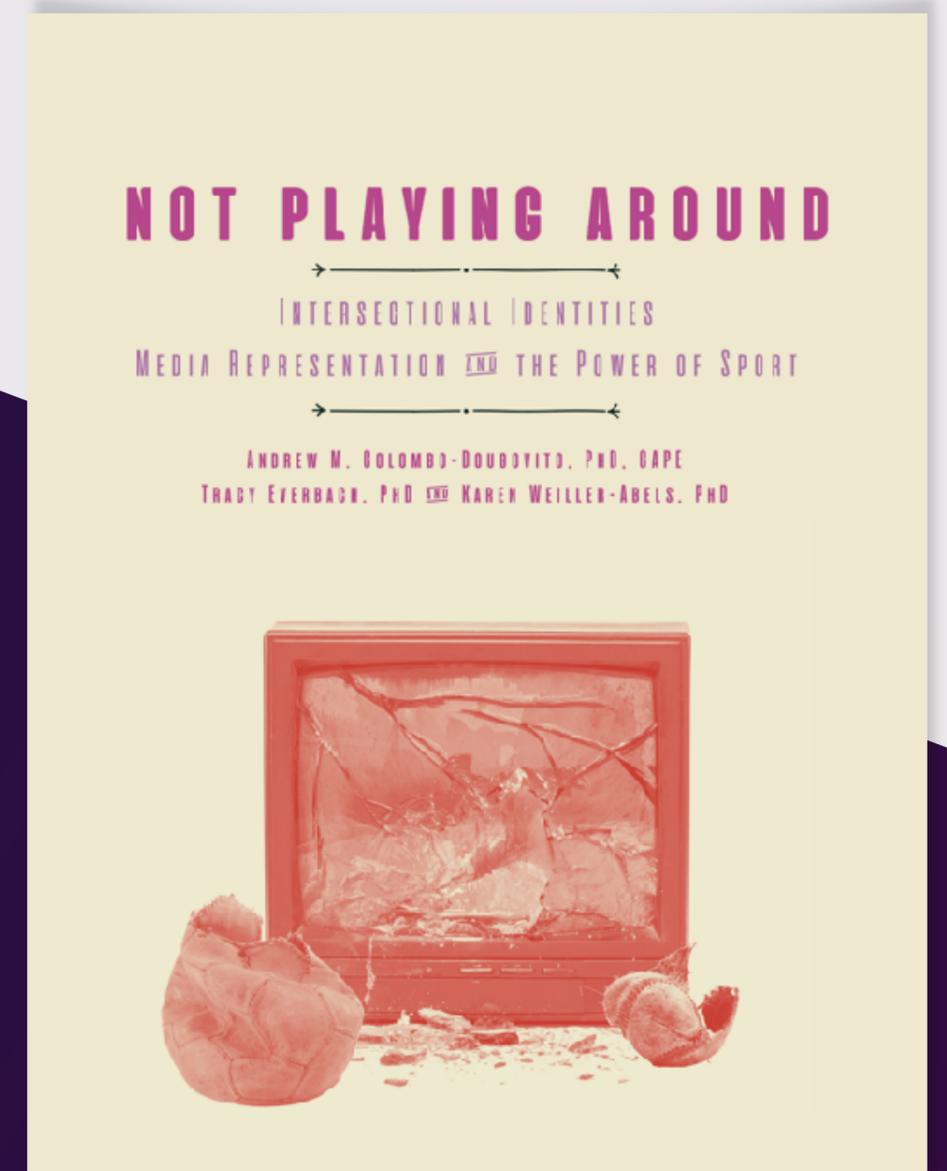
"THEY SIMPLY CANNOT HELP BEING PREJUDICED."

- * Lastly...yet, perhaps most importantly...there exists in this synthesis a great absence in representation.
 - * Ableism is apparent throughout the included studies and sport is witnessed as a mediator for such ableism (reinforcing broader evidenced assumptions), **these data are generated from very homogenous samples regarding gender, race or ethnicity, class, etc.**
 - * Evidence has been primarily generated by those with **physical impairments**, which leaves considerable gaps within the evidence.
- * Perhaps, a **broader critique** of disability and sport scholarship, and the societal influence on our views.
- * If we are to accept that ableism influences sport in the same ways witnessed in broader society, then we also must accept that we are similarly enamored.
- * As Beacom et al., (2016) highlighted, however, to outwardly condemn the way scholars or journalists cover disability in sport, "would be too simplistic and inevitably involve glossing-over what is indeed a complex area characterized by contested meaning(s)" (p. 56).

IMPLICATIONS

- * 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”**; and
 - * ...those notions have become **pervasive among our media** coverage (Rees et al., 2019).
- * As 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: one that recognizes the on-going (re)construction of disability and sport in broader society, as well as the role that media plays in how those constructs are designed.
- * Need a culturally respective practice of data generation and educational pedagogy to shift the praxis of sport and wellbeing.

Colombo-Dougovito, A. M., & Dillon, S. R. (2022). A “Permissible Prejudice”: An exploration of the systemic ableist barriers to sport and leisure activity for disabled people (pp. 113–140). In A. M. Colombo-Dougovito, T. Everbach, & K. Weiller-Abels (Eds.), *Not playing around: Intersectional identities, media representation, and the power of sport*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.



QUESTIONS?

ANDREW M. COLOMBO-DOUGOVITO, PHD, CAPE

andrew.colombo-dougovito@unt.edu

www.colombodougovito.com

SUZANNA ROCCO DILLON, PHD, CAPE

sdillon@twu.edu