



# **WE LIVE IN A DISABLING SOCIETY**

**Artificial limitations to movement autonomy and  
the influence of ableism.**

**ANDREW M. COLOMBO-DOUGOVITO, PHD, CAPE**



“Fundamental to the disability rights movement is the understanding that **we live in a disabling society**, and artificial limitations borne of injustice present the major barriers in the lives of people with disabilities, not an individual's impairments. Disability is not a pitiable medical state; it is a set of social barriers that can be fought and overcome.”

Mer Stevens, *WE WANT RIGHTS, NOT CHARITY*, 2012



# 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



# 26%

**...of adults in the us have at least one disability.**

**(OKORO ET AL., 2018)**



- \* 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.



# 2/3RDS

**...of people would avoid disabled person of doing or saying the *wrong* thing.**

**(DIXON, SMITH, & TROUCHET, 2018)**







# *RADICAL* PRAGMATISM



# MY FOCI

## INJUSTICE

Examine the systemic barriers that influence movement opportunities.



## ACCOMMODATION

Collaborate with communities to understand how to effectively meet their needs.



## INSTITUTIONS & POLICIES

Questioning our collective praxis from classrooms to fitness centers to community recreation.

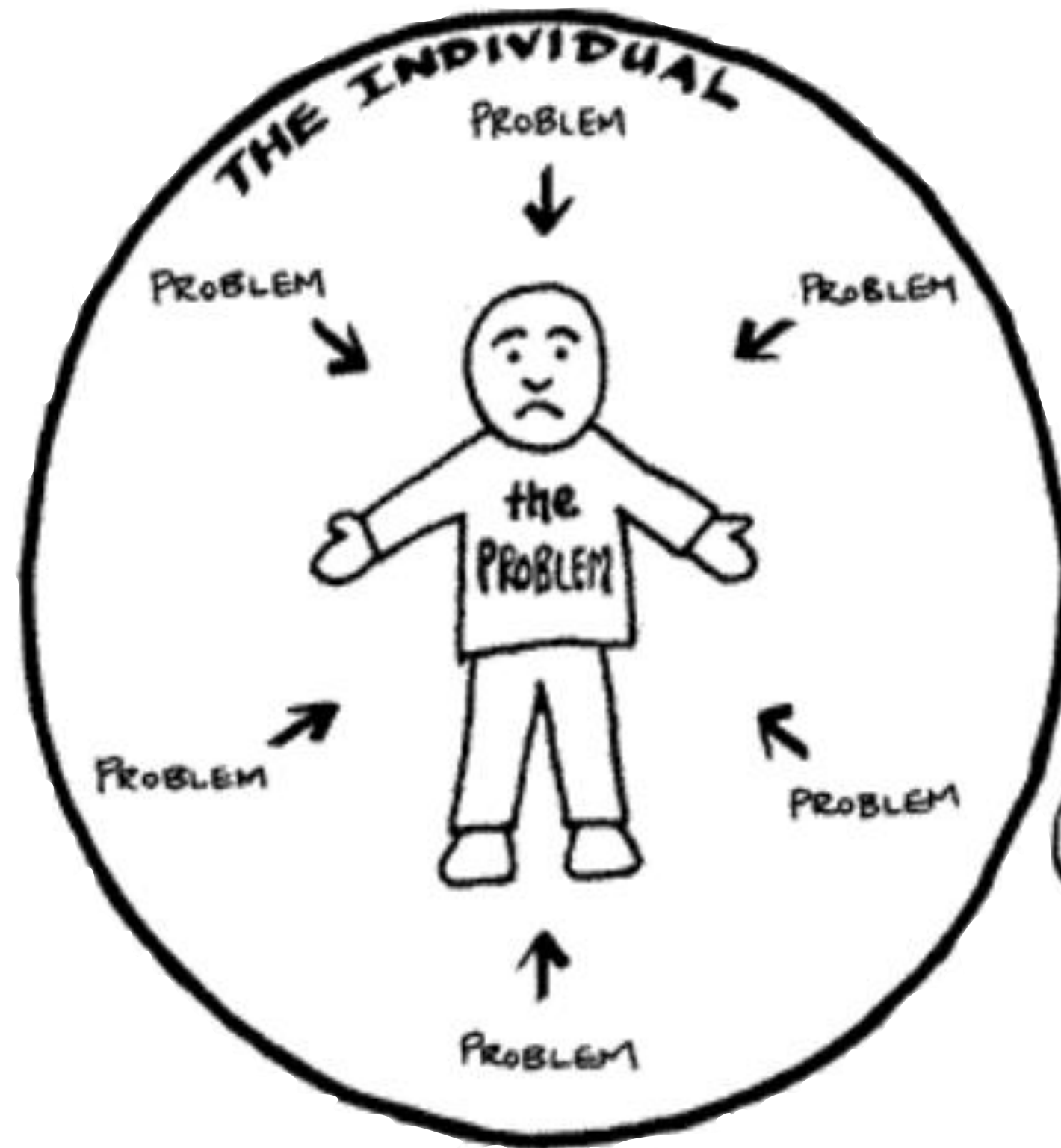


## (RE)CONSTRUCTION

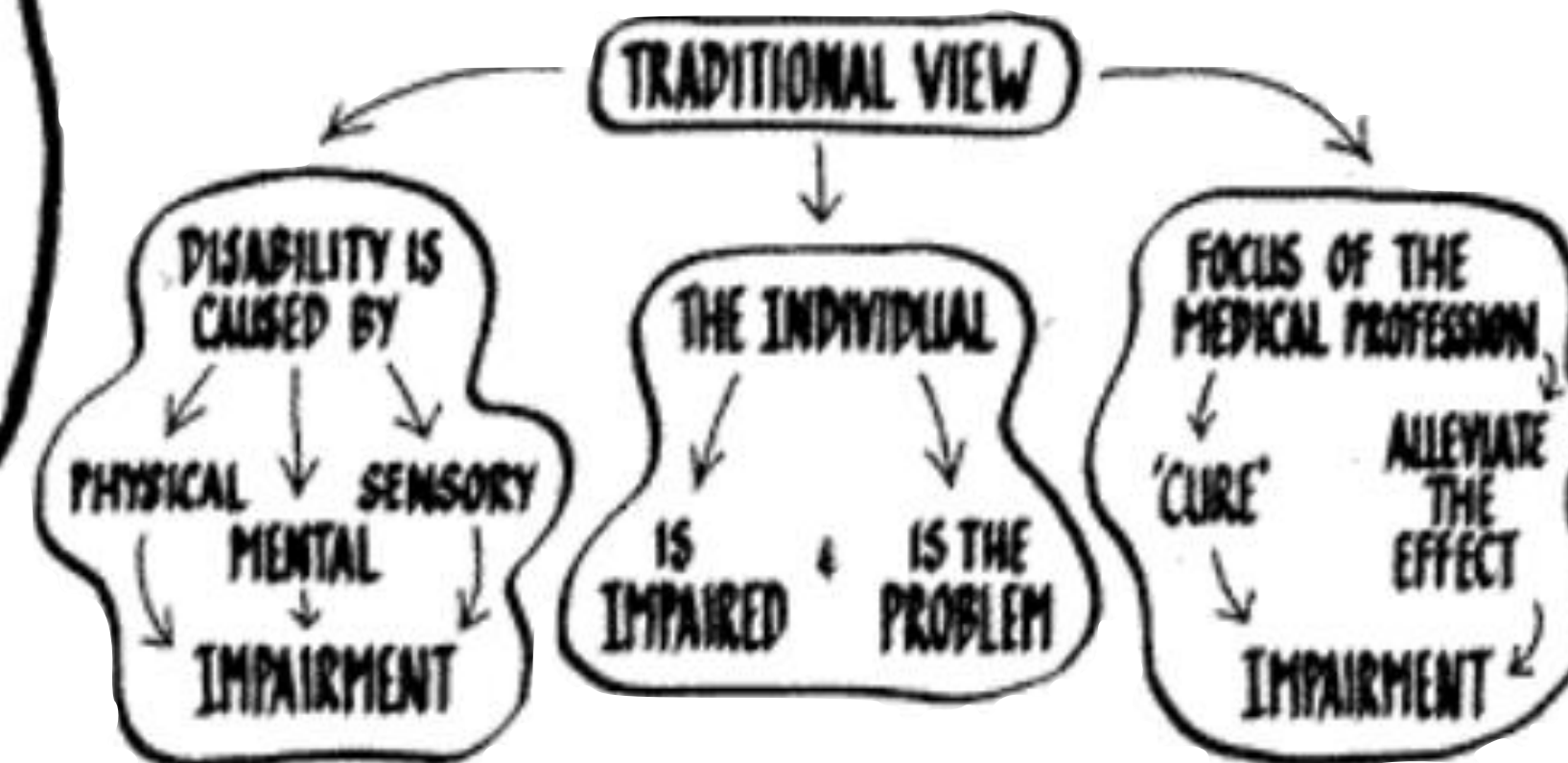
(Re)evaluate our construction of sport, movement, wellness, and health. Center historically marginalized practice.



# THE MEDICAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

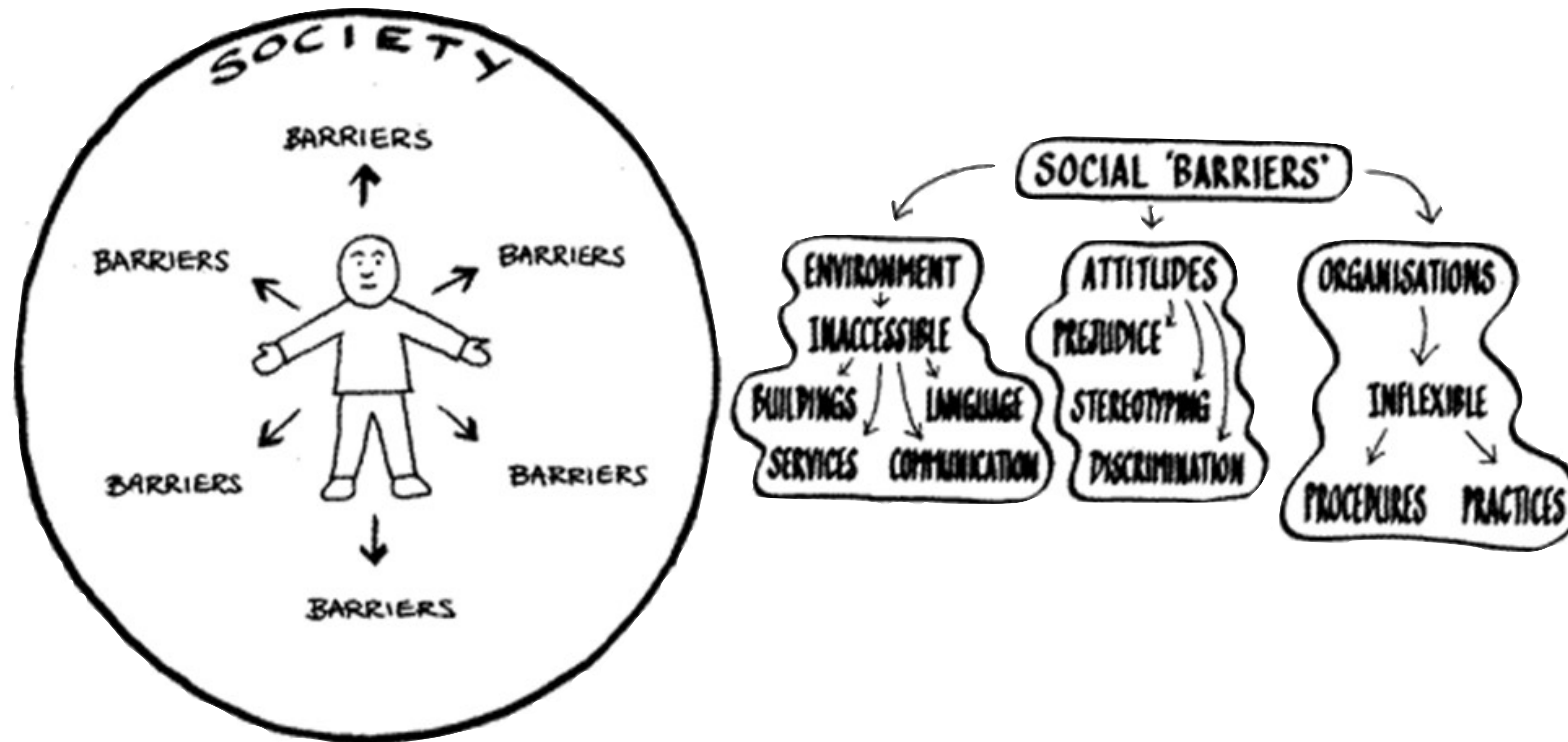


IMPAIRMENTS AND CHRONIC ILLNESS  
OFTEN POSE REAL DIFFICULTIES BUT  
- THEY ARE NOT THE MAIN PROBLEMS





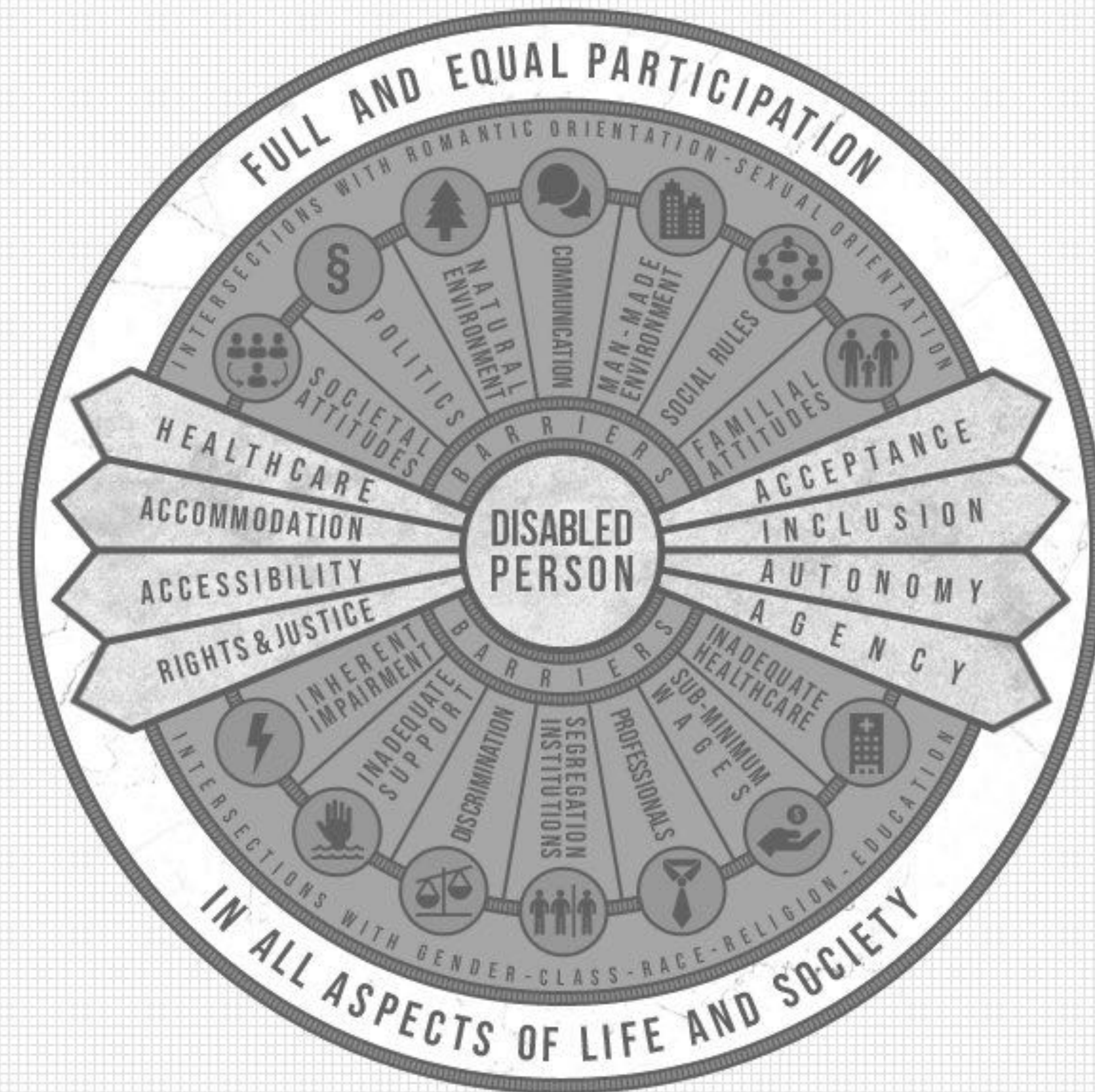
# THE SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY





# THE HOLISTIC MODEL OF DISABILITY

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION FOR DISABLED PEOPLE AND HOW TO DISMANTLE THEM





# GROUNDING THEORY OF ADOPTION AND MAINTENANCE OF PA

*Autism and Physical Health Across the Lifespan*



## **A grounded theory of adoption and maintenance of physical activity among autistic adults**

**Andrew M Colombo-Dougovito<sup>1</sup>** , **A Josephine Blagrove<sup>2</sup>**  
and **Sean Healy<sup>3</sup>** 

Autism

1–15

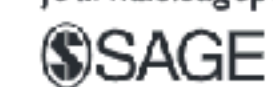
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# GROUNDNED THEORY ANALYSIS

- \* *Purpose:* To examine the physical activity and exercise experiences of autistic adults across the lifespan.
- \* Grounded theory is “a general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area” (Glaser, 1992, p. 16).
- \* First & Second Author interviewed each participant.
  - \* Bracketed thought prior to interview (Tufford & Newman, 2010), debriefed thoughts afterward.
- \* Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- \* Constant Comparative Analysis: open, focused, and theoretical coding.
- \* Constructivist paradigm (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2000; 2016).



# INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

**Reviewer script:** Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, meaning you may take a break or stop at any time. If you are uncomfortable with any question, you can skip it. We can start whenever you are ready.

## Physical activity during childhood:

1. Where did you grow up during your childhood?
2. Would you define your location as rural or urban?
3. Can you describe your family to me? Parents? Siblings? Pets?
4. What does being physically active mean to you?
5. The first part of these questions are going to ask you to reflect back on your childhood. What were your favorite activities to participate in, when you were a child?
  - a. Why were these your favorite?
6. Did you prefer activities that involved moving (such as sport) or sitting (such as television). Why, did you prefer (repeat back preferences)?
7. Did you and your family do any physical activities together? If so, what activities?
  - a. How did these activities make you feel?
  - b. Was there anything you enjoyed or disliked about these activities?
8. Did you and friends do any physical activities together? If so, can you describe these activities?
  - a. How did these activities make you feel?
  - b. Was there anything you enjoyed or disliked about these activities?
9. Did you have a pet or did your family have a pet? Did you participate with the pet? (Walking the dog, riding horses, etc.)
10. What activities did you most commonly do with your siblings?
  - a. Did you ever do physically activities together? Can you tell me about that?
11. Did you play sport in school? If so, what sport/s?
  - a. Why did you play this/these sport/s?
  - b. What made it possible for you to participate?
  - c. Do you feel you were successful?

1. If not, what could have been done to make it so you could have been successful?
12. Did you play a team sport in school? (If not mentioned above)
  - a. If yes, what sport?
  - b. If not, why?
  - c. What made it possible for you to participate?
  - d. Do you feel you were successful?
    - i. If not, what could have been done to make it so you could have been successful?
13. Were there any sports/activities you would have liked to participate in at school?
  - a. If so, what sport/activities?
  - b. Why did you not participate in this activity?
  - c. What made it possible for you to participate?
14. Do you feel you were successful? Did you participate in any after school physical activities?
  - a. If yes, why did you participate in these activities?
  - b. If no, why not?
  - c. What would have encouraged or helped you to be involved in some/more after school?
15. Did you remember it being easy or difficult to play sports as a child? Can you explain?
  - i. If so, can you please describe it for me?
16. When we play sport there can be lots of sensory stimuli, for example, sounds, and movement. Can you remember how you experienced this aspect of sport, as a child?
  - i. If so, can you please describe it for me?
17. What activities did you participate in most at recess when you were in school?
  - a. Did you usually play with friends or by yourself at recess?
  - b. Did you prefer playing with friends or by yourself at recess?
  - c. If you could go back and change something about recess, would you change anything? If so, what?
18. Did your parents or teachers ever use PA as punishment? (Example)
  - a. How did you feel about this?
  - b. Did it affect how you participated in PA?
19. When you think of yourself participating in physical activity or sport as a child, what places come to mind? Can you describe them? What made these places good for physical activity?

- a. Tell me about how your home/garden encouraged or discouraged physical activity?
- b. Tell me about how your neighborhood encouraged or discouraged physical activity?

## Physical activity during adulthood:

20. Are you married?
21. Do you have any children?
22. Looking back, how has your physical activity level changed over time? Please explain.
23. Do you consider yourself to be physically active now? Please explain.
  - a. If yes, what types of PA do you participate in? Typically, how often do you play/do (repeat from above)? For how long?
  - b. If no, how do you feel about this?
24. What activities, if any, do you enjoy participating in as an adult?
  - a. How do you feel when you are participating in these activities?
  - b. Why do you think you mostly participate in active/sedentary activities?
25. Are there any activities that you do, but do not enjoy? If yes, why?
  - a. How do you feel when you are participating in these activities?
26. Do you usually participate in physical activity by yourself or with others?
  - a. Do you rather participating in physical activity by yourself or with others?
27. How do you feel about your current level of health? Please explain.
  - a. If yes, what do you think makes you healthy?
  - b. If no, how do you feel about this?
28. What do you do that has a good impact on your health, if anything?
  - a. Do you think that PA is related to your health?
29. What do you do that has a bad impact on your health, if anything?
30. What do you feel are factors that help you to be physically active?
31. What do you feel are barriers that prevent you from being being physically active, if any?
32. Do you prefer to be sedentary or active?
33. What are the biggest benefits to being physically active for you personally?
34. Do you enjoy watching sports? If yes, what sport/s and why?
35. Many people find attending sporting events to be very stimulating. Do you?
  - a. How do you feel about attending sporting events?

- a. If yes, what do you enjoy most?
  - b. If not, why?
36. Do you work out at a gym? Can you tell me about this experience? How often do you do this?
  37. If no (to 29), do you have a desire to? Please explain.
  38. If you attend the gym, can you tell me about the atmosphere there (for example, is it supportive or not, how?). Please explain.
  39. Do you prefer participating in activity on your own or with a group?
    - a. Why do you prefer (choice)?
  40. Do you prefer activity that is more competitive or friendly?
    - a. Why do you prefer (choice)?
  41. Have you ever tried using home workout videos or apps?
    - a. If yes, what was your experience?
    - b. If no, why not?
  42. How do you feel about your current weight?
    - a. Would you say you are over/underweight or about the right weight?
  43. Do you have any health concerns such as: high blood pressure, diabetes, cardio respiratory issues, heart issues...
    - a. Does this concerns effect your everyday life? How?
    - b. Does this have any effect on your physical activity?

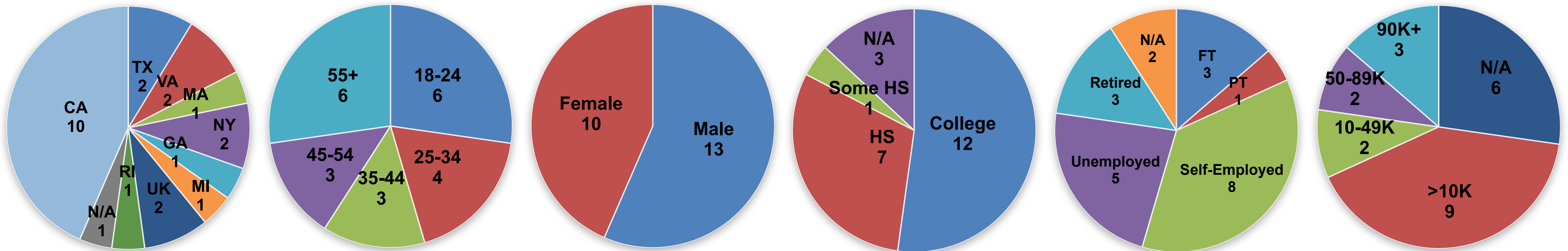
## Recommendations:

44. Please share any thoughts you might have on how families could improve PA for children with ASD
45. Please share any thoughts you might have on how PA can be improved for autistic adults?
46. Please share any thoughts you might have on how professionals and teachers could improve PA for children with ASD
47. How might organizations, such as gyms or local sports teams, better include individuals like yourself?
48. Is there anything else you would like us to know about how physical activity plays a role in your life or the life of people you know?



# PARTICIPANTS

- \* 23 autistic adults, aged 18-65 years.
- \* Recognizing the difficulty of diagnosis, we included adults without formal diagnosis. Used AQ-10 (Alison et al., 2012) as confirming measure.





# CODING PROCESS

- \* A total of 29 codes emerged from the thematic coding process;
  - \* Codes included: bullying, body image, environmental barriers and facilitators, motivation, perceived competence, as well as instance of social positives and success.
- \* Four (4) broad themes were formed during the open coding stage: (1) Environmental Factors; (2) Individual Attributes; (3) Sensory Experiences; and (4) Social Relationships.



# THEME EXCERPTS

## Environmental Factors

- Negative*: "I'd like to join a gym, but, ... it's very difficult for me to go into the gym. It's **very loud**, there's a lot of people there, I don't really know how to use the machines."
- Positive*: "There were no rules. There [is] nothing you [have] to follow, you know. You did your own thing. You had to be your own person. And the same with surfing."

## Sensory Experiences

- Negative*: "The sensory is-- sometimes it's there. It's not that bad, but for some things, it's really bad. For instance, I cannot do jumping jacks to save my life because partway into the first one, I get **very overstimulated**. The universe feels like it's falling apart."
- Negative*: "I can't do sit-ups and stuff because that's so disorienting for me. It makes me nauseated."

## Individual Attributes

- Positive*: "I was **good** at keeping a rhythm and I have very, very strong legs ... and a decently strong back at the time, too. So those are the main muscle groups that you use, and then everything else, your arms and-- uh, but your other core muscles and stuff, that helps."
- Negative*: "So much of my **mental energy** goes into, uh, everything else, like maintaining myself and being

## Social Relationships

- Negative*: "They kept me around, like they didn't kick me off the team for being an incredible misfit, but **nobody really liked me**."
- Negative*: "He instantly started treating me **like a baby** just like the other person had."
- Positive*: "Well, the people were **accepting** and **including**. That was another thing 'cause when, when



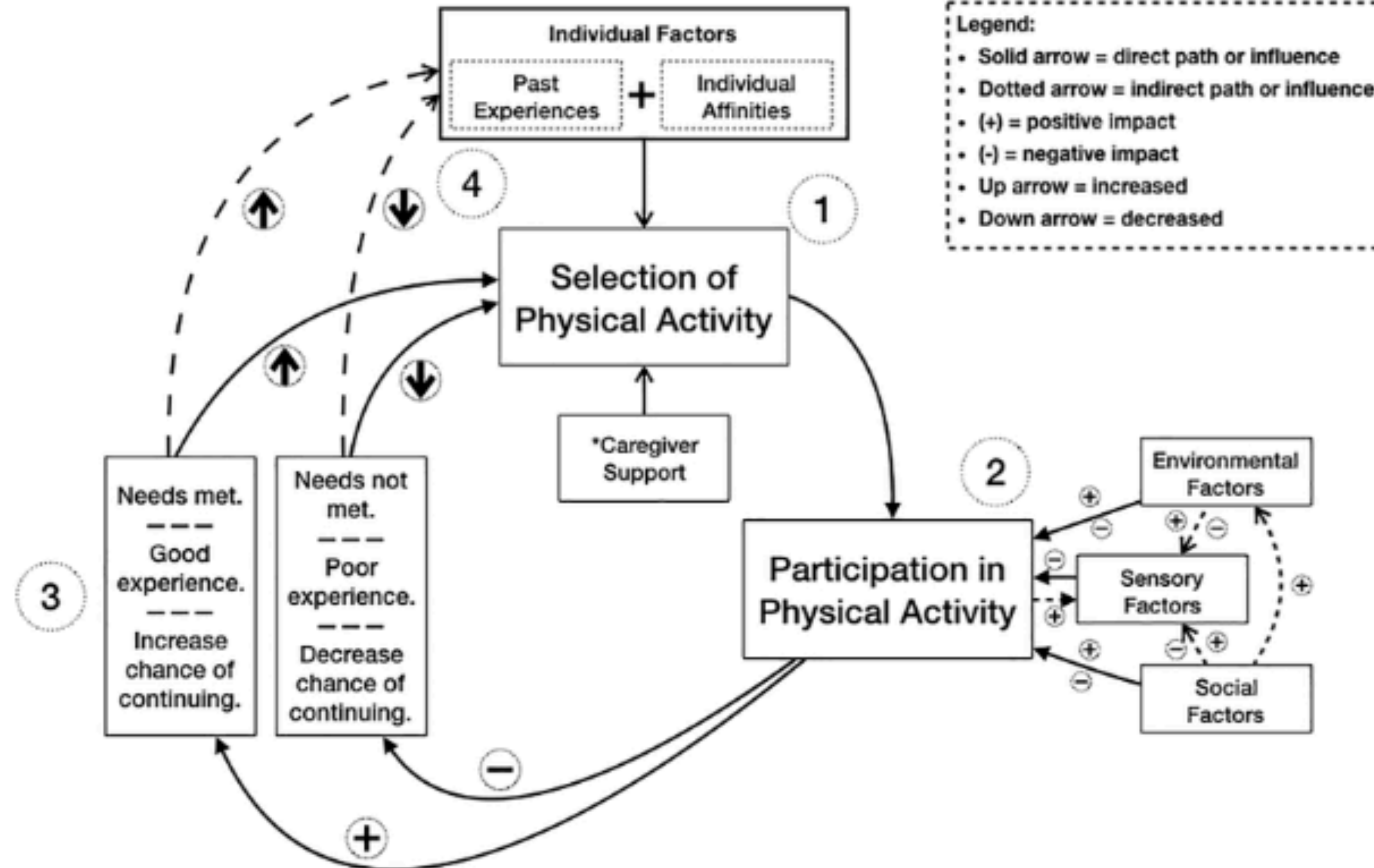
# CODING PROCESS CONT.

- \* Focused coding demonstrated that each factor impacted individuals both positively and negatively, and influenced one another.
- \* Theoretical coding revealed a cyclical process of physical activity engagement for autistic adults.
- \* Participants were consulted during each phase of coding to ensure voice was appropriately captured and the model represented their experience.



{Photo of multicolored sticky notes arranged on a black table}





#### Notes:

- 1. Selection of Activities**  
Throughout one's life, adults make choices about which physical activities to participate in and which to avoid. Selection can be influenced by past experiences, preferences, and individual strengths. \*During childhood, this choice is often influenced by parents and/or caregivers.
- 2. Participation in Physical Activity**  
When participating in physical activity, environmental, sensory and social factors all influence the experience of the participation.
  - Environmental factors can positively or negatively impact the sensory factors.
  - Social factors can have a positive impact on sensory factors.
  - Sensory factors have a great impact across the lifespan.
- 3. Needs met, or not**
  - If the participation in physical activity is a negative experience (needs are not met), there is decreased likelihood that the participant will again choose to be active in the future.
  - If the participation in physical activity is a positive experience (needs are met), there is an increased likelihood that the participant will choose to be active in the future.
- 4. The cycle continues**  
Positive and negative physical activity experiences continue to influence selection, participation, and/or avoidance of physical activity during adulthood.



# IMPLICATIONS

- \* Findings indicate that the environment acts as both a barrier and facilitator to PA in autistic adults.
- \* Social relationships are important to the PA experiences of adults, yet can have a positive or negative impact.
  - \* Social supports may help counteract environmental barriers or sensory issues.
  - \* Supports are very important during childhood years or with brand new activities, but the importance generally decrease with time and positive experiences.
- \* Competitive settings and activities, more often than not, decrease enjoyment and engagement.
- \* Practitioners and organizations need to address the sensory needs of individuals before trying anything else.
- \* Successful experiences increase the likelihood of continued participation.



# A “PERMISSIBLE PREJUDICE”: AN EXPLORATION OF THE SYSTEMIC ABLEIST BARRIERS TO SPORT AND LEISURE ACTIVITY FOR DISABLED PERSONS

COLOMBO-DOUGOVITO, A. M., EVERBACH, T., & WEILLER-ABLES, K.  
(2022). NOT PLAYING AROUND: INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES, MEDIA  
REPRESENTATION AND THE POWER OF SPORT. LANHAM, MD:  
LEXINGTON BOOKS.





# 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).



# 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., 2020, 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).



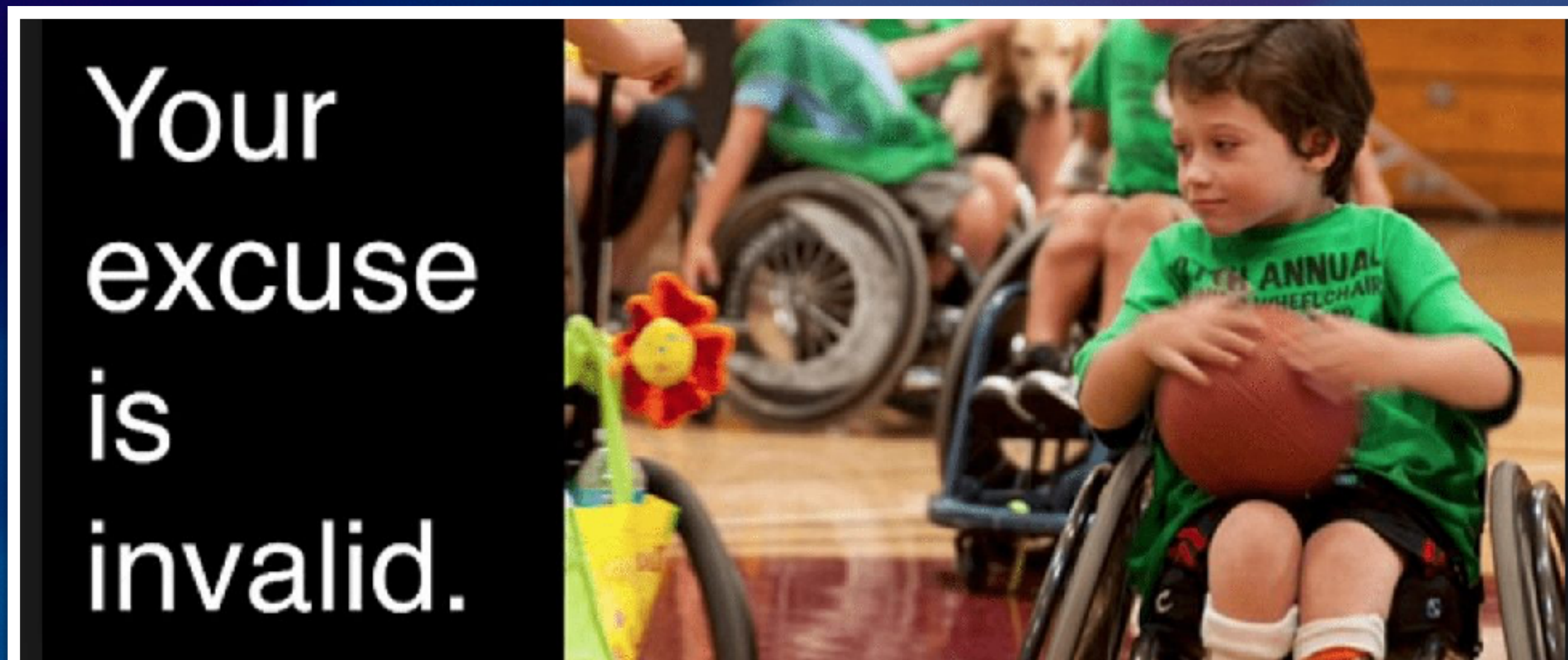
# IMPLICATIONS

- \* 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.





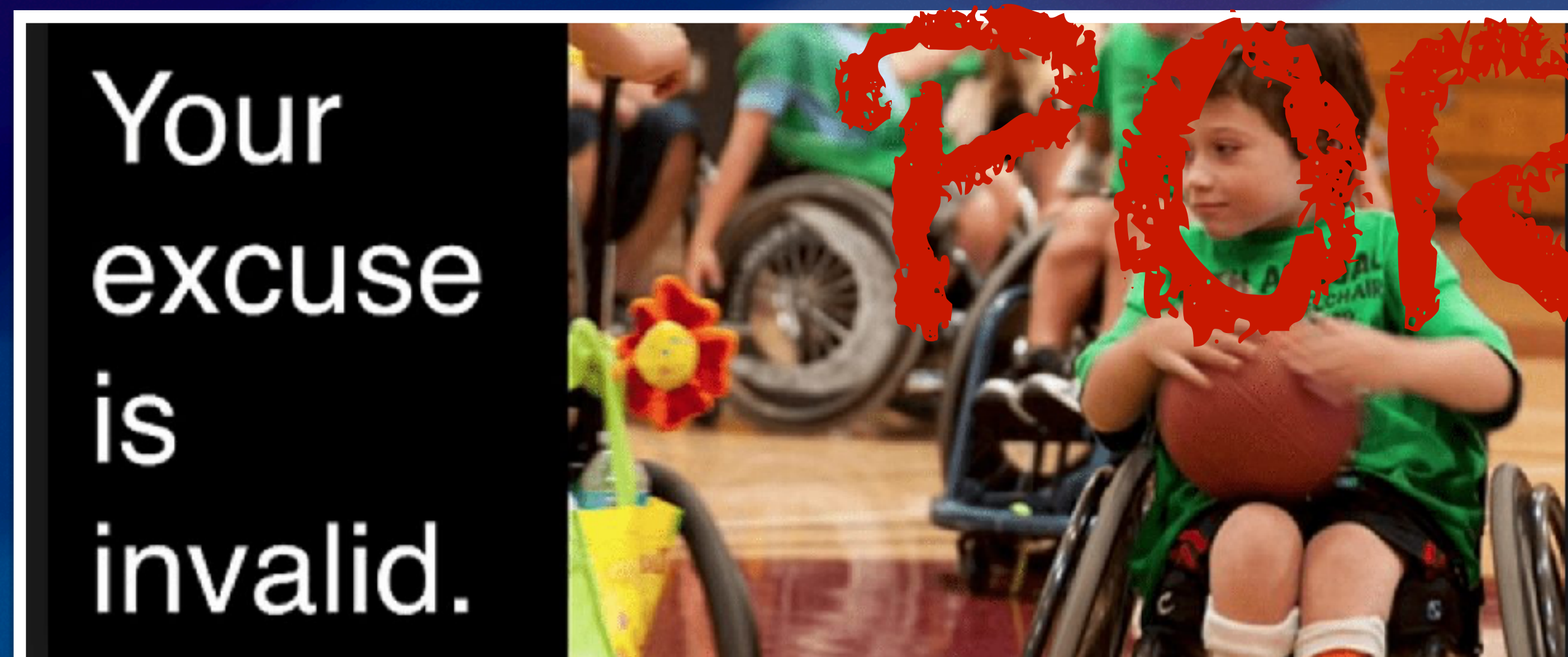








# INSPIRATION





# ABOLISING ABLEISM

- \* Disability seen as “**nothing more than a problem**” (Stiker, 1999; Tichkosky, 2007)—this viewpoint is “legitimized through the use of apparent positive narratives of people who ‘overcome’ their own personal tragedy” (Silva & Howe, 2012).
- \* Heroic depictions of disabled athletes suggest they have “value” by “performing feats normally considered possible for those without disabilities” (Hardin & Hardin, 2004).
- \* Achievement and success is often represented as **unexpected** (Weiller et al., 2021).
- \* Athleticism is not seen as synonymous with disability; thus society creates a separate category of those not fully “able-bodied” but also not “completely” disabled such as supercrip (Silva & Howe, 2012), cyborg (Howe, 2011), or able-disabled (Pullen et al., 2020).
- \* Disability is often absent from discussions (DePauw, 1997) or overtly hyper visible (Pullen et al., 2019); both seek to **erase disability**.
- \* Sport offers a space for navigating the “empire of the normal”; however, it can also reinforce pervasive stereotypes.





<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WH9xGn5clkQ>



# QUESTIONS?

**Andrew M. Colombo-Dougovito, PhD, CAPE**

[andrew.colombo-dougovito@unt.edu](mailto:andrew.colombo-dougovito@unt.edu)

[www.amcd.wtf](http://www.amcd.wtf)

 @ThatHippieProf



[pod.link/dismoveetc](https://pod.link/dismoveetc)

**TEDx Talk**



<https://youtu.be/iAiV2ya1idM>