

## Chapter 5

### A “Permissible Prejudice”

#### *An Exploration of the Systemic Ableist Barriers to Sport and Leisure Activities for Disabled People*

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In 1999, Nancy J. Chodorow—in critiquing the *laissez faire* cultural response to homophobia—was first to define *permissible prejudices* and identify them as “natural” in society; meaning that 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. These permissible prejudices are confined not only to sexuality but can also be witnessed across every other form of discrimination—from sexism to racism to ageism—that exists within society. Another form of “-ism” that is broadly accepted within society, even by those advocating for social change, is that of ableism. In an ever-evolving definition, Talila A. Lewis (2021), an abolitionist community lawyer working to prevent and correct wrongful convictions of disabled persons, suggests that ableism is:

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.

Perhaps, most importantly, Lewis implies that “you do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.”

As society grapples with purposefully ingrained systemic oppressions that engulf constructed categories of gender and race, discrimination of disabled

persons (or those society deems as lacking ability) tends to go unchecked; or as Mia Mingus, a leader in transformative and disability justice, said, “Ableism is connected to all our struggles because it undergirds notions of whose bodies are considered valuable, desirable and disposable” (2011, para. 18). Indeed, as we in the United States celebrate the 30th anniversary of the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) (Pub. L. No. 101-336, 104 Stat. 328), it has become evident that little noticeable progress has been made in terms of the accessibility of US society (Abrams, 2020). Though access is much improved from the decades prior to 1990, most disabled people are left to fight for access for even the most basic of civil rights. As American disability rights activist Judy Heumann argued, “In the past, disability has been a cause for shame. This forced acceptance of second-class citizenship has stripped us, as disabled people, of pride and dignity” (1988, p. 74). Given that, within the United States, nearly one in four individuals are classified as having a disability (Centers for Disease Control, 2018), it is shameful that society continues to perpetuate such prejudice. Individually, the stigma related to disability is in some part rooted in the confrontation of human fragility and fears of potential loss (Hahn, 1988; Rauscher & McClintock, 1997); it is connected to a desire to conform to an ideal normal that is perpetuated by cultural expectations (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). We do not need to be told “disability is bad”—this permissible prejudice persists unseen and, somewhat, unintentionally.

### DEFINING “ABILITY”: DISABLISM WITHIN SPORT

In his examination of “normalcy,” Lennard Davis (1999), an American scholar in disability studies, described the United States as “the United States of Ability” to depict the centering of ideal forms of movement and function that are inescapable, particularly among euro-centric Western cultures. This hyper focus on “ability,” as well as its relationship with individuality and autonomy, has come to be known as “the Empire of the Normal” (Couser, 2000). Within the “Empire,” those traits that society idolizes, such as whiteness, maleness, heteronormativity, are centered and prioritized within cultural representations. We see these representations repeated in media such as newspapers and magazines, as well as on television and social media, and media that perpetuates these images has a significant role in shaping those views (Rees et al., 2019). Without intentional thought, we are shown who is important and who is not.

Sport, particularly for those with disabilities, has been suggested as a potential vehicle for navigating the “Empire” and transcending its hierarchy (Berger, 2005). Moreover, disability, as a construct, challenges the perception

of a “normal” body by “provid[ing] insight into the fact that all bodies are socially constructed—those societal attitudes and institutions determine far greater than biological fact that representation of the body’s reality” (Siebers, 2001, p. 737). As the construct of ability is tied closely to the physical self, sport can provide opportunities for disabled persons to demonstrate their affinities, thus challenging societal constructs of ability and, ultimately, worth.

While sport for disabled persons has allowed for demonstrations of athleticism, the media representation of such achievement has done little on its own to shift societal views of disability. Often, this discourse results in those with impairments being defined as “super” (Howe, 2011)—or more commonly “supercrip”—that “implies a stereotyping process that requires an individual to ‘fight against [their] impairment’ [to] overcome it and achieve unlikely success” (Silva & Howe, 2012, p. 175). In short, instead of society recognizing the ability of disabled athletes, accomplishments are explained away by defining the achievement despite their disability—thus invalidating the achievement all together. 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).

Given the ability of sport to reflect society as both a place for the reproduction of dominant societal values and a place for a resistance of those views (Donnelly, 1996), the impacts of sport on disabled bodies or the broader disability rights movement remains elusive and, likely, far more nuanced than typically acknowledged (Berger, 2008). 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), which is portraying individuals with disabilities as inspirational wholly or in part based on the basis of their disability for the commodification of non-disabled audiences. Amid this increased visibility, ableist notions of ability are rampant and inseparable from the broader hegemonic views about gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and age.

Appallingly, the 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). Among portrayals of “triumph over” and “overcoming” disability, through media representation, society attempts to reconcile such depictions of “ability” with deep-rooted stereotypes of disability, often dismissing an individual’s disabled identity and categorizing them among the

“able-disabled”: still not as worthy as able-bodied peers, but less disabled than “non-athletic” disabled people. More broadly, this ongoing evolution of recognizing the achievements of disabled persons while simultaneously excusing or ignoring their impairment demonstrates the ever-changing societal construction of “ability”—further demonstrating the complexity of narratives about disability and showing that definitions are not static but active reflections of societal values (Schalk, 2016).

### A CRITICAL DISABILITY LENS

In 1992, British disability rights activist Mike Oliver argued that research has failed disabled people in at least three ways; namely, research has failed to:

- accurately capture and reflect the experience of disability from the perspective of disabled people themselves;
- provide information that has been useful to the policy making process and has contributed little to improving the material conditions under which disabled people live;
- and
- acknowledge the struggles of disabled people themselves and to recognize that disability is not simply a medical or welfare issue, but a political one.

In the 30 years since Oliver’s call for change, little has been done to improve the poor progress regarding outcomes for disabled people. Among those researchers who focus on movement (i.e., kinesiologists), narratives about disability and its analysis are guided primarily by those that would disrelish identifying as “disabled.” The cultural values, therefore, of disabled persons are often absent in the exploration of the construction of sport and the influence it has on the daily lives of its participants. This, however, does not mean to infer those presumptions of the meaning of sport for disabled persons wasn’t subsumed by non-disabled scholars. When these inferences have occurred, they traditionally have been studied through the lens of “inclusion”—though, “integration” has been suggested as a more honest identifier (Haegele, 2019). As a result of the limited influence of disabled persons, inclusion research, as it relates to sport or physical activity, has examined the ways disabled persons can most readily fit within existing structures of sport or activity without fundamentally changing the construction of that sport or activity. Indeed, under the predominant neoliberal-ableism (Goodley, 2017) in Western cultures where disabled individuals and their allies have their rights eroded under neoliberal governments, 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).

Such policies are reliant on impairment-centered practices (Townsend et al., 2018) and perpetuate a medicalized representation of disability (Weiller-Abels et al., 2021). In 1997, adapted physical activity scholar Karen DePauw urged the field to move

beyond accommodations [e.g., “allowing” disabled individuals to participate in sport but not changing the sport, itself—in other words, *inclusion*]<sup>1</sup> to transformation, which requires that sport, as a social institution, undergo fundamental change. (p. 426)

Indeed, for sport to reach a point that transcends our present state of “inclusion,” it will take a broader societal shift in the construction of *ability*. Ultimately, this will not occur without the centering of disabled expertise in narratives about ability within sport. Moreover, this transformation will need to consider the intersectionality of such expertise and how those experiences cannot be viewed separately from the neoliberal-ableism pervasive in society that reinforces the stigma of disability.

Therefore, 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 chose to conduct a qualitative meta-synthesis to thematically examine the overarching similarities among the firsthand accounts of disabled persons. In doing so, we expected to gather recollections of how sport assists disabled persons in their self-identification as well as how ableism influences their participation, thus providing a guide for future inquiries.

## A THEMATIC META-SYNTHESIS

Following the prescribed measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings by Walsh and Downe (2005), this thematic meta-synthesis of the 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. Prior to conducting the literature search, we agreed to the search terms used to identify qualitative literature for inclusion in the meta synthesis. The specific search terms, along with the inclusion criteria, guided the gathering of articles and synthesis of their findings. We also defined our paradigms as researchers and situated our own identities within the analysis.

## **Article Search Procedure**

Potential journal articles, published between 1990 and 2021, were initially located via online indexing system searches. We conducted an initial search of the literature using the indexing systems/research platforms of PsychINFO, Proquest, PubMed, SocINDEX, SPORTDiscus, Scopus, Science Direct, and SAGE Global Journals Online. The search results were generated using the following search strategy:

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.

## **Criteria for Inclusion**

The following inclusion criteria were selected by us and were reviewed by an external panel of experts. The outlined procedure required that articles:

be published between January 1990 and May 2021;  
be published in English language journals;  
be located in peer-reviewed periodical publications; and  
utilize a qualitative research design (i.e., qualitative or mixed methods design).

Reviews of literature and quantitative studies were excluded from the review. Only articles that met these criteria were eligible for evaluation.

## **Title and Abstract Review**

Research studies identified through the initial search procedure were then evaluated using a multi-step process. First, we conducted an identity-hidden title and abstract review on the potential studies identified in the initial search. This identity-hidden review process was conducted using Rayyan software (Ouzzani et al., 2016), which removed 44 duplicate entries and aided in the review process. In the initial review of 701 potential articles, we agreed on 39 articles; were undecided on 42 articles (i.e., either Andrew or Suzanna thought the article should be included/excluded but the other wasn't sure either way); and conflicted on 30 articles (i.e., Andrew or Suzanna thought the article should be included and the other thought it should be excluded). In the second step, we conducted an open review of the 42 articles marked as undecided and 30 articles marked as conflicted. This second review resulted in the inclusion

of 27 additional studies for consideration for full article review. In 62 cases, we agreed on the inclusion of the article. In four cases, both of us were unsure if the article should or should not be included—so, we included these in the full-text analysis. At the end of the second review, no articles remained in conflict.

### Inter-Rater Agreement

In the third step, we independently conducted a full article review on the 66 identified articles to confirm whether the studies met the criteria for inclusion using a dichotomous scale (yes or no). The resulting 34 articles were confirmed as meeting the inclusion criteria and were, thus, included in the thematic meta-synthesis. In instances of disagreement, articles were re-assessed until an inter-rater agreement of 100% was reached. There were no instances of disagreement during the review; hence, there was 100% inter-rater consensus.

### Data Extraction and Analysis

After the full text review, we further reviewed each of the 34 articles to extract primary source data from each recorded instance of participant-provided data within each individual study. During data extraction, it became apparent to us that three of our included studies (Gaskin et al., 2010; Rimmer et al., 2004; Taub & Greer, 1998) did not have the necessary data needed for this analysis; therefore, they were excluded. This resulted in 31 articles to extract data that led to gathering 678 individual quotations. The included quotes ranged from a few words to multiples of sentences. In certain cases, smaller quotes from the same person were aggregated into one quotation.

We then independently heuristically examined each data entry for meaning considering its context. This resulted in a codebook of 45 different individual codes which were discussed and defined—after the initial round of coding, entries were reread for any additional instances not captured during the first round of coding or for instance of quotes that needed to be recoded. Following guidance from Jensen and Allen (1996), we explored each of the included studies for credibility, auditability, fittingness, and confirmability. Specifically, fittingness and confirmability were used to examine how studies related or were dissonant from each other and ensure our processes were coherent for outside observers, respectively. These relationships among the coded entries were discussed until we found agreement. Resultingly, three broad themes were developed.

- (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.”*

These themes will be described in the following paragraphs—the framing of the findings will be rooted in a broader exploration of disability, sport, and media representation.

### FINDINGS: “HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM”

D. L. Stewart, a scholar known for their research on minoritized groups in postsecondary education, underscored that “sport serves an arena wherein a multitude of forces are played against and upon individual athletes in the service of competition and winning” (2018, p. 42). More globally, “sport is a part of society and, in some ways, reflects the society (and culture) in which it is embedded” (DePauw, 1997, p. 418). Thus, when we look upon sport with an understanding that the broader cultural issues of ableism are interwoven into the fabric of sport, the injustice of our present construction of sport becomes evident. Zhang and Haller (2013), in examining the role of media in shaping a person’s view of their own disability, showed how positive coverage of disability can lead disabled persons to affirmations of their disabled identity; conversely, negative coverage reinforced denials of a disabled identity. Given media’s mirrored reflection of society, however, there exists a paucity of positive media representations (Kolotouchkina et al., 2021; Rees et al., 2019). As we reviewed the gathered data from the assembled articles, conflicting patterns of inequity and encouragement were evident across the coded data. It also became apparent how broader systemic issues relating to the inadequacies of knowledge generation continue to impede the ability to generate benefit for those on the margins of an already marginalized population.

#### Descriptive Findings of Analyzed Studies

Among the thirty-one included articles, all but four (87%) were from researchers situated in global North countries; of those originating in or about the global South, data were shared from Brazil (Haegele et al., 2018),



Australia (Ballas et al., 2022; Mahy et al., 2010), and South Africa (Conchar et al., 2016). Of those from the global North, seven (22%) were from Canada (Bonnell et al., 2021; Jachyra et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2019; James et al., 2018; Johnston et al., 2015; Raymond, 2019; Rolfe et al., 2009), seven (22%) were from the United Kingdom (i.e., England & Scotland) (Collar & Ellis-Hill, 2019; Canton et al., 2012; Cox & Bartle, 2020; Fitzgerald, 2005; Hackett, 2003; Moffet & Paul, 2019; Richardson et al., 2017), two (6%) were from the Netherlands (Bloemen et al., 2015; van Schijndel-Speet et al., 2014), two (6%) were from Sweden (Barns et al., 2015; Lassenius et al., 2013), eight (25%) were from the United States (Autry & Hanson, 2001; Bendini, 2000; Bendini & Anderson, 2005; Blinde & McClung, 1997; McLoughlin et al., 2017; Pack et al., 2017; Taliaferro & Hammond, 2016; Wilhite et al., 1999), and one study (3%) concurrently recruited participants from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada (Javorina et al., 2020). In looking at these studies in aggregate, the oldest were from the United States (Blinde & McClung, 1997; Wilhite et al., 1999) while many of the most recent articles were from Canada or the United Kingdom. This highlights two important factors in understanding the pervasiveness of ableism: (1) much of our understanding of ableism is rooted in euro-centric, Western thought generated either in the United States or the United Kingdom; and (2) an increase in the studies from a broader array of countries around the world is a positive trend, yet further demonstrates the lagging acceptance of US-based researchers toward recognizing the expertise of lived experience.

Nine (29%) of the included articles were published prior to 2010, though only two were published prior to 2000 and none were published prior to 1997 despite searching for articles published as early as 1990. The increase in publications after 2015 (19/31, 61%), following the Paralympic Games in Sochi and London, shows the increasing acknowledgment of the need to capture the lived experiences of disabled athletes, particularly in exploring the factors that greatest influence their movement opportunities. However, only a few authors of the included studies acknowledge their research paradigm, and many provided too little information for their paradigm to be determined by us. Of the nine articles (29%) that included enough information, two (6%) centered findings within the social model of disability (Cox & Bartle, 2020; Rolfe et al., 2009); four (13%) examined data using stigma theory (Bedini, 2000; Bedini & Anderson, 2005; Collard & Ellis-Hill, 2019; Raymond, 2019); two (6%) rooted findings in the Social Ecological model (Taliaferro & Hammond, 2016; Wilhite et al., 1999); and one (3%) grounded their work in a post-structural feminist framework that incorporated Foucault’s Concepts of Surveillance (Autry & Hanson,

2001). The remaining articles (22/31; 71%) did not mention a theoretical or conceptual framework for the analysis, though several did acknowledge their general worldview such as interpretivist (Pack et al., 2017; Javorina et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 2017) or constructivist (Bloemen et al., 2015; Bonnell et al., 2021).

Across the included studies, participants ranged in age from 8 to 80 years and were predominantly male. Only two studies (Bedini & Anderson, 2005; Rolfe et al., 2009) focused primarily on female participants; no studies identified participants outside of the gender binary. This homogeneity among sample populations not only within studies but also across studies demonstrates that the gathered findings, though covering the lifespan, may miss the potential “double oppression” (Deegan & Brooks, 1985; Fine & Asch, 1988; Hargreaves, 2000; Wendell, 1989) that impacts disabled women or disabled individuals who do not identify within the gender binary or are transgender. Remaining consistently homogenous, unsurprisingly, study samples were overwhelmingly white; though, several articles did not include enough information about the racial or ethnic breakdown of their sample to determine the makeup of the included participants. These findings, though subtle, suggest that the included data may miss the multiple oppressions faced by racially or ethnically marginalized groups—demonstrating the possible, often unintentional impacts of racism embedded within the data collection and analysis of most academic scholarship (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

Among the disabilities represented in the studies, participants in the included studies were primarily those with a physical disability, such as cerebral palsy, para- or quadriplegia, spina bifida, polio, and arthritis, which included a mix of perspectives from individuals whose disability was acquired and those that were congenital. Outside of physical impairments, one study (Collard et al., 2019) focused on those with epilepsy, one (Haegele et al., 2018) included those with visual impairments, three (Mahy et al., 2010; Taliaferro & Hammond, 2016; van Schijndel-Speet et al., 2014) focused on those with intellectual disabilities, and one (Jachyra et al., 2021) included perspectives from autistic participants. Overwhelmingly, data were generated through semi-structured interviews or focus groups. Only two studies (James et al., 2018; Johnston et al., 2015) included observations along with interviews; and one study (Moffet & Paul, 2019) used a mixed methods approach. The types of physical activity or sport explored were quite broad with most studies focusing a broadly defined “physical activity” or “recreation” and were primarily in amateur settings; only three studies exclusively included a sample of “elite” athletes (i.e., those that competed in organized competition or at the professional level such as Paralympic athletes) (Ballas et al., 2022; McLoughlin et al., 2017; Pack et al., 2017).

**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”***

Examining sport using a lens centered in the abject understanding that oppressions are a design feature of the broader system and not an unfortunate flaw takes the traditional inquiry regarding sport for those with disabilities a step beyond the usual explorations of this phenomena. As we explored the gathered data, barriers rooted in the ableist notions of worth and value were abundant. 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. Additionally, the 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.

Given that the primary disability included were physical disabilities, cost as an identified barrier is not surprising. As one participant put it:

At the beginning every sport you begin to play, you need adapted equipment and that all requires money to get it to fit to your body, and chairs run about 4 or 5 grand each so you have to find that money to do that. . . . Once you get really into it you realize it (is) an expensive hobby. (McLoughlin et al., 2017)

Though it is not uncommon for individuals to have to purchase specialized equipment to participate in many different sports, disabled persons are at a greater disadvantage due to limited societal supports that allow for the ability to have discretionary income. As this participant stated, “If you have a disability, you’re less likely to have a job, less likely to have a house, less likely to have a partner, less likely to have a family. That’s real discrimination, they’re big things” (Cox & Bartle, 2020, p. 8). This added cost burden highlights the broader societal issues related to the acceptance and accommodation for those with disabilities. Unemployment among disabled persons is much higher than that of non-disabled persons (US Department of Labor, 2021), which directly impacts what types of activity an individual can engage in or access (particularly if transportation is needed).

More broadly, if individuals can afford the added cost burden of many physical activities, there continues to be limited opportunities available for disabled individuals to participate in sport or activity. As participant Katie (Wilhite et al., 1999) summarized, “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.” Demonstrating the broader constraints that ableism places on society, a lack of representation or inclusion of

disabled people in the development of movement opportunities is mired in an ignorance of disabled people and their needs. Participant Nancy (Rolfe et al., 2009) recollected one example of this ignorance:

A sighted guide is essential [for me when I use the gym]. A sighted guide is where you get the blind person [to] hold your elbow. And [the sighted guide] just guides them around. Guide dog etiquette is essential too. . . . A lot of the time I found some of the [gym] monitors . . . unfortunately, were saying, “Well [guide dog’s name], come [do] this and do that.” . . . What they’re supposed to [do] is tell me [how] to guide [my dog].

As media representation continues to perpetuate and reinforce the otherizing of disability (Goethals et al., 2022), it is foreseeable that those in the environment with the power to influence a disabled person’s success are often poorly equipped to complete the task effectively. This can lead to individuals “policing” the disabled person and their place in physical activity settings. Participant Cindy (Bedini & Anderson, 2005) noted, “Well, I deserve to have the rights to do that [recreate]. Um . . . maybe I can’t do all of them by maybe I can if I want to.” Participant Marsha (Bedini & Anderson, 2005) stated, “Some people think, you know, that just being handicapped means you can’t do anything at all.” Ultimately, this increase in policing can cause potential safety issues, particularly for those that are able to “hide” their disability. As a participant with epilepsy, reflecting on their swimming experiences, described, “My experience with that [disclosure to a lifeguard] is that I’d be, not embarrassed, that’s the wrong word. But if I tell them, I’d feel like they’d be staring at me the whole time I’m in there” (Collard & Hill, 2019). Another participant (Richardson et al., 2017)—describing the overwhelming fat-phobia embedded into physical activity settings—said:

I went in as a guide to find out what the prices were and have a look round to see who was there. I can actually remember . . . the look on the face of the receptionist like “Christ!” and one of the membership guys came round. . . . I didn’t go to the gym that day, I went back the next day at the crack of dawn 6 o’clock . . . you can kind of, in the gym you can feel the eyes on the back of your head; “what’s fatty doing in the gym?”

Given the abundance of evidence to the prevalence of increased weight among those with disabilities, it is possible that many individuals face oppression that is related to their disability as well as their weight. As connection of weight and health is rooted in the ableist notion of an “able-bodied ideal,” it is worth considering that, though common among those with disabilities, discrimination based on weight may operate separately, yet parallel to, the discrimination based on disability. In whatever ways these

factors may be constructed in society more broadly or influence access for people who are visibly divergent from the assumed norm, social stigma associated to disability heavily influence disabled persons ability to engage with physical activity and sport. Knowing that through participation, particularly through media outlets, the representation of disabled people can assist in dismantling the prejudice of ableism (Ellis & Goggin, 2015). Without authentic representation, however, people are left with stereotyped versions of their future self. As one participant reflected on their transition after acquiring their disability: “I didn’t go out for months because I could not stand the stares and being continually ignored. . . . You just feel completely worthless and abandoned” (Richardson et al., 2017).

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. One participant, describing their acquired disability and a loss of dignity, said:

Sometimes I wish it would have happened all at once, because I think that might have been easier to cope with than having to face it as I go along. . . . Most of the loss of dignity comes from having to get help for things that either you’ve done for yourself in the past then all of a sudden you can’t do them. You have no choice, you have to give in . . . and admit I need help. (Johnston et al., 2015)

Guided by our prevailing media depictions, much of our identity, particularly in Western cultures, is rooted in ability, individualism, and autonomy thus acquiring a disability or attempting to navigate spaces as a disabled person means that you must confront a system that was not designed for you and needing assistance in some way is a requirement. As we, particularly within sport, associate needing help with “weakness” and worth, those attempting to be physically active while disabled are forced to reconcile with conflicting, often discursive, information. For instance, many participants among the included studies recognized their right to participate yet failed to also recognize their right to appropriate accommodations. Disabled individuals, when engaging in sport and physical activity, are constantly reminded that they are not welcome in such spaces; that they should be grateful if they are allowed; or, as one participant believed, that “sometimes their [requested] help inhibits us more than anything [ . . . ] but we must always appreciate it, always.” This extends to the ways in which disabled people who are attempting to participate in sport are allowed or not allowed the dignity of risk (i.e., being able to make choices that could result in negative consequences and to experience said consequences) (Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities National Training Center, 2020) (Wolpert, 1980). As one participant mentioned:

Nobody really wanted to take me [on any school teams] anymore. So that kind of finished. . . . Um, they were constantly worried I was going to have a seizure cause. . . . I kind of, I like quite challenging sports, I'm not particularly into yoga and things like that, as you can tell. Um, so, none of them wanted to take me on sports I wanted to do. So . . . so, yeah, I didn't really do anything, which was a bit of a shame. (Collard & Hill, 2019)

This can extend to the ways in which ableism is ingrained in society and even be reflected in the attitudes or beliefs among disabled peers. Participant Cindy shared that “I wanted to get on the team but, see, they won't let people with motorized chairs play. That's just the way it is. I don't know why” (Bedini & Anderson, 2005). As a participant in Bedini (2000) stated: “People cannot, they simply cannot help being prejudiced against . . . a person whose mind isn't all there. . . . It's just one of those things that is . . . human nature.” This innate prejudice reinforces prior stigmas and continues to extend the otherizing of disability. As Bill, a 20-year-old, who had recently acquired a spinal cord injury said: “I just see that people there are in worse situations than I am, and I can do more than what they can do and they can do a little bit more than what I can do” (Autry & Hanson, 2001). These examples (Bedini, 2000; Bedini & Anderson, 2005; Autry & Hanson, 2001) describe the existing hierarchy of disability (Schell & Duncan, 1999) that is generated through the prevalent “supercrip” narrative (Howe, 2001; Schaulk, 2016; Silva & Howe, 2012). Ultimately, the prioritization of physical disabilities within the inquiries of sport, hierarchizes a select group of disabled persons over others, and emboldens *otherizing* (Pullen et al., 2019). For instance, Kelly (Autry & Hanson, 2001) said that she “sometimes feels guilty about not being as disabled as some of the others.” Another participant described how

they couldn't really classify me because I'm not like—I am disabled, but I'm not in a wheelchair or blind. And the only judo they had was blind judo, and that is not fair because I have sight and they don't. I'm not blind, but I'm not physically normal. I'm like right in between, and they didn't have competitions for that. (Conchar et al., 2016)

Even among those with disabilities, sport is often described as means to overcome their disability: “[Sport] has shown me that I haven't let my disability get the better of me. . . . I haven't let my disability define me, I have defined my disability (Ballas et al., 2022)”]; or show the worth of disabled persons to non-disabled people. For example, Tiger, a 16-year-old African American male with cerebral palsy in the study from Wilhite et al. (1999), said: “If we can just get an opportunity to be included, I think we can show them [people without disabilities] that we can do it.” 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. (Autri & Hanson, 2001)

These types of reflections are evidence of the extensive ongoing and active segregation of disabled people from society within sport and physical activity. Given media’s tendency to focus on impairments and “super” qualities, the opportunities to use positive images of disabled athletes to “help peers ‘engage in sport’ is lost” (Rees et al., 2019, p. 379). Moreover, the overarching “overcoming” narrative present in many depictions of disability further preserve the presumed incompatibility of disabled bodies in sport (Pullen et al., 2020b).

Experiences of bullying and exclusion, for instance, were rife among the included studies, which reflect our broader understanding of disabled peoples’ experiences during physical activity (e.g., Healy et al., 2013; Hutzler et al., 2021; Lindsay et al., 2012). One participant reflected (Jachyra et al., 2021), “One of the guys came up to me and said that I’m a retard, and a waste of space and am good for nothing. All because I did not score” while another participant shared, “Disability, that’s like homeless people. Don’t want to look at them; don’t want to make eye contact. I’m sure a lot of people would like to speak to people in chairs; the thing is a lot of people don’t” (Johnston et al., 2015). The pervasive ableist notion of worth of disabled people, within the sport and physical activity contexts, is reflected exponentially as the constructions of ability conflict with societal constructions of sport (DePauw, 1997). Without a prevailing shift in the discussion of disability in the public sphere and a removal of pervasive stereotypes and stigma (Kolotouchkina et al., 2021), the athletic achievements of disabled persons will continue to be ignored (Pullen et al., 2020a, 2020b). This continued dissonance is reflected in the active exclusion of disabled persons and the persistent ignoring their needs. As another participant of Johnston et al. (2015) mentioned:

Sometimes you figure you got to become a second-class citizen. Suck it up get it done. Figure out how to get by. It’s frustrating, it’s to the point where . . . do I stay in my room where I know everything works or do I go out in public and suffer the slings and arrows?

It is important to highlight that of those views that were included, participants were predominantly able to communicate verbally, and did not rely on augmentative and alternative communication devices as may be the case for participants with autism spectrum disorder or speech disorders. Therefore, it must be considered that if those who have tools to self-advocate experience exclusion and bullying, than those without those tools may experience a greater level of discrimination.

**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”***

Sport and physical activity, though reflective of broad societal inequality, was not a passive conduit onto disabled persons. Within each of the included studies, elements of the positive influence of physical activity were permeative, though sparse. Overarchingly, 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. Moreover, sport and physical activity offered individuals a way to seek dignity and gain a sense of self. It should be noted that, though potentially powerful, 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. Further still, data were gathered from homogenous sources not dissimilar from the dominant views normalized within sport broadly (e.g., masculine, heteronormative).

Overwhelmingly, 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. As a participant said:

I had nothing until I found swimming. I felt like a complete misfit. When I found swimming that all changed. Swimming gives me a focus that I’ve never had, it is fun and it feels so good having the water on my skin. I feel tired after swimming, but that feeling also is what gets me coming back to the pool. I don’t know what I would do without it now. (Jachyra et al., 2021)

Sport and physical activity became outlets for participants to “take a break from pretending to be normal” (Jachyra et al., 2021). As participant Pat shared, by participating in sport, participants showed themselves that they had worth and that their own preconceived stigmas of disability were untrue:

“It showed me, showed me that I am somebody . . . and that I am a winner.” When asked how the camp experience had achieved this he replied, “through people . . . you know, looking me in the eye . . . looking me in the eye, smiling. And saying things, like, ‘you can do it.’” (Autry & Hanson, 2001)

Among those with acquired disabilities, participation in sport alongside accepting non-disabled peers helped to build confidence for many individuals:



I grew up playing with my friends who are able-bodied and I played right alongside them. I was really included in everything. . . . (I was) definitely the slowest down the court and things like that, but I still loved it! (McLoughlin et al., 2017)

Sport and other physical activities also helped many “find acceptance” with their disability, whether it be acceptance of an acquired disability and processing the grief of “loss” or acceptance of self and self-worth from finally uprooting assumed ableist notions of one’s own disability that are so prevalent among the societal representations of disability. Participant Vince said: “It (swimming) gave me the confidence to recognize that I’ve got a disability, embrace it rather than saying I don’t want to do that because I’m disabled. Now I understand it” (Pack et al., 2017). Another participant, Anne, from Pack et al. (2017), reflected:

I’d always worn a prosthetic unless I swam or slept, so going to swimming at first was a bit of a challenge because people were just so open about their disability, and like obviously when you swim you can’t hide it, so that was a bit of an eye opener for me. I kind of learnt to like my disability and that people didn’t care, especially when you’re in a disability environment.

Similarly, participant William recalled that

when I play hockey in my neighborhood, everybody is welcomed. Even if you do not know how to play, you are welcomed. It is easy to access, thus it allows to see that okay, the barrier is broken, and everybody can play. (Wilhite et al., 1999)

Though sport reflects the broader stigmas embedded in society, it also provides opportunity to resist those stigmas (Donnelly, 1999). As Berger (2005) noted, disabled persons can leverage sport to navigate the covert and overt stigma they endure. One participant reflected:

And, I never thought about wheelchair sports, and . . . so, I was like really, really depressed for a long time, because they said, “no more sports.” And that’s all I’d done all my life. And, uh, so . . . I was provided this opportunity [to go skiing and] to get involved in something and I loved it, and I didn’t do a lot of wheelchair, I mean there wasn’t a lot of wheelchair activities. Like we went skiing, snowmobiling . . . and so I realized if I can ski, maybe there’s something else I can do. (Autry & Hanson, 2001)

Bill, another participant of Autry and Hanson (2001), explained further:

“I can do more than what I thought I could do.” but, he explained, “Ah, before I went there I ain’t wanta do nothing, I ain’t wanta go nowhere, but now [my

friends] call me and I can go places and do things that I thought I never could do.”

Likewise, a participant of Ballas et al. (2020) recounted:

For me, the Paralympics helped normalise and made me realise that I wasn't alone, that I wasn't the only amputee in the world. So, you start talking to other amputees—how do you do this? You learn from them, which is so powerful.

Similarly, Wilhite et al. (1999) included a participant, Pierre, who shared,

They [friends that live with a physical disability]<sup>2</sup> showed me how to do it with my disability, how to get into the kayak and how to get out because it is much different than before!

Yet, sport is not wholly able to transcend all elements of ableism as Ellis and Goggin (2015) or Berger (2005) suggest—in some instances, it may only serve to reinforce it. As a participant from McLoughlin et al. (2017) presumed: “That’s one of the big things for people with (physical) disabilities. If they’re not introduced to sports at a young age, they don’t have the opportunity to do things.”

Despite sports’ mercurial yet imperceptible influence in broader society, it comes as no surprise that the influence of sport for disabled people exists in among a field of gray. Like few things in society, however, sport offers connection to a greater whole (Smart, 2007) and a way to navigate entrenched stigma of disability (Berger, 2005). When the appropriate supports exist, in other words, “It is a good place if you want to understand that you are not being judged, that we are all the same, that we all have a disability” (Wilhite et al., 1999). Perhaps, more significantly, sport can offer a safe space for those who’ve benefited from prior success or developed supports. Metaphorically, if all the pieces align, sport can be place of escape or reprieve from society. As one participant stated: “Well, you take a shower and then you go into the swimming pool and . . . it is like entering another world. It feels really good (Lassenius et al., 2013).” Perhaps, our media coverage should do better to acknowledge sport in this role instead of focusing on “excellence.”

**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”***

Lastly . . . yet, perhaps most importantly . . . there exists in this synthesis a great absence in representation, which attributes to the limitations of the present findings. Though, 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, and so on. Moreover, evidence has been primarily generated by those with physical impairments, which leaves considerable gaps. This is not to suggest that those researching sport and activity for disabled persons overlook the barriers faced by other disabled populations—that evidence does exist (for instance, see Nichols et al. (2019) and Buchanan et al. (2017) to see barriers for autistic individuals)—however, this evidence is overwhelmingly generated from those approximate to the disabled person such as their caregiver, teacher, therapist, or sibling. Frank (2006) said that people, “need to hear their own voices and, by knowing others’ stories, become empowered to tell their own” (p. 422). Without these stories told, our understanding of the intersecting oppressions faced by disabled athletes will continue to be incomplete.

Perhaps, this theme is encompassing a broader critique of disability and sport scholarship, and the societal influence on our views. As its scholars, we are tasked with the investigation and critique of its practices. Yet, we rarely reflect that lens upon ourselves and examine the influences of our bias. 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). As we seek to examine sport and its influence on disabled bodies, as well as how those views are espoused in broader society, we must ensure that our lens acknowledges the privileges from which we’ve benefited. Indeed, intentional effort must be made to encourage the adoption of participatory methods within our practice, so that we may understand the full breadth of the influence of society on sport and sports ability to resist such influence.

## CONCLUSION: WE ALL HAVE RESPONSIBILITY

In a 1964 speech with Malcolm X that summarized her fight for racial equality, civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer said:

All my life I been sick and tired. Now I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired . . . there’s so much hypocrisy in this society and if we want America to be a free society, we have to stop telling lies, that’s all. (Brooks & Houck, 2011, p. 62)

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”; and those notions have become pervasive among our media coverage (Rees et al., 2019). Through a critical disability lens, this synthesis reignites a 30-year-old call to action; 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). In doing so, we must assume a transformational practice: one that recognizes the ongoing (re)construction of disability and sport in broader society, as well as the role that media plays in how those constructs are designed. We must engage in the transformation of sport culture “to ‘see’ sport and athlete with a disability without seeing any contradiction, without assuming a physical liability, stigma, or deformity, and without assuming an impaired athletic performance” (DePauw, 1997, p. 428). Only then might we dismantle the persistent authoritarianism of the “Empire of the Normal” (Couser, 2000; Davis, 2013) and throw off the remaining colonizing normativity of our present media culture.

It is vital to acknowledge that this change among representations of disabled athletes is occurring, albeit slowly (Devotta et al., 2013). Persistently, though, this representation continues to be based in heavily medicalized views of disability and propagates stigma related to disability (Goethals et al., 2022; Rees et al., 2019; Weiller et al., 2021). Within sport and physical activity contexts, we see that focusing on “inclusion,” even among media, is “more about governing people with disability in sport to achieve integrative standards of normalcy rather than creating more inclusive (in Barton’s terms) spaces of a more diverse range of people who do not traditionally participate in sport” (Hammond et al., 2019, p. 318). If we are honestly intent to serve the needs of disabled people through sport and physical activity, immense introspection on the power of our words (Burns, 2010) is required. To fight for justice for disabled persons in sport, we must listen to disabled individuals and recognize their expertise (Stewart & Spurgeon, 2019)—we must push for a shift in our construction of sport and its relationship to historically oppressive constructions of *ability*.

## Response

### Just Because You Use a Ball Chair Doesn’t Mean You’re Blameless

John Loeppky

There is a duality in being a national team-level athlete one second and being banned from bringing your wheelchair to school the next. My physical education teachers in high school gave me three options: work in the weight room, get pelted with whatever sports prop was in use that day—puck, basketball, football, and so on—or stay away. No one in administration spoke up when a classmate told me to “sit on the sideline where your crippled ass belongs.” I just removed myself from the situation and flew across the country to train the following week. If you’re wondering, I’m an ambulatory wheelchair user whose wheelchair was briefly banned because my friends kept using it when I was sitting in class. They expected me to police my chair. All they were doing was policing my body.

It’s a standard narrative in parasport to equate competing with saving one’s life. I was isolated, I was frustrated, I was angry—I once got thrown out of an anger management session for being too angry. I got to go and play basketball with and against tons of Paralympians across North America and yet when I returned home, I was just another cripple in the corner.

There is a bright side. One of my former opponents was a groomsman at my wedding, I could fly into most major centers in Canada and have a couch to sleep on if so desired, and my inclusion in parasport means that I feel capable and comfortable in my career as a journalist. This community has given me so much, and yet has so much to answer for.

Ableist barriers exist in community, too. A room full of people singing “fa-ker, fa-ker, fa-ker” when I stood up in a hotel lobby the day of a wheelchair rugby tournament, for example. I was on a national team bench when I was denied food—a required need for my body and not a nice-to-have ask from a needy basketball-playing teen.

Look, I’m very privileged on the grand scale of things. I’m white, in the middle of the Canadian prairie, I’m an immigrant but was born with citizenship, my parents were able to get me the adapted equipment and medical model support that I needed. I was lucky, but I won’t deny that parasport often hides behind this inspiration narrative, as this undeniable force for social good, this unquestioned space for equality. As I’ve written about for the *Globe and Mail*, much of this is a façade. If the parasport movement wants to grow, then it needs to acknowledge that funding makes the world go around, that there is plenty of ableism within the elite parasport environment (coincidentally I wrote about that too, this time for *Rooted in Rights*), that there is cheating,

and—perhaps most importantly—that there is a massive gulf in opportunity between those we see in elite competition and those from marginalized backgrounds.

But, and it's a big but, that unpacking begins with how we treat disability and the political right of disabled people to live in their body, to be active, and to compete. Parasport is problematic, but that's largely a function of our wider ableist notions of what a disabled body can and should be able to do.

## NOTES

1. Text between [] was added by us to define accommodations for the reader as Dr. DePauw has in the included quote, which adds necessary context to the quote.
2. Text inside [] is direct quote from original source, Wilhite et al., 1999.

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