

Disability sport and activist identities

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2 **Disability Sport and Activist Identities: A Qualitative Study of Narratives of**

3 **Activism Among Elite Athletes' with Impairment**

4

Abstract

5

Objectives: Sport and exercise psychology has recently expanded into how it can be utilized to enable social missions like activism. No research, however, has examined activist identities among disabled, elite athletes. This article is the first to engage with this new and complex issue by examining narratives of activism amongst elite athletes with impairment and their adoption/rejection of various activist identities. **Methods:** Thirty-six people were recruited using maximum variation and criterion-based purposive sampling strategies. Data was collected using interviews and fieldwork observations (e.g., observation and social media material). The large data set was rigorously analyzed using a narrative thematic analysis. **Results:** All participants adopted an athletic identity and an athletic activist identity. A small group also adopted a political activist identity that was concerned with challenging disablism. The athletes' reasons for adopting or eschewing activist identities are identified and connections made to organizational stressors, interpellation, feeling, emotional regulation, narrative, habitus, health and wellbeing. Also revealed is the impact that sporting retirement had on activist identity construction.

19

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

27

28

Keywords: disability, para-sport, activist identity, narrative, affect, retirement

29 **Disability Sport and Activist Identities: A Qualitative Study of Narratives of**
30 **Activism Among Elite Athletes' with Impairment**

31 Within the field of sport and exercise psychology, research on disability has grown in
32 recent years. As part of this growth, attention has turned to elite athletes with impairment.
33 For example, research has examined experiences of retirement (Wheeler, Malone,
34 VanVlack, Nelson, & Steadward, 1996), mental skills use (Martin & Malone, 2013),
35 posttraumatic growth (Day, 2013), and autonomy supportive coaching (Cheon, Reeve,
36 Lee & Lee, 2015) among elite, disabled athletes. Research also exists on athletic identity,
37 that is, the degree to which a disabled individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer,
38 Van Raalte & Linder, 1993). Along with work on the athletic role in recreational sport
39 (e.g., Perrier, Smith, Strachan & Latimer-Cheung, 2012; Tasiemski & Brewer, 2011),
40 research has examined the relationship between athletic identity and self-esteem among
41 elite, disabled athletes (Vliet, Van Biesen & Vanlandewijck, 2008), the effect of sports
42 participation on athletic identity and influence on quality of life (Groff, Lundberg &
43 Zabriskie, 2009) and the role of para-sport in the construction of disabled and athletic
44 identities (Peers, 2012).

45 Whilst disability specific research within sport and exercise psychology is a
46 growing field, significant gaps in knowledge remain (Smith, Martin & Perrier, 2016). One
47 gap pertains to activist orientations or *activist identities* among elite athletes with
48 impairment. Activist identity is broadly defined as an individual's developed, relatively
49 stable, yet changeable orientation to engage in social missions (Corning & Myers, 2002).
50 It involves collective, social-political, problem-solving behaviors that range from low-
51 risk, passive, and institutionalized acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviors
52 that convey what is seen is needed to make a better society (Corning & Myers, 2002).

53 Thus, individuals with an activist identity are often advocates in the sense that they seek
54 change for the better within society (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015; Stake & Rosu, 2012).

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

73 A focus on activist identities is therefore important. It contributes to how the field
74 of sport and psychology might be utilized to benefit human activity and social life.
75 Despite this, there is a lack of empirical work within the field on activist identities in
76 relation to disabled, elite athletes. Designed to address the aforementioned gaps in
77 knowledge, the purpose of this paper is to examine narratives of activism among elite

78 athletes' with impairment and their adoption and/or rejection of possible activist
79 identities. Our central research questions were: 1) What types of activist identities, if any,
80 are constructed and performed by elite athletes' with a disability and for what do they
81 advocate? 2) Why, or why not, is an activist identity pertinent to them? 3) How and when
82 do they engage in activism? 4) What social functions might their discourses serve in terms
83 of disability, social missions and wellbeing?

84 Theoretically, the research is informed by narrative inquiry. Joining with
85 approaches like symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and discursive psychology,
86 and as also shown in discourse orientated work within sport and exercise psychology
87 (e.g., Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb & Kettler, 2013; McGannon & Spence, 2012), narrative
88 inquiry considers language to be constructive. That is to say, stories constitute our
89 psychological realities, including identity (McGannon & Smith, 2015). For narrative
90 scholars, identity is not something an individual 'has' inside them and which emerges
91 from their mind. Rather identities are constructed within social relations primarily through
92 talk (Nelson, 2001; Frank, 2010). As part of this relational and discursive constructive
93 process, identity is performed, which means that people enact identities through their talk
94 (Cosh et al., 2013; McGannon & Spence, 2012). In addition to our identities being
95 constructed and performed, research has shown that language is performative (Cosh et al.,
96 2012; Smith, 2013; Wiggins & Potter, 2008). In other words, and echoing classic
97 formulations of philosophical speech-act theory, stories, accounts, and others forms of
98 discourse *do* things; our talk is action-orientated. Language-in-use then is neither passive
99 nor a neutral medium of representing thoughts, attitudes, emotions, or behavior. Rather
100 storied language acts in, for, and on us, affecting our thoughts, attitudes, emotions, and
101 behavior (Frank, 2010). Thus, as Atkinson (2015) argued, researchers must always "have
102 due regard for the fact that language accomplishes social actions and realities" (p. 93). Or,

103 as Wiggins and Potter (2008) put it, “to separate talk and action as psychologists
104 commonly do (for example in distinctions such as attitudes vs. behavior) is to set up a
105 false dichotomy, and to overlook the ways in which talk achieves things in itself” (p. 77).

106 **Methodology and Methods**

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

109 **Methodology and Sampling**

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

124 To recruit a sample, calls for participants were placed on social media and
125 websites, and letters were sent to disability sport networks inviting people who met the
126 sampling criteria to take part in the study. The study was described as research that sought
127 to understand people’s experiences of being a disabled athlete. Participants were not then

128 informed about the specific topic of this research. The reason for this was based on the
129 need to recruit a diverse sample whilst avoiding recruiting a group of people who might
130 first consider the research an opportunity to promote disability sport or their personal
131 political views. Recruitment of participants continued until data saturation was achieved.
132 Recognizing the complexities of data saturation (e.g. there is always the potential for ‘the
133 new to emerge’) (O’Reilly & Parker, 2013), this kind of saturation best refers to an
134 iterative process that involves collecting and transcribing initial data, immediately
135 assessing it, and then continuing to collect and assess data until anything ‘new’ found
136 adds nothing necessarily to the overall story and patterns. The result was a recruited
137 sample of 36 people (20 males and 16 females aged between 23 and 40 years) who had
138 been competing in their sport for an average of 8 years. The participants reported a range
139 of impairments (e.g., amputation, cerebral palsy, spinal cord injury, visual impairment)
140 and represented a diversity of sports (e.g., athletics, canoe, cycling, swimming, triathlon,
141 wheelchair basketball). Nine individuals described their impairments as congenital or
142 acquired during childhood and 27 acquired their impairments in adulthood. The sample
143 was also diverse in terms of income and employment status.

144 **Data Collection**

145 Data was collected using qualitative methods synchronously, resulting in a large
146 and qualitatively rich data set. All participants were involved in a semi-structured life
147 story interview. Each interview was recorded and lasted on average 2 hours. In each
148 interview, the interviewer invited each participant to tell stories about their own life and
149 how it had been lived over time. An interview guide was also used to help facilitate
150 discussion. Questions included in the guide were, “Can you tell me about your sporting
151 experiences?”, “Can you describe who you are?”, “What does activism mean to you” and
152 “Can you describe any experiences you’ve had of engaging in activism”. Clarification,

153 elaboration, and detail orientated probes, that is, curiosity-driven follow-up questions
154 were used throughout to elicit richer data (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). One year after the
155 first interview, people in the sample who had retired from competitive sport were
156 interviewed again. The rationale for a second interview with this group was based on the
157 view that retirement from elite sport might be a major epiphany that engenders reflection
158 and possible change in identity and wellbeing. Eight participants retired during the project
159 and were interviewed on average for 1.5 hours. All data were transcribed verbatim and
160 participants given pseudonyms.

161 Concurrently with the interviews, 70 hours of observational data was collected in
162 various contexts. For example, gym training (e.g., weights sessions or aerobic training in
163 the gym), training camps in which players met, ate together, practiced skills, discussed
164 tactics, played sport and so on, team meetings, interactions in cafés with team mates and
165 friends, and time spent in a family home were observed. Data were recorded either in situ
166 or later that day using fieldnotes. The method of observation was chosen because it allows
167 the researcher insight into the mundane, the typical, and occasionally extraordinary
168 features of everyday life that a participant might not feel worth commenting on in an
169 interview (Thorpe & Olive, 2016). Moreover, combining observational data with
170 interview data enables researchers to understand not just what a participant says they do,
171 but also what they do in everyday life (Atkinson, 2015). In addition to these ‘real world’
172 observations, the authors were also attentive to the virtual and digital sites where athletes
173 with disabilities show and perform identities (Bundon, 2016). Throughout the project,
174 social media accounts (e.g. Twitter) and blogs produced by athletes were also observed
175 and provided a supplementary source of material.

176 **Data Analysis and Validity**

177 Transcripts, fieldnotes and collected digital media were subjected to an inductive

178 thematic narrative analysis as described by Riessman (2008) and Smith (2016). Initially,
179 the authors engaged in indwelling, which involves immersing oneself in the data, thinking
180 with stories, and generating initial ideas. Next, narrative themes - a pattern that runs
181 through a story - were identified by theme-ing the data, which means systematically
182 coding stories for manifest and latent meaning. Themes were then reviewed against the
183 entire data set before these were refined and combined into larger themes that captured
184 complex patterns that run through stories. This process led to the emergence of 4 main
185 narrative themes, and the initial naming of these.

186 The study was guided by a relativist approach to conceptualizing validity in
187 qualitative research (Burke, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2009, 2014). This approach does not
188 mean that ‘anything goes’. Rather, it means that criteria for judging the quality of
189 qualitative research are drawn from an ongoing list of characterizing traits as opposed to
190 being applied in a universal manner to all qualitative research. The criteria for enhancing
191 the quality of the work here included the following: the worthiness of the topic; the
192 significant contribution of the work; rich rigor (e.g., developing a sample appropriate for
193 the purpose of the study and generating data that could provide for meaningful and
194 significant claims); and the coherence of the research, which refers to how well the study
195 coheres in terms of the purpose, methods, and results. Participant reflections on our
196 analytical interpretations were also utilized, not in an effort to achieve theory-free
197 knowledge, but rather to open up dialogue about the fairness, appropriateness and
198 believability of the results shared. A reflexive diary was kept in order to critically reflect
199 on, for example, prior assumptions held about disability, sport, and activism, and ongoing
200 judgments about the data and interpretations of these. An audit trail in which two
201 colleagues, acting as ‘critical friends’ (Smith & Sparkes, 2012), independently scrutinized
202 data collection was additionally used. Critical friends were also used to provide a

203 theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, alternative
204 explanations and interpretations as these emerged in relation to the data (Burke, 2016;
205 Smith & Sparkes, 2012).

206 **Results**

207 The results are presented as follows. The theme of a sporting activist identity that
208 all participants adopted is first highlighted. A second activist identity concerned with
209 challenging social oppression outside sport is then revealed. Emphasized next are the
210 barriers to constructing and performing political activist identities. Thereafter retirement
211 and the development of a new identity about political activism are attended to. The article
212 concludes by addressing the contribution of the research, suggesting what each identity
213 might do, and offering practical implications.

214 **Sporting Activist Identities**

215 All participants identified strongly with the athlete identity. Each also constructed
216 and performed what we termed a sporting activist identity. Defined, this is a type of
217 identity that advocates for change *inside* sport for the purpose of transforming policy,
218 practices, and organizations that are believed to restrict ones own *individual* or *team*
219 sporting success. In addition to advocating for a consistent, fair, correct, and clearly
220 communicated classification policy system (the system by which athletes with disabilities
221 are ‘classified’ into different competitive categories based on their type of impairment
222 and/or functional abilities), what people with a sporting type of activist identity mainly
223 advocated for was a reduction of perceived inequalities between what able-bodied athletes
224 received and what disabled athletes received. The perceived inequalities, often emerging
225 from within organizations or the material environment, included restricted disabled
226 parking and limited accessible accommodation close to training locations, a lack of
227 disability specific sport equipment, minimal and precarious financial support to train and

228 compete, and limited access to high quality coaches and sport science services
229 (particularly those with disability-specific awareness and knowledge). Moreover, such
230 perceived inequalities emerging from within the material environment and organizations
231 were deemed a stressor by the participants that could negatively impact upon their
232 preparation for major competitions, sporting success, emotions, and health and wellbeing.

233 As one female athlete said in response to being asked 'What does activism mean to you':

234 Activism for me is all about getting equality in sport. As an athlete my goal
235 ultimately is to win, and to be the best I can. But sometimes it feels as though I
236 can't do this. That's not down to me. It's the fault of so many things external to
237 me, like the failure of the [name of] organization to come up with good training
238 facilities, parking, the lack of good coaches that understand my needs and what
239 being a Paralympian is all about. But I don't accept the inequalities between what
240 we have and what Olympic, able-bodied have. You see it's a huge stress that
241 impacts on my training, what I could really do in sport, and effects even my health
242 and moods...Inequalities are wrong and really stressful, but I don't take it lying
243 down. I won't tolerate now how some people in sport treat us. I know a lot of
244 other para-athletes think like this too, that we get a raw deal and more needs to be
245 done to shrink the gaps between us and Olympic athletes. That's a big mission, but
246 I believe in it. (Helen)

247 How athletes responded to perceived inequalities in sport, and the stress that
248 inequality could engender, was by sometimes engaging in acts of activism that they
249 themselves perceived to be high-risk. This included demanding change at team meetings
250 and via social media in confrontational ways. What was largely perceived to be at stake
251 for the participants by engaging in such risky acts of activism was the withdrawal of
252 emotional (e.g. trust), tangible (e.g. financial assistance), and informational (e.g. advice)

253 social support from coaches or team management. What the participants were also risking
254 was a rise in stress that came with the fear of having social support withdrawn.
255 Notwithstanding such risks and stressors, how athletes mostly performed activist
256 identities was by engaging in occasional, low-risk, gentle, and institutionalized activist
257 acts. For example, the participants spoke with other athletes as well as sport staff
258 (coaches, team managers, and performance lifestyle coordinators), about perceived
259 inequalities and about how reducing these gaps in equality would improve their individual
260 or team performance.

261 I: You spoke about trying to make changes in sport. Can you tell me how you've
262 gone about this?

263 Male participant: Not in an aggressive manner. I'd be out of the team I reckon if I
264 did. You see, being a para-athlete comes with many challenges. Many though are
265 not of our own making. For me, and others I know, there is great pressure to
266 perform and get medals, but I'm having to battle to get things in place to do this.
267 Para-athletes don't get the same environment as able-bodied athletes and
268 sometimes the disparities between us feel so wrong because we could do so much
269 better if we had the same as them. I know I could...I'm not saying I can change
270 the world of para-sport here. I'm not naïve. But I can do my little bit. I've spoken
271 up at training camps about how bad our food is, I've pushed for competitions that
272 treat us as good as able-bodied athletes, and said we need the same access to sport
273 science support...Still, when you do speak up there are risks, like thinking, if I tell
274 the coach to stop patronizing me, will he just walk away or not give his all. So
275 mostly I'm like, yes this is wrong, things need improving, but I don't go
276 overboard. There's too much to lose, and it's emotionally quite draining I reckon
277 too. So I'm more like, I go about things in a gentler, subtle manner, wanting to

278 make change but not upset the apple cart. (Harry)

279 Whilst all the participants constructed and performed a sporting activist identity by
280 advocating for change inside sport, there were important differences amongst them in
281 terms of where they discursively positioned 'athlete' in their identity hierarchy. Whilst
282 Paralympians are, *de facto*, individuals with a disability else they would be ineligible to
283 compete at the Paralympic Games, 29 of the participants rejected the term disability to
284 describe themselves, preferring instead to define themselves as simply an athlete. The
285 participants described themselves using this 'athlete only identity discourse' partly as a
286 way to legitimate their athletic status, competence, and talents as a sportsperson. For
287 example, one participant in an interview said:

288 Female participant: I think of myself as an athlete, not as a woman, and certainly
289 not as disabled.

290 I: Why is that?

291 Female participant: I am 100% an athlete, that's who I am, totally. I train hard, I
292 lift weights, I cover hundreds of miles, go out in all weathers...I am an athlete, and
293 want to be seen as one, not disabled, but an athlete outright, a winner. I don't even
294 think of myself as disabled. I'm a Paralympian and for me that is all about being
295 an athlete, not disability. (Emma)

296 Observational data further highlighted the dominance of an 'athlete only identity
297 discourse' within the sample.

298 During team meetings, when speaking with the media, on his twitter account, and
299 in conversations with the general public it has become apparent that James views
300 himself as just an athlete. Sometimes he was often at pains to stress this. On
301 several occasions, like observed today when he responded on twitter to a tweet, he
302 stressed that, to quote, he 'did not see himself as disabled' and was 'an athlete just

303 like any other elite athlete who competes at elite level.’ (James - observational
304 field notes)

305 In contrast to the majority of participants who used athlete only identity language,
306 7 people in the study, who came from a range of sports and had different impairments that
307 were either congenital or acquired, described themselves as a ‘disabled athlete’.
308 Identifying as a disabled person first and then an athlete second did not though mean that
309 the participant’s identification with an athletic identity was weak or diminished. Rather,
310 they identified strongly with the athlete role but preferred to position disability first within
311 their identity hierarchy to emphasize an affirmative identity. As described by Swain and
312 French (2000), an affirmative identity refers to a positive identity as a person who is
313 proud to be disabled, finds benefits in living life with a disability, and wishes to affirm a
314 connection with other people who have an impairment. Participants also adopted the
315 discourse of a ‘disabled athlete’ to as a way to counter negative discourses of disability,
316 including those that depict disabled people simply as vulnerable, dependent, pitiful, tragic
317 victims, or not ‘normal’.

318 I: How would you describe yourself?

319 Male participant: I’m disabled, and that defines me. I’d describe myself as a
320 disabled athlete, in that order. I’m an athlete, for sure. But I’m more than an
321 athlete. I’m first and foremost a disabled person...Disability isn’t just about me,
322 my body, or Paralympic sport, or winning a medal. It’s political because when
323 you’re disabled society often treats you like a second-class citizen, as if being
324 disabled is a horrible, abnormal thing, and we should be grateful for help or pity.
325 That’s wrong. It needs challenging, and if I can use my status as an athlete to do
326 this, to bring disability rights to people’s attention, then that’s as good as any gold
327 medal...I’m proud to be disabled. I’m disabled and then an athlete, a disabled

328 athlete. Unfortunately I don't see too many of us about in sport like this. (Mark)

329 **Political Activist Identity**

330 The majority of the participants confined activist behaviors to advocating for
331 change inside sport. However, the 7 participants who described themselves as a 'disabled
332 athlete' did engage in activism both inside and outside sport. In so doing, they constructed
333 and performed another identity, what we termed a political activist identity. Defined, a
334 political activist identity refers to a type of identity that advocates for change *outside* sport
335 for the purpose of resisting and transforming discourses, attitudes, non-verbal acts,
336 policies, and environmental structures that socially oppress people in their everyday lives.
337 Accordingly, this type of activist identity is different to an athletic activist identity in that
338 activist acts are conducted outside of the sporting context. Moreover, what these actions
339 were directed at challenging was disablism, not for reasons to do with sporting
340 performance, but rather to collectively improve the everyday lives of disabled people.
341 Disablism refers to the social oppression disabled people encounter (Goodley, 2016). It
342 involves the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and
343 the socially engendered undermining of their physical health and psychological or
344 subjective wellbeing (Thomas, 2014). As one female participant said:

345 Being a disabled athlete is a privilege in many ways. When you really look outside
346 sport and the comfortable life it gives you, what you see is unfortunately a lot of
347 misery and difficulties for disabled people. None of it our fault, very little anyway.
348 The problems largely fall at the door of society, for not thinking we can excel at
349 work, for not adapting buildings, people staring at disabled people when they shop
350 in a supermarket, a lack of accessible transport, bad stadiums, welfare cuts, cruel
351 jokes, and even physical violence. The list goes on. When you step outside of
352 sport you hear all about the damage being done to disabled people and get to

353 experience it first hand. It's wrong. It's oppressive. People can't enjoy gyms, get a
354 job, struggle to watch their football team, or even afford to buy healthy food or
355 live in a house that meets their needs. People are suffering, that's the reality of it.
356 And if I can use my identity as an athlete to help change things, I will and do. I'm
357 proud of being an athlete, and have a very strong identity as a political disabled
358 athlete too. This didn't happen overnight though. It was a while before I felt the
359 calling. (Rachel)

360 There were various reasons why the 7 participants constructed and performed a
361 political activist identity. Five participants began the process of developing this kind of
362 identity prior to being an elite athlete and 2 when competing at athletes, partly as a result
363 being interpellated to activism. Interpellation is the social constitutive process where
364 individuals are "hailed"—called—to acknowledge and respond to ideologies to be certain
365 individuals' as subjects (Frank, 2010). The people in this study were interpellated to take
366 up an activist political identity by at least two embodied, socialized, and relational forces:
367 one of affect and feeling and one of narrative. As part of the affective turn, it has been
368 argued that we are *feeling bodies* and act on how we *feel* (Burkitt, 2014; Cromby, 2015;
369 Damasio, 1994). That is, we feel various embodied intensities, sensations, directions,
370 desires, and valences corporeally and these feelings, provided for us by our bodies, can
371 impel us to certain identities that have been called out. For example, participants
372 explained that they took up political activist identities partly because of their 'gut
373 feelings', what Damasio (1994) theorized as affective somatic markers for informing
374 identity identification and guiding behavior. Likewise, why the interpellation to take up an
375 activist political identity had force was because the participant's *felt* they must respond to
376 a call made their own body.

377 I: You've said a lot that you're, to use your words, 'a disabled activist who is also

378 very much an athlete'. Are there any reasons why you were drawn to activism?
379 Male participant: There are a few. This might sound strange, but it was a feeling,
380 deep inside me that told me it was wrong to ignore the injustices I heard about and
381 saw were happening when I stepped outside of sport... The only way I can explain
382 my initial decision to be an activist was that it felt wrong knowing what happens
383 to disabled people and I knew, in my body by how I suddenly felt, that I should do
384 something. I had to. If I ignored that feeling, what person would I be? (Matthew)

385 Of course, people can refuse interpellation and avoid taking on board a political
386 activist identity they have been called by their corporeal feelings to adopt. But, this was
387 not the case for the 7 people. Reasons for this relate to an embodied narrative
388 enculturation and socialization process that involved first being *inducted* to a story of
389 oppression that soon acted on them as a *subjectifier* by arousing *imagination*, offering a
390 new *narrative map* and *connecting* people, and then over time, the stories that acted on
391 and for them formed a *narrative habitus* around a political activist identity. Specifically,
392 whilst "language interpellates or 'calls out' feeling, organizing experience in accord with
393 regimes of discourse" (Cromby, 2015, p. 101), people also require access to certain
394 discourses in order to help inform them, in the sense of providing information, about
395 political activist identities. In other words, in order to know about activist identities they
396 needed to be introduced to stories of activism, what might be termed *narrative induction*.
397 A key way in which they were inducted to discourses about activism was by hearing
398 stories from other disabled people outside of sport about oppression and the damage
399 disablism can do. Being introduced to these stories not only helped organize and make
400 sense of their embodied feelings. The stories moreover helped perform the work of
401 identity *subjectification*, that is, "telling people who they ought to be, who they might like
402 to be and who they can be" (Frank, 2006, p. 430).

403 Whilst a story as a subjectifier does not determine people as individuals can reject
404 stories as not for them, the participants did get caught up in political stories, and these left
405 their mark. A reason for this lies in the capacities that, according to Frank (2010), equip
406 narratives to have the effects they have. For the participants, stories aroused their
407 *imagination* by making the unseen not only visible but also emotionally compelling.
408 Stories as subjectifiers further had the capacity to provide what Pollner and Stein (1996)
409 termed a *narrative map*. Narrative maps are guides that experienced people offer to
410 newcomers who are at a gateway to an unfamiliar world. As a map, the stories people
411 share provide orientation, information and advice about how to navigate a new social
412 world and the negotiation of new identities in unfamiliar situations (Pollner & Stein,
413 1996). Moreover for the participants, stories had the capacity to *connect* them with other
414 people who performed activist identities. In so doing, the stories brought multiple actors
415 together to produce a collective story of activism and a network of activists, thereby
416 enhancing the force of narratives to call and capture people's imagination (Frank, 2010).
417 As one female athlete put it:

418 Sport is very insular. But for me I felt anger when I heard what is happening to
419 disabled people who don't have the luxury of being in sport. There are problems in
420 sport, don't get me wrong, and which I'm happy to protest about. But the big issue
421 is what is going on out there. When I was introduced to other disabled people, it
422 was like a wake-up call. I knew in my body something was wrong, and as well
423 people were telling me so many stories about the horrors they were going through
424 and how together we could do something. They opened my eyes to a new world
425 and I wanted to be part of their cause, and fight for the rights of disabled
426 people....When I heard all these stories about how disabled people are badly
427 treated in society it got me angry, very emotional, and I couldn't help but imagine

428 that could be me. Now I feel as though this political side is part of me, that it's
429 important to who I am, it's engrained in me. I suppose you might say that it's in
430 my veins now. I don't hesitate to tell someone now if they are being prejudiced
431 against disabled people, write an email to MP [Member of Parliament], or pipe up
432 when I hear people say disabled people are a drain on society. It's natural now to
433 act like this. (Janice)

434 As suggested above, over time stories of oppression and activism that the
435 participants first heard, provided information, aroused imagination, and connected them
436 with other people who engaged in activism, turned into an embodied companion to tacitly
437 guide and predispose actions by becoming part of their *narrative habitus*. This type of
438 habitus (Frank, 2010) refers to the embedding of stories in bodies to hear certain stories,
439 immediately and intuitively, as belonging to one's body and self. As Frank (2010) put it,
440 although narrative habitus is never determinism, it is "a disposition to hear some stories as
441 those one ought to listen to, ought to repeat on appropriate occasions, and ought to be
442 guided by" (p. 53). It describes the embodied sense of attraction, indifference, or
443 repulsion that people feel in response to stories which leads them to define some story as
444 for us or not for us. Narrative habitus, therefore, "is the unchosen force in any choice to be
445 interpellated by a story, and the complementary rejection of the interpellation that other
446 stories would effect if a person were caught up in them" (p. 53). Another example of the
447 participant's narrative habitus that predisposed them to be called to stories of activism can
448 be seen in the following comments from a male participant (Ken): "I'm political. I'm not
449 sure I'd be allowed to have it any other way, well, that's how it feels. And of course, all
450 this dictates what I do. It's natural for me now to challenge discrimination and give my
451 voice to campaigns to make life better for disabled people."

452 How and when the participants performed a political activist identity in

453 predisposed ways was diverse. For example, using their platform in sport as a vehicle to
454 help counter disablism in society, they purposefully shared stories about the damage done
455 to disabled people in society and what might be done to change this with other athletes
456 who they perceived to be widely unaware of how widespread oppression was. Notably
457 this process, they claimed, helped change some athletes' views and narratively inducted
458 them into a political activist identity. Participants would also challenge people they
459 encountered in public places, like in the street, shop, or gym, for suggesting that all
460 disabled people are vulnerable, pitiful, and/or welfare 'scroungers'. Other ways how
461 participants sought to resist disablism and improve disabled peoples' lives was by writing
462 to their local Member of Parliament, signing petitions, producing blogs or tweets,
463 engaging in organized protest rallies, and confronting senior people in organizations to
464 demand oppressive policies and structures, like inaccessible environments, were changed.

465 Observing Edward train in the gym today. Whilst I was helping put away some
466 weights, I watched him chat with another male gym member. "Yes, I'm training
467 for the Paralympics. I'm a disabled athlete," he responded to a question asking if
468 he was a Paralympian. Following a short conversation about how great sport was
469 and that he'd won a medal at the last Paralympics, he said to the person, "One
470 thing you should know is that I had to fight hard to get access to this weights area.
471 People didn't want me here. Bad for business I was told. But I wouldn't let it go. I
472 fought it and here I am. But compared to most disabled people, I have it easy. I've
473 left a petition about welfare cuts at the front desk. If you've the time please read it,
474 and hopefully you'll support us." An hour later I watched as the young man read
475 and signed the petition...Edward later sent a tweet about the cuts and why he
476 believed these were dangerous for disabled people. (Edward - observational field
477 notes)

478 Barriers and risks to constructing and performing political activist identities

479 There were two main reasons as to why the majority of participants did not
480 construct political activist identities. Although disabled people still regularly face
481 disablism in society (Goodley, 2016), most people in the study assumed that disabled
482 people were now largely treated fairly, equally, and respectfully in society. Thus, it was
483 reasoned that engaging in activism outside sport was largely needless. A second reason
484 for the absence of a political activist identity was that it was presumed that, even if
485 activism was truly needed, a political activist identity was incompatible with an athletic
486 identity. For example, people thought their sport organizations and sponsors would be
487 offended if they engaged in social justice issues outside of sport. As a result, they feared
488 the withdrawal of funding, endorsements, or sponsorship that was necessary for
489 maintaining a strong athletic role. In addition, it was presumed that engaging in activism
490 would engender negative emotions that would negatively impact on their athletic identity
491 due to the need for repeated emotional self-regulation – “the use of automatic or
492 deliberate strategies to initiate, maintain, modify or display one’s own emotions”
493 (Tamminen & Crocker, 2013, p. 738). For instance, performing a political activist identity
494 during social interactions was assumed to require the management of emotions by
495 deliberately inhibiting outward displays of emotion. Such an expressive suppression
496 response-focused strategy for regulating emotions would, in turn, require significant
497 coping efforts and consume cognitive resources, resulting in negative training, recovery,
498 and performance outcomes (Wagstaff, Hanton & Fletcher, 2013).

499 I: Why do you say you’ve no interest in disability politics?

500 Female participant: I don’t hear too many bad things happening to disabled
501 people. So I guess there isn’t much point in acting political. But even if there was,
502 I suspect it would be too emotionally draining to get involved. That and you’d

503 have to keep your emotions hidden. You can't bubble over in public. I couldn't
504 afford any of that as an athlete...My focus and energy needs to be on training,
505 going for a medal, which is about being an athlete, not wasting emotional energy
506 on getting involved in political stuff and trying to keep my emotions in check. But
507 as I say, I don't think disabled people have it bad now. (Hannah)

508 In contrast to the majority of participants who assumed acts of activism were a
509 barrier or risk to the athlete role and associated peak performance, the small group of
510 people who did construct and perform a political activist identity said they both strongly
511 identified with an athletic identity and believed sporting achievement never suffered as
512 result of their activism. This is not to say that engaging in activism was easy or
513 straightforward initially for the 7 participants. When political views were expressed and
514 oppression challenged they sometimes encountered anger, alienation, or hostility from
515 sporting organizations, athletes, and the general public. This made it difficult to act
516 effectively at first. Anger, alienation, or hostility could also engender negative emotions
517 for the participant's, harming their wellbeing. That said, it was suggested that with
518 experience they became competent at enacting political activist identities and, in turn,
519 harm to wellbeing was very rare. One reason for this relates to their narrative habitus and
520 use of certain emotional regulation strategies.

521 According to Frank (2010), "narrative habitus provides the *competence*" (p. 53) to
522 use stories and perform identities. This is because with experience people develop a
523 disposition to know, in the body and mostly tacitly, what acts fit which occasion, who
524 wants to hear what activist story and when, and how others will react to a story that might
525 be told to challenge oppression. Whilst never perfect or guaranteed, narrative habitus can
526 thus enable knowing, as if one were on narrative automatic pilot, how to effectively
527 perform political identities without serious negative impact on emotion during and after

528 interactions. Important in the process was the development of strategies for both
529 emotional self-regulation and interpersonal emotional regulation – the “verbal and
530 nonverbal actions which influence others’ emotions” (Tamminen & Crocker, 2013, p.
531 738) - that over time became part of their habitus. For example, constituted from life
532 experiences over a period of time participants used reappraisal strategies, such as altering
533 their emotion experience by changing thoughts, to manage any potential negative
534 interactions and emotions. Other useful positive strategies for regulating emotions that
535 formed part of their habitus for communicating activist points effectively were humor,
536 smiling, cue words to calm people down, and prosocial actions, like taking into
537 consideration the needs of others (Tamminen & Crocker, 2013). As one male said:

538 Challenging the problems, and the physical and psychological abuse disabled face
539 is now second nature to me. I don’t have to think about it. That wasn’t always the
540 case though. I had to learn to control my emotions and anticipate how other people
541 might react to what I would say as it was a fine line between making them angry
542 and getting my point across...Early on some people got me so angry that I blew up
543 at them, which you learn doesn’t help, and a few athletes started to ignore me. But
544 eventually it all clicks in place and becomes natural. I know when to smile to take
545 the heat out of someone now, make a joke to get my point across, or think, ok, this
546 isn’t going to work, change approach or leave it for later. (Martin)

547 **Retirement and the development of a political activist identity**

548 Eight athletes retired from playing sport competitively during the study. In
549 interviews with them before they retired, none adopted a political activist identity whilst
550 in sport. However, analysis of data collected one year following retirement from playing
551 revealed that 7 of the 8 athletes now constructed and performed this type of identity.
552 Several connected reasons were suggested for constructing a new identity. Whereas the

553 one participant who did not construct a political activist identity returned to sport in a
554 coaching capacity, the other seven left sport completely. They reflected that sport largely
555 buffered them from the everyday realities disabled people in society generally face. When
556 they retired from sport the participants were however no longer buffered. As a result, they
557 soon began to personally experience and witness profound disablism. This shattered their
558 previously held assumptions about the absence of oppression in society. With new first-
559 hand experience of how society often treats disabled people, coupled with witnessing
560 stories from other disabled people about the damage oppression causes, the participants
561 began constructing a political activist identity. As one female participant said:

562 Sport is like being in a bubble, and now I realize buffers you from what are very
563 real daily problems most disabled people face. Yes, I had access difficulties as an
564 athlete. But these were small in comparison to what I now face. I regularly
565 experience people openly gawping at me, hear a lot of negative attitudes leveled at
566 disabled people, which I thought were in the last century, am made to feel
567 invisible or I'm really not wanted, have experienced a lot of insults and even some
568 threats, and, well, that's the tip of the iceberg of the discrimination I face, and we
569 face as disabled people...I thought everything by and large was fine for disabled
570 people when I played sport. But no - how wrong I was! I couldn't have been
571 further from the truth. The stories disabled people told me about the daily
572 discrimination they face and how hard it is to survive shocked me, and I soon
573 realized that my experiences since retiring were so similar. That set me on a path
574 to where I am today, a person who still loves sport but also a person who wants to
575 make a difference by confronting discrimination and wanting to change things so
576 our lives as disabled people can be better. I must say too that this has had a very
577 big, positive impact on my confidence, happiness, esteem, relationships. (Liz)

578 Whilst developing a new identity was not easy following retirement, the
579 participants proposed that with the intimate knowledge of the damaging nature of
580 disablism they now had, if they could go back in time, they would unequivocally have
581 done several things differently whilst being an elite athlete. One of these included
582 adopting an athletic identity, athletic activist identity, *and* a political identity. The
583 participants also suggested that other athletes would benefit from adopting these multiple
584 identities. This was especially so given the negative impact retirement initially had on
585 their health and wellbeing due to not just direct social oppression, but also limited post-
586 sport employment opportunities, psychological difficulties dealing with the loss of sport,
587 and a reduced quality of life. As one male said:

588 Retiring from competitive sport hit me psychologically. It left me struggling. I
589 wasn't happy. I was miserable a lot. I lost a lot of confidence too. And to add to all
590 this, I woke up in a world that I didn't really recognize...When I retired and was
591 out of the sporting bubble I started to see the world very differently. My
592 impairment was a route into professional sport, but now society treats me like a
593 second-class citizen. It's left me first angry, but soon more defiant, especially
594 when I was told, by strangers, that I'm a drain on society and would be better off
595 dead. I wasn't going to let people off the hook and I felt I needed to do something.
596 Battling for disability rights is now a daily part of my life, it's part of who I am
597 now...And if I could offer one bit of advice to athletes in sport now it would be:
598 'Don't believe all is rosy for disabled people. It isn't. When you retire, you'll find
599 this out pretty quickly and retirement will be even more difficult because of the
600 discrimination we face. Retirement will be much more difficult to adjust to. Start
601 being politically active as an athlete, or at least aware. Use your status as an
602 athlete to bring attention to disability rights if you can...It isn't time consuming.

603 For instance, sending a tweet highlighting problems only takes 30 seconds.’ (Ian)

604 **Closing thoughts**

605 Drawing on a large qualitative data set rigorously developed, this research is the
606 first within sport and exercise psychology to explicitly examine activist identities among
607 elite athletes with impairment. The article also contributes to research, including disability
608 studies and the sociology of sport, by identifying two different types of activist identities
609 disabled, elite athletes construct. Research, be it qualitative and/or quantitative, should
610 therefore consider in the future activist identities in the plural. Interpretations were offered
611 concerning why identities were constructed or not, when and how an activist identity was
612 performed, and the costs and benefits to wellbeing associated with different identities. In
613 addition, the article develops novel insights into various contemporary concerns within
614 sport and exercise psychology as well disability studies and the sociology of sport. For
615 example, in terms of career transition research not only was the negative impact of
616 retirement on wellbeing for disabled people revealed (Wheeler et al., 1996). It was
617 suggested that social oppression could increase damage to wellbeing following retirement
618 from competitive sport. The possibilities retiring may have for developing different
619 identities that can positively impact on wellbeing were noted too. The article moreover
620 adds to the organizational stress literature in sport (Arnold, Fletcher & Daniels 2016).
621 Research in this area has overlooked elite, disabled athletes. This article however suggests
622 that disabled athletes, as a result of perceived inequalities within sporting organizations,
623 encounter some similar stressors (e.g., leadership and team issues) to able-bodied athletes
624 as well as distinct stressors (e.g., the lack of disability-specific coaching and inaccessible
625 environments). Further, the article extends into research on feeling and emotion. The
626 importance of embodied feelings for motivating the development of identity for disabled
627 athletes was highlighted. The use of emotional regulation and various strategies in

628 constraining and enabling the development of activist identities was noted. It was
629 suggested that emotions and feelings should not be subordinated to cognition or the mind.
630 Emotion and feeling are instead often somewhat ineffable and emergent from and
631 immanent within the flows of language and embodied social relationships.

632 With regard to what the participant's discourses of identity might do – the social
633 functions -, several suggestions are proposed. Whilst athletic activist discourses offer
634 some resistance to inequalities inside sport, what the combination of using an athlete-only
635 identity discourse and eschewing a political activist identity may do is reproduce both a
636 medical model understanding of disability and a 'supercrip' narrative. A medical model
637 defines disability as any lack of ability resulting from impairment to perform an activity
638 within the range considered normal for a person (Goodley, 2016). One problem with the
639 medical model is that disability is depicted as abnormal, inevitably a personal physical
640 tragedy, and every time a psychological trauma that should be overcome. Thus, being
641 disabled is portrayed as always a 'bad' thing that must be eradicated. Another danger with
642 the model is that any solutions to 'disability' are directed at the individual, thereby
643 leaving social oppression unchallenged and placing the weight of responsibility onto the
644 person to seek a 'solution' to *their* problem (Goodley, 2016; Smith & Bundon, in-press).
645 A supercrip refers to an athlete who, with courage, hard work and dedication, proves that
646 one can accomplish the impossible and heroically triumph over the 'tragedy' of disability
647 through sport (Smith et al., 2016). Whilst numerous disabled athletes themselves might
648 not see themselves as a 'supercrip', for some disabled people inside sport (Peers, 2012) as
649 well as outside of sport (Braye, Dixon & Gibbons, 2013), the supercrip narrative provides
650 an artificial stereotype of disability by misrepresenting the wider population of disabled
651 people. Perhaps unintentionally too, the narrative shifts attention away from the social
652 oppression that damages the lives of many to considering disabled people as 'tragic

653 victims' who can be 'saved' by sport and the largely able-bodied people associated with
654 para-sport Games.

655 In contrast to an athlete-only identity discourse and athletic activist identity, what
656 the discourses of a political activist identity and a disability first identity (i.e. 'I'm a
657 disabled athlete') can do is act as a counter-narrative. According to Nelson (2001),
658 counter-narratives are purposive acts of moral definition that set out to resist "and repair
659 the damage inflicted on identities by abusive power systems" (p. xiii). Acting as counter-
660 narratives, what the identity discourses of political activism and 'I am a disabled athlete'
661 do is resist disablism and circulate affirmative identities. In so doing, these discourses
662 hold great potential for evoking social change and generating positive ways of being as a
663 disabled person. What the political activist and disability first identities also may do is
664 promote a social relational model and a human rights model, thereby bolstering
665 possibilities for change and the promotion of affirmative identities. Building on the social
666 model, the social relational model proposes that disabled people can experience various
667 forms of indirect or direct social oppression that restrict activities and damage wellbeing
668 (Thomas, 2014). Encountering the social relational model can positively change how
669 people view disability and equip them with a vocabulary to further resist disablism (Smith
670 & Perrier, 2014). For instance, people can move from thinking that the 'solution' to the
671 'problem' of disability lay squarely with 'them' (the individual) to believing that society
672 produces disability. Such a move can be empowering and affirmative for people. It also
673 means that attempts to improve wellbeing, environmental structures, societal attitudes,
674 and media representations of disabled people must involve challenging disablism within
675 society. In contrast to the social relational model, the human rights model is embedded in
676 a legal convention - the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of People with
677 Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). It promotes change at a national and international

678 level through eight principles (e.g. disabled people have the rights to equality of
679 accessibility) that, if implemented, helps enable disabled people to claim their rightful
680 place in society (Smith & Bundon, in-press).

681 With regard to practical opportunities, one possibility lies in amplifying stories of
682 activism. By amplifying stories we mean seeking to expand peoples' narrative resources
683 through sharing– not prescribing but offering - different stories about activist identities
684 and showing what each story might do. One possible way to share stories, and which
685 currently is being discussed with disability sport organisations, is through workshops with
686 athletes, performance lifestyle advisors, and coaches. The rationale for amplifying stories
687 is based not just in organizational mandates to promote social missions and take care of
688 athletes' wellbeing. It is grounded in narrative theory and research (e.g., Frank, 2006,
689 2010; Nelson, 2001; Pollner & Stein, 1996; Smith, Tomasone, Latimer-Cheung & Martin
690 Ginis, 2015) along with the findings of this study. The former has suggested that in
691 addition to stories being a highly effective way to communicate knowledge, and because
692 narratives are emotionally engaging and compelling, narratives as subjectifiers can be
693 useful for what Freire (2005) termed *conscientization*. Also shown to be beneficial in
694 community based participatory action research (Schinke & Blodgett, 2016),
695 conscientization refers to the process of breaking through prevailing assumptions and
696 mythologies through sharing stories (and other means) to reach new levels of awareness.
697 Stories further help constitute our identities and, as subjectifiers, can arouse imagination
698 and act as narrative maps for possibly learning new identities. Thus, by bringing in more
699 stories people's narrative resources can be expanded to potentially enable the construction
700 of different identities, if people choose. In other words, by circulating different stories
701 people's menu of narratives to artfully choose from and live by can be increased.

702 In terms of this study, the majority of athletes were largely unaware of the level of

703 oppression disabled people faced in society. They also held certain assumptions about the
704 barriers or risks to adopting a political activist identity. In light of all this, and using
705 stories from athletes who adopt the latter identity, narratives could be amplified in
706 contexts like workshops that show the severity of oppression in society. The stories could
707 also show that people may in fact be successfully involved in sport per se, strongly
708 identify with the athlete role, and perform an activist political identity. Such amplification
709 could counter assumptions, help conscientization, and expand athlete's awareness of
710 different identities within disability sport so that they can develop other identities, if they
711 choose. Given also the findings on retirement, to help with the long term care of disabled
712 sports people it might be useful to share stories with athletes currently in sport about, for
713 example, the damage disablism may have on lives when an athlete retires and how they
714 might then live in personally meaningful ways. Another possible benefit of amplifying
715 stories is that it could create spaces for athletes who are already active activists, or who
716 may be intending to engage in activism, to discuss activist issues in safe environments
717 where there is minimal risk of harming emotions and losing support. It may also provide
718 opportunities to discuss concerns about engaging in activism, such as it takes much time
719 to perform activist acts, and develop solutions to these (e.g. the use of social media like
720 twitter).

721 Of course, we do not presume that athletes with a political activist identity will
722 want to always share their stories. Equally we do not claim that all athletes with
723 disabilities *must* take on activist identities or that people will *always* take on board new
724 identities when stories are amplified. Whilst many stories and identities call out to be
725 taken on board over the life course, space can be found for relatively few (Frank, 2006).
726 Institutional norms can also govern what stories can be told and how and when these
727 should be communicated. All this recognized, research has shown that narratives

728 contribute more positively to promoting different identities, producing greater affective
729 and motivational reactions, and changing health behaviors than cognitive orientated
730 informational messages (e.g., Falzon, Radel, Cantor & d'Arripe-Longueville, 2015;
731 Nelson, 2001). Given this, amplifying stories of activism could expand people's menu of
732 narrative resources to choose from, thereby potentially opening up possible selves and
733 enabling a highly multifaceted identity. In many ways then, this work and suggested
734 practical applications that follow embraces the call for what Gergen (2015) termed *future*
735 *forming research*. Here the aim is not to simply "illuminate existing problems in society,
736 but to devise practices that can achieve better or more viable outcomes" (p. 14). Reversing
737 the traditional claim that science is just about what *is*, Gergen proposes that research as
738 future forming attempts to promote 'what *might* or *ought* to be'. Given the assumptions
739 many people in this study held, the harm to wellbeing following retirement, and
740 suggestions from retired athletes themselves that activist political identities could be
741 promoted more, then showing through stories what might be if certain identities are
742 constructed or rejected seems worthwhile to pursue and investigate further.

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