"I think I became a swimmer rather than just someone with a disability swimming up and down:" Paralympic athletes perceptions of self and identity development

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**ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to explore the role of swimming on Paralympic athletes’ perceptions of self and identity development.

**Method:** A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was taken. During semi-structured interviews, five Paralympic swimmers (aged 20–24 years) were asked questions about their swimming career, perceptions of self, integration, and impairment. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Results:** An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis yielded three superordinate themes: (a) “One of the crowd”; none of the participants viewed themselves as disabled, nor as supercrips; these perceptions stemmed from family-, school-, and swimming-related experiences, (b) “Becoming me”; participation in swimming facilitated self- and social-acceptance, and identity development, and c) “A badge of honor”; swimming presented opportunity to present and reinforce a positive identity.

**Conclusions:** Swimming experiences enabled the participants to enhance personal and social identities, integrate through pro-social mechanisms, and to develop a career path following retirement from competition.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR REHABILITATION**

- Offering equal sporting opportunities for people with/without physical disability can help facilitate social integration and act as a buffer against stigmatization.
- Our research suggests that participation in sport had afforded the participants a heightened sense of self-concept, independence, ability and corresponding pride.
- When working with individuals with physical disabilities, rehabilitation professionals could utilize sport as a means of increasing an individual’s feelings of independence, confidence and normalization.
- As such, part of rehabilitation should be to ensure opportunities for sport participation for people with physical disability are available for people of all ages.

**Introduction**

Identity, typically considered as sets of meanings applied to the self in a social role or situation,\cite{1} is said to represent an individual’s self-understanding, self-objectification, and/or integration of information about the self.\cite{2} It has also been proposed that identity is the organizational process that links how people act and behave to their social world.\cite{3} Identity as a concept is also used in various ways (such as exploring the salience of particular identities) to highlight different facets of human self-definition,\cite{4–6} and as such, has also become a prolific, and contested, topic of research.\cite{4}

Within sport, researchers have generally adopted a dispositional approach to identity, and have explored a range of affective, cognitive, behavioral, and personality correlates of domain-specific self-identity.\cite{7} One particular type of domain-specific identity that has increasing research interest is “athletic identity.”\cite{8,9} Athletic identity (i.e., a dispositional perspective to identity)\cite{10} has been considered as the extent to which individuals identify with the role of an athlete. Athletic identity is considered to be both a cognitive structure (schema) and a social role,\cite{9} whereby it consist of (a) a cognitive structure that affords clarification of information, coping across different situations, and influences behavior, and (b) individual’s perceptions of others and of social roles\cite{11} assigned to the identity. In other words, individuals might make inferences regarding perceptions of their commitment to an activity, their ability to engage in the activity,\cite{12} and a commitment to ideological and occupational options most consistent with their needs, values, skills, and interests.\cite{13}

Typically, athletic identity is considered as being pervasive, and as creating positive impressions regardless of sex, age, or activity level and “able-bodiedness.”\cite{14–16} An individual may describe oneself through multiple identities represented by specific self-attributes (e.g., I am athletic) or specific social roles (e.g., I am a cyclist; I am a swimmer).\cite{17} These multiple possible identities are typically organized in a “salience hierarchy” whereby the more important identities receive greater investment of time and effort in order to ensure enactment\cite{17} of those identities. How athletic identity is constructed within populations of athletes with disabilities is still relatively unknown. Equally, research investigating the influence of sport on disabled athletes sense of self and identity development is limited.

What is known, is that sport as a domain has been identified as a venue that can facilitate opportunity for favorable...
self-perceptions to develop among individuals with disabilities. [18–20] To date, research has demonstrated positive correlations between athletic identity and positive perceptions of physical ability amongst children with visual impairment,[21] equally strong athletic identity existed between athletes with disability when compared to those without a disability,[22] and confirmed that athletes with disabilities strongly considered themselves as athletes, and have many sport-related goals as well as a strong desire to achieve these goals.[23]

However, researchers have urged that more exploration be conducted with regard to fully understanding the social-psychological characteristics of athletes with disability.[24] Indeed, disabled athletes have been under-represented in sport psychology research, with a focus only appearing within the past 10–20 years. [25] Moreover, research focusing specifically on athletes with congenital disability is rare. The authors were able to trace only one paper [26] exclusively focused on athletes living with congenital disability, highlighting a significant gap in the literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the role of swimming on Paralympic athletes’ with congenital disability sense of self and identity development. Specifically, the exploratory research question was: How did swimming influence identity development and maintenance?

Method

Participants

Following institutional ethical approval participants were purposively sampled. Details of the study were made available, and subsequently five swimmers (male \( n = 2 \); age \( 20.5 \pm 3.5 \) years; female \( n = 3 \); age \( 24.3 \pm 6.7 \) years) consented to participate. All participants lived with a congenital physical disability, and had been categorized into particular swim events via the International Paralympic Committee Classification Code 2007, within groups S1–S10 (swimmers with a functional physical disability e.g., amputees, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injury). All participants had represented Great Britain at the London 2012 Paralympic Games. References to particular disability locations, and competition class, were removed from the study to protect participants’ anonymity. Pseudonyms were allocated to further protect the anonymity of participants.

Interpretative framework

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis IPA [27] was used as the analytical framework to facilitate understanding of personal accounts of particular events and topics; i.e., lived experience.[26] IPA researchers assume a connection exists between individuals’ accounts, cognitions, and physical states that interpretation of accounts can yield.[27] IPA is founded upon phenomenology and symbolic interactionism.[27] That is, IPA allows researchers to explore how individuals experience, and thus make sense of, their personal and social worlds. Thus, the aim of IPA is to understand lived experience, rather than the aim of producing objective accounts of the topic under investigation.[29] IPA is also considered to be a co-constitutive process [29] in that, whilst it aims to explore a participant’s view of the world, it also incorporates an “insider’s” perspective of the topic under investigation.[30] Therefore, the researcher’s own interpretation of meanings elicited within analyses is central to an IPA.[31] Whilst participants are attempting to understand their world, the researcher is attempting to understand the participant’s world.[28] Therefore, whilst the intention is to get as close as possible to the participant’s life world, it is acknowledged that this cannot be achieved either directly, or completely. Similarly for symbolic-interactionists, the meanings which individuals ascribe to events are of central concern, but it is again acknowledged that those meanings are only obtained through a process of social engagement, and a process of interpretation.[27] Hence, to a large extent, interpretation is dependent upon a researcher’s own perceptions of a participant’s life world.[28,29,32]

Analysis

The focus of analysis was upon the meanings participants ascribed to topics,[34] and therefore upon developing thick description [35] regarding how the participants thought about, and dealt with, complex issues.[27] Each transcript was analyzed following detailed guidelines.[27,28,36,37] Transcripts were transferred to the middle of a three-column table, and were read several times to increase familiarity. Notes were made in the right-hand column regarding issues that seemed interesting or significant. Analysis guidelines [28] suggested noting associations, repetitions, contradictions, connections between participants’ speech, and the use of language. Furthermore, the guidelines suggested making preliminary interpretations, and noting initial theme titles that reflect the emerging essence of topics in the left-hand column of the table. Emergent themes were then clustered according to apparent connections, and related back to transcripts to check the fit with the participants’ accounts. This resulted in development of a set of super-ordinate and sub-themes. This process was completed for each transcript to afford contextually interpretative analyses,[28] and resulted in a master list of themes being produced for each transcript with each list then being compared to others. New, and repeated, themes were thereby identified within each account that had an alternative meaning for participants. These processes continued iteratively, and were combined with the writing-up process [27] thereby enabling movement from a descriptive thematic analysis to a contextually interpretative reading of each case.[28] The data from the interviews offered particularly rich description; therefore in order to select quotes for inclusion, the notion of “searching for gems” [38] was used. Smith [38] describes “shining,” “suggestive,” and “secret” gems as being utterances which present significance disproportionate to their size.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of qualitative research might be judged by its credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability.[39] For example, an audit trail was maintained relating to the procedures and data analysis allowing the coherency, confirmability,
credibility and dependency of argument to be examined.[39] Adding further to the credibility of the study was the saturation of data evident during analysis. Interpretation of the data was conducted by all authors resulting in reinterpretation of the links between several themes. Also, participants were sent drafts of these interpretations for comment with respect to whether these fairly and accurately represented their perspectives and practices.

Attending to the researcher’s presence

Reflexivity has become increasingly associated with qualitative research as a means of accounting for the researcher’s presence in qualitative research.[40] Personal, and epistemological, reflexivity have been described as introspection whereby researchers explore the impact of their own experience and understanding in interpreting the phenomena under investigation.[41] Accordingly, a process of self-dialogue and discovery was undertaken based upon our reflections, thought processes, and intuitions via reflexive diaries and discussion.

Results and discussion

This section presents, and discusses, the key elements of three related themes which emerged from the data. These were: (a) one of the crowd, (b) becoming me, and (c) a badge of honor. Each theme is illustrated by verbatim extracts from the interviews.

One of the crowd

Participants described experiences, linked to swimming, which seemed to depict processes of normalization whilst growing-up: “my mum was a swimmer, and my brother and I started lessons, just like any other child” (Christy; living with Cerebral Palsy). There was frequent comparison of their childhood to a stereotypical social reality, thereby positioning swimming as an everyday component of growing-up. Swimming had been the expected thing to do. This lends support to previous research[42] which indicates that environmental and family demographics are more significant determinants of participation than the characteristics of disabled individuals themselves. Vince (living with Osteogenesis Imperfecta) had “completed that bit” in order to please his parents, and also explained that swimming had been a rational choice of activity: “The doctor said to keep fit this is a good idea sort of thing, non-competitive swimming provided an arena in which to objectively gauge his-self. In contrast, Tony commented on others (non-swimmers) with the same disability (as his own) who did not use their limbs, and consequently experienced further disability and pain.

The participants described a watershed, during early teenage years, following which they began to train and compete seriously. For Anne (living with a missing limb) this watershed signaled the end of an existential quest and the emergence of a tangible sense of belonging in, and contribution to, the world: “As I got into swimming more and more, I felt like I had a place more and more” (Anne). Perceptions of integration often stemmed from attendance at mainstream schools where experiences had generally seemed positive. However, owing to a lack of specialist facilities integration had been the only option. Tony’s reflexive account highlighted “enforced” integration/denial of opportunity in swimming: “Even now I’m just doing public swimming, and it’s a case of because I know what I’m doing with swimming, I just get in and everyone’s just like well yeah, I can swim kind of thing thank you” (Tony).

Tony’s circumstances (living with a missing limb) however seemed beneficial in that focus was largely upon his swimming behavior, as opposed to embodied experiences, ensuring that his athletic identity and biography remained intact.[46] Self-identity might rest upon what people are actually able to do,[4] and not how they do it. As such, “identity is disembodied.”[4] Certainly, Tony was keen to prove potential stereotypical judgements as unwarranted, and (as with Vince) to reject notions of difference on the basis of functional capability and not physical difference:

You get to know the regulars, or they got to know me to the point where they would always sort of say hello and stuff, and that was really positive, so I was known as the swimmer and not that kid with the disability. I’d always be conscious like if I went swimming that people would stare because even if it was just family fun time, people always do stare, but then, I know now, if I get into the pool and people stare, I could swim up and down and people wouldn’t stare anymore because they would realise that I can do it just as well. As soon as I get into the water I’m no different to anybody else. Once you’re in the water, then you’re in the water and just swimming. (Tony)
Disabled individuals have been described as being disqualified from full social acceptance.[47] This disqualification is perhaps evident in the lack of participation in sport wherein disabled bodies perhaps do not meet expectations of an ideal sporting body/identity; and therefore warrant lack of participation. Many individuals with disability also experience low performance expectations.[42] However, a more positive impression of disability is generated when individuals are physically active, perhaps via a judgement of utility that adds to a sense of normalization.[48,49] Tony’s pro-social approach to dealing with perceived negative reactions was supportive of this notion, and his (autonomous swimming) performance re-presented his body (to the public) as a possibility not a problem.[50] He did not require, nor seek assistance, and so considered that he did not present an anomaly nor a burden. Thus, once immersed in the water he countered a poolside “disablist socio-spatial environment,”[51] and transcended his conspicuousness and self-consciousness. Whilst swimming Tony’s disability was masked by the water thereby shifting focus from disability to competency, such distraction processes are especially powerful when people are not expected to perform well in certain activities.[52] Thus, Tony’s body had “something to teach;” his body was communicative[50] in conveying possibility. Therefore, swimming provided a means of demonstrating competence and efficiency; both of which are “self-profitable” traits linked to perceived ability.[49] The need to be self-sufficient was apparent in Michaela’s (living with cerebral palsy) account of “policing”[53] other swimmers:

I think I proved that most people with disability can fit in somewhere as long as they’re willing to work as well as everyone else is. I know we had a few people and on the way, they were like I’ve got a disability, you owe me something, and it was like no, kind of go away, you’re here to work, you’re here as a swimmer. (Michaela)

Disabled athletes consider that their commitment to sport is what defines them as an athlete, regardless of disability status.[46] However, despite proving her competency in the pool Christy spoke of challenges she experienced on joining a new club. When asked for clarification by the interviewer (“you had to persuade the coach to let you in?”) Christy replied: “Yeah because he was a little bit worried that I’d be in the way, like taking up room for his other swimmers who were much faster than me.” Stereotypes position disability in such a way that behaviors different to those ascribed by a stereotype are considered unusual. Therefore, an athletic identity is hard to attain when those with a disability do not fit the model of a “normal person” or that of a “normal athlete.”[54,55] Whilst Michaela described striving to achieve her best as a swimmer, this did not appear to be a compensatory strategy. Nor, as reported by Berger[56] with regard to wheelchair basketball players, did she wish to be viewed as a “supercrip”[57]: “At the end of the day, we’re still doing the same things and we still all just want the same things” (Michaela).

In summary, the participants’ accounts highlighted the importance of swimming with regard to facilitating social and self-acceptance, and a sense of identity. Similar to previous research[4] their life-course was depicted as being no different to that of other people, as having extended far beyond medical model notions of disability, and as having led to an ongoing enhancement of quality of life.

**Becoming me**

The notion that living with congenital disability is easier as opposed to living with acquired disability is a myth.[58] Certainly most of the participants described existential challenges akin to those described by individuals with acquired disability. For example, Michaela spoke of difficult on-going self-rationlisation in order to find an acceptable explanation for her circumstance:

In childhood and early teenage years, I struggled to realise what disability meant, partly because I didn’t want to accept it and didn’t want to be different to my brother and sister and friends, but actually, it got to a point where I couldn’t keep up with them any longer, and thought hang on a minute, who am I? I was fortunate, I had a couple of really good physios and a really good consultant that said if you don’t accept it now, you’re not going to be able to do anything later on, that’s part of the reason I use a wheelchair, because if I don’t preserve the mobility I’ve got now, I’m not going to have anything when I’m older. (Michaela)

Michaela was aware of unavoidable progressive physical decline and restriction, and her difference precipitated an existential search for her self. Her account of early life experiences seemed to epitomize a future “feared self,”[59] and a discernible causality for her disability was unavailable which highlighted an inability to make sense of circumstances. However, despite the daunting prospect of using a wheelchair doing so had afforded greater predictability[60] and independence, facilitated opportunities for “learning who I am myself,” and thus offered greater self-congruence through comparison of past, present, and possible future selves. Far from presenting a pessimistic, and disabling, prognosis of future functionality her on-going use of the chair appeared to offer an optimistic alternative. As reported in other research, Michaela had become “en-wheeled” and subsequently “newly abled.”[61]

Anne (living with a missing limb) also described early difficulties in understanding her disability, and her account resonated with rejection and disassociation:

There wasn’t any reason for it, doctors didn’t know. When I was younger, I was embarrassed and I didn’t like to be different. I felt people watch me and kids would be like ah mum look she’s got one arm. I’ve had an operation, I thought I looked cuter, but that is the only disability I have, like it didn’t affect any other areas. (Anne)

Although still uncertain as to why “it” had happened to her and despite her early pre-occupation with, and dislike of, her appearance, Anne had felt able to exert some level of influence. Manipulation via surgery had facilitated a sense of adjustment, and presented opportunity for compromise in terms of achieving a more acceptable appearance and sense of self. Yet, an element of incongruence, sensitivity, and vulnerability still remained:

When I first went to boarding school, only the swimmers for the first six weeks realised I was missing an arm because I’d wear my prosthesis often that no-one knew, and then when the rumour went round, people were like she’s missing an arm, oh my god, I had a bit of an issue with the maths teacher once who was asking me why I wasn’t using my arm, I was like I don’t have one, and I took my arm off. (Anne)

Anne’s attempts to remain inconspicuous (and pass as “normal”) had failed through no fault of her own, and being “discovered” had seemed uncomfortable. In contrast to other participants, Anne’s sense of self appeared to be dominated largely by the perceptions she believed others (outside of swimming) had of her at that time. In contrast to the other participants, Anne had attempted to comply with what she believed others considered as normal; and account for something that was “missing.” However, the prosthesis had not functioned in the manner she had hoped, and instead had become a troublesome encumbrance upon which much of her self-concept had been based. This “enforced” inipitude adds to previous research wherein participants report physical changes as leading to a sense of ineptitude.[46] Attempting to “beat” or “fight” disability might lead to an inability to
reembody the self. However, for Anne, the abandonment of the prosthetic, and her involvement in swimming, had facilitated a positive change in her self-perception:

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. (Anne)

This unaccustomed norm of visible disability appeared to have offered comfort, opportunity for adjustment, and an improved body-self relationship. In contrast to “dys-appearance” of the body[62] due to over-emphasis upon an impairment, Anne’s body had “re-appeared.” Abandonment of the prosthetic had seemed an empowering release, and had afforded repair and reintegration of the self. Through swimming, and positive reinforcement from significant others, Anne seemed to have resisted a debilitating sense of difference and instead had achieved a desired validation. Vince also described swimming as pivotal in the understanding and acceptance of his current self: “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” (Vince). Disabled individuals often have a limited range of identities to choose from because of societal labels and ascriptions, and whilst identity exists at personal and societal levels it impacts most when it is self-defined as an individual experience.[63] Understanding disability therefore appeared to relate not only to their physical nature but also to the establishment of an acceptable and worthwhile place in the world. Swimming appeared to have presented opportunity for definition, and in some cases repair and redefinition, of the self. It appeared that the participants had been able to reclaim their body from the rights of public scrutiny and judgement.[64] Swimming had provided a benchmark which had facilitated development of a holistic self-concept and transcendence of negative stereotypical beliefs (including their own) regarding disability.

The participants’ self-acceptance had also involved self-presentation of emotional accounts in a positive manner: “I kind of quite like having big shoulders because it shows that I’ve worked hard at my sport and like, this is what I’ve got to show for it” (Christy). Tony’s account illustrated a transformative process, and gradual ownership of an identity that involved him mutually in physical, psychological, and social terms:

I think I became a swimmer rather than just someone with a disability swimming up and down. So I’d say someone that could achieve something, because I was doing sort of the same training and I had the same mentality as some of the able-bodied swimming, you know you put the hours in, I was a swimmer. It wasn’t because I was disabled that I was achieving, it was because I was a swimmer and I had put that work in. (Tony)

Individuals who have accepted and integrated an acquired disability are said to focus predominantly on present behavior and goals, competition, and performance as opposed to dwelling on a loss of self.[46] This focus was also evident amongst the current participants, and appeared to facilitate the development and maintenance of an athletic identity. Michaela’s emotional account served to illustrate change in her self-worth through swimming, and to depict the disavowal of an unassuming self that appeared to offer little hope:

I was a very shy and quiet little girl who was just, I don’t know, I was sort of participating in swimming, I’d try and pass everything at school and was involved with stuff. But I wouldn’t say I was actually achieving in anything particularly, sort of the average student, I was always tired trying to keep up with all my friends so it was that little bit harder to do everything so, I think when I started achieving stuff, that changed and I changed, I became a lot more confident, I could speak for myself. (Michaela)

As a child Michaela had considered herself as having been “alright; if anyone asked.” From being unassuming and not wanting, or feeling worthy of, attention Michaela described how her confidence had blossomed. Similarly to participants in previous research[54] sport had enabled Michaela to “come out of her shell.” Whilst only able to speculate on a life without swimming there was consensus amongst the participants regarding the debt owed: “I don’t know what I would have achieved without it, because having that positive self-perception of myself meant that I’ve realized I can do other things” (Christy).

In summary, a disabled body and impairment were not defining features in an emergent sense of self. The participants appeared to have experienced an on-going discovery and maintenance of the self, as opposed to a singular moment of “rebirth” or “remaking” the self.[65] Thus, the current self was not limited by a desire to resurrect a previous self.

A badge of honor

The participants described a noticeable change in public attitude towards disability following media coverage of the London 2012 Paralympic Games which they perceived as having showcased disability sport. For Tony, disability appeared to have since become a badge of honor:

It almost makes having one arm an amazing thing. It’s got a use in a way, it provides me with a career, it’s not just like oh missing a limb, that’s it. Someone told me the other day that they had a little one who was just walking down the street and saw another disabled person in the street, and I think their prosthetic leg was on show, and they said look Mum it’s a Paralympian, so they instantly made that connection that actually, it’s not a disabled person but it’s a Paralympian, that they can do something great, so that’s a really good shift I think, as long as the parents respond to that and don’t keep telling the child don’t look at them or whatever. (Tony)

It has been argued that disability might represent a badge of pride,[66] and unanimity. This appeared to be the case for the participants and, far from distancing themselves from a disability identity, they appeared to gravitate toward an athletic identity and its associated characteristics (whilst not wanting to be viewed as “supercrips”). Thus, in contrast to previous research,[4] the participants indirectly “subscribed” to disability in a manner that they found empowering. Tony’s comment supports previous research that an athletic stereotype might reverse prevailing negative perceptions of disabled individuals[67] as the apparent admiration perhaps indicates the presence of positive competency-based perceptions.[49,67] Tony continued to describe how being part of a select sub-culture helped to normalize his appearance, and increase his sense of pride:

Your disability is pretty visible in swimming, but I kind of learnt to be proud of it, and when there’s a whole eight of you that have got the same disability standing behind the block, people aren’t just watching you. If I was in town, people notice, but when there’s eight of you, they don’t notice, they see you as a whole group, so when I race, I’m kind of part of a group not an individual. (Tony)

Thus, benefits appeared to arise from both a demarcation of the individual and the group. Being exposed within such an environment with similar others is something that has been proposed as an intervention for “normalization” [14] wherein a group-identity is formulated which leads to the establishment of a sense of belonging. Despite the multifaceted nature of disability[68] many disabled individuals still feel a sense of commonality with each
other which produces what is commonly called “disability culture.” [69] This protective culture, borne out of common experience,[70] assumes a common voice to address societal barriers.[71]

Anne took pride in considering that her participation in the Paralympics had contributed to changes in media and public perception, and a possible shift from viewing the participants as legitimate athletes and (as with Tony) not as “supercrps:”[72]

I thought that was one thing the Paralympics achieved this time round in London was that people realised it wasn’t a Paralympic games, it was just athletes doing things a different way. Swimming has given me the opportunity to represent my country on numerous times. I mean, to walk out in front of 17,000 people at this last games, all shouting for you, that just pretty much says it all. (Anne)

Success in swimming had led to an increasing visibility for the participants which afforded interaction with the “normal world” (47) Instead of hiding their disability the swimmers appeared able to present favorable holistic images of themselves which provided a catalyst for empowerment in other contexts.[73] For example, Anne described how her performance in swimming, her corresponding growth in confidence, and a strong sense of athletic identity and accomplishment had led to a career beyond competitive swimming:

Because I’ve achieved in swimming, that opened other doors, because I was known as a swimmer and not someone that needed lots of adaptations because of my disability. So, then because I’ve been able to do that, I had a better perception of myself because it’s been able to open other doors, so it’s been a sort of self-perpetuating thing. (Anne)

Similarly, in a study using a life history narrative approach, a Paralympic wheelchair tennis player described how an acquired spinal cord injury had presented a dilemma. As with the current participants, this athlete appeared to conclude that their achievements gained from playing wheelchair tennis outweighed the disadvantages of disability.[74] The current participants also seemed to believe that significant changes regarding what is required for competitive success had materialized during their swimming careers. Ironically, Vince believed that such changes had further rendered invisible particular disabled population (swimmer) population groups (e.g. those living with more severe impairment). However, he was clear in his assessment of what is required to become an elite athlete, and in his acceptance of himself as a Paralympian.

I would say certainly pre-96, there was kind of you’re doing disability sport, you can be a Paralympian, whereas now it’s blimmin hard work and the majority of Paralympians are doing it as a full time job, they’re on lottery funding. There’s certainly swimmers and cyclists that are doing the training of an able-bodied swimmer, so they’re not just doing a couple of hours a week and turning up and winning, it used to be, in the very early days, and you could do multi-sport and all the rest of it. I’d say ’96 until now, it’s completely changed, it’s more professionalised, it’s very much like the Olympics, it’s very elite. (Vince)

In summary, the participants had described perceptions of personal and societal transformation that defined tenets of a medical model of disability. Far from representing a substantial and long-term negative impact on their ability to undertake normal daily activities disability had instead facilitated a sense of ability, competence and pride.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of swimming on Paralympic athletes’ sense of self and identity. Overall, the accounts indicated that the participants did not view themselves as having lost something, as being disabled, nor as supercrps. [72] Yet, difference was not, and could not be denied both whilst growing-up, and later in the possibility of a hierarchy relating to ability and work ethic within Paralympic swimming. Similarly, the participants believed that public focus had shifted from disability to proficiency in an activity within which they had not been expected to excel. Therefore, their swimming careers have directly supported proposals within progressive models of disability (e.g., the Affirmation Model of Disability),[75] and further eroded medical discourse, by indicating that participation in swimming facilitated overall quality of life by enhancing movement capability, and instilling and maintaining an identity which provided a sense of acceptance, purpose, and pride. As a career choice swimming had also facilitated independence, the development of social networks and, for some, the establishment of a career upon retirement from competition.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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