

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Braye, Stuart, Dixon, Kevin and Gibbons, Tom (2014) 'A mockery of equality': an exploratory investigation into disabled activists' views of the Paralympic Games. *Disability & Society*, 28 (7). pp. 984-996. ISSN 0968-7599

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.748648>  
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.748648>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/43468/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

# **‘A mockery of equality’: An exploratory investigation into disabled activists’ views of the Paralympic Games.**

## **Abstract**

This article offers an exploratory analysis of the opinions of disabled activists towards the Paralympic Games. With the use of a qualitative online survey the work focuses on the perceptions of disabled individuals (n=32) who are not Paralympic athletes but are affiliated to the disability rights group, the United Kingdom Disabled People’s Council (UKDPC). Working on the premise that the views of disabled activists have been excluded from Paralympic sports discourse to date, the results illustrate a nuanced yet negative view of the Games to contrast with an existing, yet overly positive, academic narrative. Participants were particularly cynical of the portrayal and production of the Games and its Paralympic athletes as they perceived that the wider population of disabled people is misrepresented. The overwhelming perception in this preliminary analysis suggests that the Paralympic Games can be counterproductive to disability rights beyond sport.

**Keywords:** disabled activists; Paralympic movement; disability rights; disability politics; disabled people’s movement.

## **Introduction**

Within the last decade there has been a growing catalogue of Paralympic research covering a wide range of issues such as: The fairness of the classification of disabled athletes (Jones and Howe 2005); the genesis and history of the Paralympic Games (Bailey 2008); journalism and the politics of the Paralympic Movement (Howe 2008); physical education (Thomas and Smith 2009); and the consequences of doping (Brittain 2010). It would appear, then, that many topical areas relating to the Paralympic Games and to disability sport more generally are beginning to be explored via scholarly investigations. Notwithstanding this, there is a paucity of research dedicated to the Paralympic Games from the perspective of disabled activists. This appears to be an important omission given the growing magnitude of the games and the assumed positivity that it brings for disabled people per-se (Kim

2011).<sup>1</sup> After all, little is known about how the Paralympic Games are received by disabled people and the potential implications that this could bring for disability politics and disability rights, more specifically. ‘Disability politics’ is the primary concern of people who wish to bring changes to policies and practices to reverse the oppression that people face on top of having an impairment (Oliver 1996). The popularity of the Paralympics makes any resistance to disabling policies unpopular among Paralympic organisers, fans and athletes; the latter appearing as anything other than oppressed.

Of the research that exists in this area, scholar and ex-Paralympic athlete, Danielle Peers (2009) writes conceptually about the ‘disabling discourses’ of Paralympic sport.<sup>2</sup> Peers claims that, in spite of the positive rhetoric surrounding disabled sport within the mainstream media, the Paralympic Movement may potentially provide conditions where disabled athletes become ‘passive, disabled and marginal’ as well as ‘disempowered and heroic’ (Peers 2009, 655). She argues that in order to become empowered as an athlete, disabled Paralympians must first become anonymized within the Paralympic Movement. Once accepted into this framework, Peers suggests that acquiring heroic status is largely a formality (656). All one must do, she implies, is appear to be disabled; and whilst admiration of the athlete may suggest positive and endearing tones within public discourse (on the surface, at least), it has potential negative consequences for disability rights per-se (661). For example, heroic status of this type and at the individual level, Peers explains, is not a price worth paying. It offers false perceptions of empowerment in the sense that the Paralympics remains in the hands of non-disabled people who save and empower helpless disabled people (657). By consequence of this paternalistic organization, it is argued that the Paralympic Movement reproduces disabled people

as ‘tragic’ in order to reproduce itself in the image of a selfless, nurturing institution. Whilst Peers does not claim that the Paralympic Movement consciously aims to repress disabled people, it is implied that this may be one unintended consequence. These are, of course, bold claims that lack empirical evidence at this time. Hence, in what follows, this paper aims to explore those assertions made by Peers by analyzing the views of disabled activists (not athletes) that are affiliated to the United Kingdom Disabled People’s Council (UKDPC). Disabled activists were chosen because it was important to glean a political perspective of the Games from people who have an interest in disability rights beyond the confines of sport. Thus, before the data is presented a brief synopsis of early attempts by disabled activists in the UK to engage in sport policy will follow.

### **UK Disabled activists’ engagement with sport policy**

The interest of UK based disabled activists in sports policy is not an entirely new concept. For instance, in 1997, disabled activist Ian Stanton drew attention to the lack of cooperation between the Disabled People’s Movement (DPM) and sport (Stanton 1997). He called for contributions to a publication that would address this issue. Consequently four articles were published in April 1997.<sup>3</sup> Stanton stated that links between sport and the DPM should be established and furthermore announced details of a new organization intending to fulfil this brief:

A new organization controlled by disabled sportspeople – Pro Sport – has been formed and as a new member of BCODP, Pro Sport will be working hard to highlight the issue of sport and disabled people (Stanton 1997, 4).<sup>4</sup>

The Pro-Sport Forum of Disabled People, with two ex-Paralympic athletes among its 25+ members, was disbanded in 1998 when, under pressure from National Disability Sports Organizations (NDSOs) and the national 'Task Force – Disability', the English Sports Council withdrew their funding of the forum under the premise that it was unrepresentative of disabled people in sport.<sup>5</sup> The English Sports Council had set up the 'Task Force – Disability' from members of the NDSOs to advise them on all issues related to disabled people in sport. As a consequence, at their first meeting in July 1996 only four of the fourteen delegates were disabled people (Braye 1997, 12). Furthermore, referring to incidents at that time, Gradwell (1997, 6) observed that:

As recently as 12<sup>th</sup> February, 19 regional and national officers from the English Sports Council and other disability sports organizations met to discuss the way forward for disabled people in sport – none of these 19 people were disabled people.

Pro-Sport had a productive working relationship with local authorities from August 1994 to April 1998. This was partly due to the willingness of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Public Service Trade Unions (UNISON), to engage with disability rights organizations and impact local authority provision (Braye 1997; 1998). Pro-Sport also had a representative on the BCODP national council from 1997 to 1998 (see endnote 4). Thus, there is clear evidence to suggest that some organizations and individuals within the DPM have tried to influence sports policy and practice but have been unable to maintain a stake in ongoing developments. Furthermore, it is clear that the assumption by Thomas and Smith (2009, 154), that

organizations in the DPM, ‘do not generally appear interested in sport’, is actually not the case at all.

## **Methodology**

The UKDPC is the largest organization of the DPM in the UK, and as such, is a suitable organization from which to gather wider political views on disability issues. Following an email conversation with the lead author of the current paper, the CEO of UKDPC agreed to distribute the online survey via email which was subsequently sent out to all 41 member Disabled People’s Organizations (DPOs) (UKDPC 2012). The CEO was the only direct link the authors had to the UKDPC. The use of online surveys are recognized as a valuable tool for gathering empirical data (Vehovar and Lozar Manfreda 2008; Dillman 2007). The online survey was created using Bristol Online Surveys (BOS), a software tool specifically designed by academic researchers. The online survey consisted of four open-response questions asking for participants’ opinions on the following four areas which were determined in relation to key areas addressed in previous literature on disability and Paralympic sport: Firstly, the representation of disabled people in the Paralympics – this was based on non-disabled people controlling the portrayal of disabled people (Campbell and Oliver 1996; Peers 2009; Shakespeare 2000); secondly, Paralympic athletes as role models – based on the portrayal of disabled people as passive, anonymous and heroic (Peers 2009; Shakespeare 2000); thirdly, media coverage of the Paralympic Games – from the distorted media view of disabled people (Barnes 1991, 2007; Barnes and

Mercer 2011; Peers 2009; Thomas and Smith 2003); fourthly, what impact these issues might have on people's views of disability – based on the dominant view 'that disability is a tragic happening,' and the Paralympic Movement reproduces disabled people as 'tragic' (Oliver 1996, 32; Peers 2009).

The survey was made available from the beginning of January to the end of March 2011, a non-Paralympic year, when media coverage would be at a comparative minimum. Thirty-two people aged from 20 to 75 responded in total (12 male, 20 female), with between 5 and 50 years personal experience as disabled people. All respondents were members of DPOs affiliated to the UKDPC and were given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. The lead author of this paper, and our 32 participants, have over 850 years of personal experience as disabled people between them and it is from this expertise that we begin to draw new interpretations of the Paralympic Games.

The generation of key themes gleaned from the thematic analysis of answers to the open-response survey items was achieved by conducting a qualitative coding technique. Codes - also referred to as 'tags or labels for assigning units of meaning' - were developed using semi-inductive technique rather than using pre-determined categories (Miles and Huberman 1994, 56). The four key areas of the online questionnaire were also used to interpret key themes that arose from the empirical data – this is why the data analysis technique employed was semi-inductive in nature. This approach to semi-inductive qualitative coding is congruent with the suggestions made by Gratton and Jones (2010, 240) who contend that codes:

should be *valid*, that is they should accurately reflect what is being researched, they should be *mutually exclusive*, in that codes should be

distinct, with no overlap, and they should be *exhaustive*, that is all relevant data should fit into a code.

As Glaser and Strauss (1967, 5) suggest, categories or themes generated from inductive analysis of qualitative data, ‘must be meaningfully relevant to and be able to explain the behavior under study’. As such, the coding approach used partially resembled the ‘grounded’ approach originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Analysis for the current study began by manually developing a list of initial codes based upon an interpretation of the meanings extracted from the data and the authors’ understanding of previous literature in the area. This involved individual answers to questionnaire items being assigned an initial theme before being grouped into codes with similar answers. This initial coding process usually resulted in a long list of provisional codes and so it was essential to re-read the data a number of times in order to reduce the amount of codes into fewer but more comprehensive qualitative categories that were different enough from one another to be classed as separate codes, but still related to the overall research objectives (Silverman 2000). The data was eventually organized into three final themes as follows: The Paralympic Movement as misrepresenting disabled people; Perceptions of Paralympic athletes; and, Perceptions of the influence of television/media. In the following discussion each of these three areas are analyzed further.

## **Discussion of findings**

### ***Concerns with the Paralympic movement***

The expectation of representation seems to be of particular interest to our participants, though the same expectation does not appear to be placed upon Olympic



athletes by the non-disabled public. In this sense our participants identify strongly with Paralympians on the basis of impairment and as a result expect them to have the same views on issues around equality and discrimination. They were concerned that the Paralympics misrepresented what life is really like for many disabled people. They felt that the Paralympics portrays a confused and at times inaccurate message about disability and consequently it reinforces negative stereotypes. Given their apparent apathy towards the perceived implications of the Games, it is easy to see why academics such as Thomas and Smith (2009) suggest that there is a lack of interest from DPOs to involve themselves fully in sport. However, like 81% of the participants, Gordon (below) explains that while he is acutely aware and interested in sport as an avenue for furthering disability rights, it is not a priority concern:

In the world of Disabled People's Organizations most organizations are so busy delivering services such as information, advice and advocacy that sport or the importance of the Paralympics may not feature on their radar [Gordon].

This is a position that scholars of disability studies have also taken, highlighting that issues such as education, employment, health, housing and transport are key areas for equality, and thus, sport is perceived as less of a priority (Barnes 1991; Barnes and Mercer 2011; Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare 2005). Similar to findings from Kim (2011), participants in this sample appeared to be strongly resistant to the Paralympic Games and were, concerned that they may negate the efforts of DPOs. This public influence of the Games and that of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) was a cause for concern amongst 91% of our participants. For instance, Colin shared the following:

I'm afraid that the focus on elite Paralympians promotes an image of disabled people which is so far from the typical experiences of a disabled person that it is damaging to the public understanding of disability [Colin].

Colin implies that the IPC ought to have a sense of responsibility when representing disabled people on the global stage. Moreover, Colin views the Games as sitting outside his 'typical experiences' of disability including such things as struggles with pain and illness. For him the Games present an overly optimistic but unrealistic view of living as a disabled person. This view is shared by French (1994, 30) when she states that many, 'disabled people are extremely fit and healthy, but for others their impairment is associated with illness.' Pain may also be a barrier for some people's participation in elite sport; though not referring to sport specifically, French later suggests disabled individuals, 'who cope with pain as well as disability are clearly in a very different position to people who, though severely disabled, are free of pain' (31). Another of our participants, Sam, alluded to a similar point conceding that, 'the Paralympics seems to ignore a section of people with long term illness and disability', he insisted, 'this paints an inaccurate picture.' Furthermore, in Sam's view, the 'Paralympic committee should consider widening or altering the categories to allow for a greater representation of disabled competitors.' Sam's understanding of impairments and disability rights issues, leads him to apply this to the Paralympics. Consequently, participants with a thorough understanding of the politics of the DPM perceive that the Paralympic Games misrepresent disabled people. This view of misrepresentation has led our participants to question the Paralympic Games in terms of its potential to be counter-productive for disabled people at large. For instance, Petra's comment below is indicative of the kinds of views held by 94% of the UKDPC members in this sample:

I actually feel publicizing such events is an insult when there are other disabled people fighting to gain the care they need and the respite they deserve. To be honest I think the money spent on the Paralympics would be better spent on the amazing people who juggle disability and children often alone with little or no credit and feeling socially isolated [Petra].

The fact that the Paralympic Games has been described (above) as an insult to some disabled people offers a different perspective to a subject area that is often met with praise through public discourse (Bailey 2008; Brittain 2010; Howe 2008; Legg and Steadward 2011; Thomas and Smith 2009), Petra continues:

Let's tell it how it is! Paralympic opportunities are dependent upon disabled people having the right type of impairment to fit into a classification for competition and that, I'm afraid leaves the majority of disabled people unrepresented by the Games [Petra].

It appears that the majority of our participants were negative towards Paralympic athletes for not being 'politicized' for instance, Olive stated, 'Paralympic athletes often do not appear to have the same issues as disabled people outside of sport'. Contrary to this finding, 34% of our participants were able to appreciate the achievements of athletes, though this was overshadowed by an understanding of wider issues for disabled people. For example, Maggie stated:

I don't think seeing amazing achievements by disabled athletes demonstrates in any way the day to day struggles of living as a disabled person, or makes people think about such things as accessibility etc. [Maggie].

The reflexive and critical nature of the participants represented here leads them to perceive the Paralympics in negative terms to the point where they see it as counter-

productive to equality issues. As well as broad concerns with the Paralympic Movement as a whole, participants also held specific perceptions of disabled athletes.

### *Perceptions of Paralympic athletes*

Given the emphasis placed on the misrepresentation of disabled people by the Paralympic Movement in the previous section, it was unsurprising to note the presence of underlying negative perceptions of Paralympic athletes more generally. There were occasions where participants were inspired by the achievements of Paralympic athletes, for instance Carolyn observes that they have succeeded, ‘in spite of inequality, less support and less sponsorship’, however, 59% of the comments on celebrated Paralympic athletes were particularly cynical, for example:

If being a Paralympic athlete really means something today then they need to have courage and speak up while they have the chance. Tanni Grey-Thompson, made it to the House of Lords, but that’s a very privileged position for only one person who appears not to care or understand the reality of disablement [Fred].

Perhaps our participants perceive and resist a lack of power on their own part in contrast to the relative success of the Paralympic athletes who may want to use sport to change public attitudes towards disabled people. It is difficult to pinpoint all of the reasons why this apparent animosity exists, but two motives recurred in 50% of our participant’s responses:

Rubbish, for me they are not role models. They are very blessed to have been given an opportunity in life to use the ability they have. However most

disabled people do not have opportunities and their human rights are violated daily [Jenny].

Firstly, Jenny infers that athletes do not appreciate or perhaps experience the violation of their human rights in the sense that they are identified principally as athletes and then as disabled people. Secondly, attitudes of disillusionment towards Paralympic athletes suggests our participants saw them as too far removed from what Jenny (above) considers to be ‘typical’ disabled people, and thus, she explains, ‘there is no real connection to say that I am like them, no likeness and therefore certainly no inspiration for people like me’.

There is a paradox here; our participants are in a movement resisting subjugation and they see the Paralympics as somehow negating their efforts through misrepresentation and *ipso facto* they appear to see Paralympic athletes as colluding with the non-disabled establishment. Our participants appeared to be adopting a superior attitude towards Paralympic athletes by demonstrating their understanding of disability politics. This is shown in the responses they made to the notion that disabled athletes are role models:

I am a disabled woman interested in sport and I do not know of one disabled athlete who has made a difference in the lives of the people who are disabled in my circle of disabled friends [Esther].

Of our participants, 34% dismissed the possibility of Paralympic athletes contributing to emancipation for disabled people in quite negative terms, as Dave stated:

When I think of Mexico 1968 and the black power salute I just wish a Paralympic athlete or two would do something similar, they are all disabled for goodness sake, don't they realize what's happening in the real world? [Dave].

The idea of Paralympic athletes protesting to highlight inequality, however, is not entirely new. Peers (2009) refers to two incidents where Paralympic athletes have protested, one in Barcelona 1992 to do with a rule change in sport and the other in Atlanta 1996 to do with the standard of accommodation. In both cases this was in response to direct discrimination against the athletes themselves within a Games context and nothing to do with the wider issues of discrimination to which our participants are referring. Another of our participants shared:

Paralympic athletes are just disabled people like the rest of us, no better and no different, when they realize that and see just how irrelevant the Paralympics is to disabled people collectively then they can make a difference [Ruth].

In accordance with 34% of our participants, Ruth differentiates between Paralympic athletes and other disabled people. The IPC's official website lists four key aims, the fourth of which is to, 'Touch the heart of all people for a more equitable society' (IPC 2012). Though not referring to this statement explicitly our participants seemed to see little link between athletes and equality. Tina's view was typical among 34% of respondents: 'unless the athlete is truly aware of real life issues and real life for most disabled people, I am sorry but they have little real use to us.' Naomi concurred with this, but was less diplomatic, offering a highly emotive account:

Yeah, go celebrity go! Get yourself some money for advertisements etc. maybe you can get out of the pit of poverty that unfortunately a lot of disabled people find themselves in [Naomi].

This statement resonates with the work of Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare (2005) emphasizing as they do, the point that being a disabled person does not mean that one is necessarily aware of wider disability issues. According to 34% of our participants this was certainly the case with Paralympic celebrity athletes. For instance Alan perceived Paralympic athletes to be young and naïve, living outside of wider disability issues:

Seeing a disabled athlete cry as their national anthem plays whilst ignorant of other disabled people denied their most basic human rights, even life itself in many instances makes a mockery of equality, but perhaps they don't know that, not yet anyway [Alan].

By saying 'not yet anyway' Alan is perhaps inferring that after the Paralympics most athletes seem to go back to relative obscurity as disabled people in society. Hence, Paralympic athletes and UKDPC members are two clearly distinct groups of disabled people, in the views of our participants at least. It would appear that without seeming to have engaged Paralympic athletes in any kind of dialogue our participants conclude that Paralympic athletes negate the efforts of the DPM. Our participants were also particularly cynical about the role the media plays in the Paralympic Games.

***Perceptions of the influence of television / media***

Apart from some visually impaired competitors who need sighted guides, the Paralympics is exclusively for disabled people. There are sports designed specifically for disabled people with certain types of impairments. For instance, wheelchair rugby was designed for people with more severe impairments than those that play wheelchair basketball. In addition, other sports such as Boccia, some athletic field events and some swimming events have athletes with the most severe impairments. The technology of wheelchairs and prosthetics also has a major impact on the type of events possible and the athlete's ability to adapt to these has an impact upon competitive outcomes. For example, the combination of an athlete's impairment, sports event and technological aid for a competition to be possible, such as leg amputee sprinters, produces a unique spectacle and the advent of the 'cyborg' athlete (Howe 2008, 126). In addition the merging of differently impaired athletes in various events is not necessarily an exact science and still creates doubts in the minds of spectators which are evident in the analysis which follows.

Of our participants, 78% alluded to a causal link between how they are viewed generally and the media portrayal of Paralympic athletes. In this respect television was deemed to play a key role. Disabled activists with a limited interest in sport cannot escape the media coverage of the Paralympics with its obvious disability focus. This was indicated by 50% of our participants. For example, George stated:

The Paralympics is all about competing, winning and being successful: Who wants to be asked to watch heavy stuff? Generally, we, the public, are not that interested in the problems of disability in society, not until it affects us directly, and we assume it won't. The media likes heartbreaking stories, but they convey them so pathetically that it's bad telly [George].



George (above) suggests that television is irresponsible in its coverage of the Paralympics and his views concur with Peers' (2009) conclusion that Paralympic discourse renders disabled people as passive and helpless. Furthermore, the advancement of the Paralympic Movement has resulted in the Games being covered extensively by the world's media (Howe 2008), and it is the influence of this advancement that seemed to evoke a strong response from 31% of our participants who identified specific stereotypes as an issue. For instance, Harry suggested:

I do not understand the categories of the competitors and I don't think many people do. If I do not understand the categories as they are portrayed in the media, how will non-disabled people get it? The media are not particularly interested in portraying that message. They are more bothered about promoting the supercrip model as usual. Heroic stories of super cripples seem more important than real everyday issues [Harry].

Again, we see our participants' statements resonating with Peers' (2009) view that disabled people are portrayed as heroic and tragic simultaneously. In this sense the power of the 'supercrip' and 'triumph over tragedy' stories convey the Paralympics to a mass audience at the expense of less glamorous narratives associated with typical experiences of disability (Hardin and Hardin 2004; Shakespeare 2000, 6). Part of this narrative is what Ellis (2009, 24) referred to as the 'super cripple paradigm'. Thus the reality of disability is replaced by a confused fictional ontology which is reinforced by Paralympic imagery and narrative. Even among those for whom disability is a personal experience the classifications are unclear. In many Paralympic events athletes are placed together on the basis of functional similarities even though their impairments may be different (Howe and Jones 2006). The failure

to explain how this is meant to lead to fair competition negates the enjoyment of the games, as Liam suggests:

The Paralympic Games are confusing and no real attempt is made to explain the challenges posed by different impairments and why this leads to so many different variations of the event [Liam].

The seriousness of the Paralympics according to 31% of our participants is undermined by the lack of explanation and a perceived condescending tone. Faith stated:

Some of the TV coverage of the Paralympics is good but still has a feel of ‘oh isn’t it a shame, look at the poor cripple’ it just makes non-disabled people see disabled people as ‘brave’ or ‘courageous’ [Faith].

These comments highlight the issue that in the media coverage of Paralympic sport there is a disproportionate emphasis around impairment compared to sporting achievement (Thomas and Smith 2003). For some of our participants the sport and impairment relationship is problematic when Paralympic athletes are represented through the eyes of the media in such a way. Luke’s view was typical of 37% of our participants: ‘The media work with the Paralympic organizers and the disability sports organizations who love to speak on our behalf’. This fits with Peers’ (2009) view that Paralympic athletes are made anonymous, and reinforces the long held view of disabled activists that attitudes towards disabled people are ‘paternal’ (Coleridge 1993; Davis 1994). Much of the Paralympic coverage is focused on the patronizing language around disablement (Smith and Thomas 2005; Thomas and

Smith 2003). Moreover the paternalistic nature of the Paralympics was mentioned by our participants in a wider context. 28% inferred that the weakness of the Paralympic Games may be its proximity to the Olympics:

The relentless effort to market disabled athletes alongside Olympic ones has backfired in my opinion. It magnifies differences rather than erode them, like a child continually compared to his cleverer elder sibling always disappoints regardless of doing his best [Tony].

Gilbert and Schantz (2008, 8) ask whether the Paralympic Games produces ‘empowerment or side show?’ and this perspective resonates with one participant, James who suggested that the, ‘Paralympic Games lives in the shadow of its big brother mainly because it is a side show of zero significance’. The blanket coverage of the Olympics, demonstrates to television viewers the essence of elite sport. What follows in the Paralympic television show, because of its differences rather than its similarities, contradicts the claim that what is being viewed is elite sport. Congruent with this, Tännsjö (1998, 30) when referring to the Paralympics in comparison to the Olympic Games makes the following point:

We do not take those who perform in handicap competitions seriously. We encourage them to go on but only in order that they develop into something less worthy of our contempt. In any case, if we are forced to choose, what we, the vast majority of us, want to watch, are competitions involving the *absolute elite*, not the Olympics for handicapped people.

Finally, the position of the Paralympics following the hype of the Olympics lends itself to a tired response from the media who have given everything to the main event so to speak. This is documented by Golden’s (2003, 6) research on sports reporters’

generally negative views of the Paralympics immediately following the Olympic Games with one stating, 'We're Olympic'd out. We're tired. Our readers are tired'. If reporters lack the will to cover the Paralympics in positive terms then it is likely that they will revert to the more recognized paternal narratives of disability. The television distribution of the Paralympics around the globe may have the approval of the IPC, but the disabled activists in this sample are dissatisfied with the representation. Perhaps a concern of our participants is that they perceive that the Paralympic Movement has easily wrestled the ideology of equality and emancipation of disabled people out of their grip. In other words, the Paralympic Movement has overshadowed the DPM by becoming the accepted voice for disability equality and softened or changed its ontology.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to introduce and analyze the previously unexplored perspective of the Paralympic Games among disabled activists in the UK. The main goal was to highlight the potential value that the views of UKDPC members could bring to future academic research, considering that the current impact of the Paralympic Games on the inclusion of disabled people in wider society remains largely unclear (Smith and Thomas 2005). We also aimed to add empirical data to Peers' (2009) analysis of existing Paralympic literature and to contribute to general disability studies beyond sport. Though Kim's (2011) research highlights that disabled activists' resistance to the Paralympic Games is nothing new, analysis of UK based disabled activists' views has not specifically been undertaken before. The views expressed represent a particular perspective worthy of consideration. In

practice the sporting and political elements of disability appear not to meet at any level and operate in isolation. Our participants' overtly negative view of the Paralympics and its athletes clearly demonstrates a particular DPM stance that is dismissive of Paralympic sport as a vehicle for disability equality.

Participants have revealed that the portrayal of equality in the Paralympics is an apparent misnomer when compared with the lives of ordinary disabled people. With this disparity in mind, the surprisingly negative and at times vitriolic comments from participants towards Paralympic athletes suggests that in the view of this small sample of UKDPC members at least, the Paralympic Games is not successful in achieving disability equality in reality. Thus, findings support Peers' (2009) conclusion that Paralympic athletes are passive, heroic, anonymous, helpless and tragic. This paper also goes some way towards merging the relatively recent discourse of the Paralympic Movement with a sample of the views that underpin its established political counterpart, the DPM. Campbell and Oliver (1996) argued that disabled people are not a homogenous group operating as one movement and our participants' views support this opinion. As an overarching finding the perceived misrepresentation of disabled people by the Paralympic Games is the most significant. Moreover, Paralympic athletes may legitimately view sport as their focus for equality and ignore the politicized views of the UKDPC members represented here.

Finally, similar to the South Korean and Chinese Governments in 1988 and 2008, we suggest that the UK Government in 2012 is likely to use the Paralympics to prove that equality for disabled people in wider UK society is being achieved (Kim 2011). **Similar to South Korea and China, UK disabled activists resisted the notion of**

equality during the 2012 Games. They achieved significant media attention by highlighting the IPC's ten year association with the sponsor Atos who the UK Government have awarded £3.1 billion to assess disabled people's fitness for work. The DPM is strongly resisting the integrity of the system, criticizing Atos' misconduct and the UK Government's removal of vulnerable disabled people's benefits (Lakhani 2012). Our small sample size is an obvious limitation within this study and the views of more participants from the wider DPM ought to be considered to examine the validity of our findings. A more specific focus on the views of UK based disabled activists on the London 2012 Paralympics would be a useful continuation of this research. Additional research to explore the intersectionality between the disability rights groups and the IPC would be interesting, however the ability to embrace 'politics' as a civil rights issue beyond the confines of sport may be too much to ask for the IPC. Research using narratives to analyze the intersectionality of individual Paralympians and their non-sporting endeavors would also provide useful information. For instance, in London 2012 Hannah Cockroft won the T34 100m and 200m for wheelchair users, but her two gold medals cannot hide the fact that she still faces the same barriers to public transport as any other wheelchair user.

### **Acknowledgements**

The researchers would like to thank the UKDPC CEO for distributing our online survey. We would also like to thank the 32 people who took the time to complete our online survey.

## Notes

1. Throughout this paper the term 'disabled people' will be used as it is the preferred term of the UKDPC.
2. The two books reviewed by Danielle Peers are: Bailey, S. 2008. *Athlete first: A history of the Paralympic movement*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons. And, Steadward, R.D., and C.J. Peterson. 1997. *Paralympics: where heroes come*. Edmonton, Canada: One Shot Holdings.
3. The four articles published by Stanton (1997) in the Coalition magazine were: 'Sporting connections' by Lorraine Gradwell; 'Disabled people in sport (or not?)' by Stuart Braye; 'Mutually exclusive?' by Helen Cogan; and, 'Windsurfing and disability' by Graham Clarke.
4. BCOBP, The British Council (of Organizations) of Disabled People was established in 1981 and changed its name to the United Kingdom Disabled People's Council (UKDPC) in 2006.
5. The National disability sports organizations are: UK Deaf sport; Mencap sport; Wheelpower; British blind sport; British amputee and Les autres sports association; Special Olympics GB; Cerebral palsy sport; the dwarf sports association UK.

## References

- Bailey, S. 2008. *Athlete first: a history of the Paralympic movement*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons.
- Barnes, C. 1991. *Disabled people in Britain and discrimination: a case for anti-discrimination legislation*. London: The Macmillan Press.
- Barnes, C., and G. Mercer. 2011. *Exploring disability, a sociological introduction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Barnes, C., G. Mercer, and T. Shakespeare. 2005. *Exploring disability, a sociological introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Braye, S. April 1997. Disabled people in sport - or not? In *Coalition*, ed. I. Stanton, 8-13. The greater Manchester coalition of disabled people.
- Braye, S. 1998. Sports provision for disabled people, falling short of expectation? In *Taking sport to heart*, 1997 Kelvin Hall, Glasgow. Melton Mowbray: 119-123. Institute of sport and recreation management.

- Brittain, I. 2010. *The Paralympic games explained*. London: Routledge.
- Campbell, J., and M. Oliver. 1996. *Disability politics, understanding our past, changing our future*. London: Routledge.
- Coleridge, P. 1993. *Disability, liberation and development*. Oxford: Oxfam.
- Davis, K. 1994. Disability and legislation. In *on equal terms, working with disabled people*, ed. S. French, 238-249. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Dillman, D.A. 2007. *Mail and internet surveys: The tailored design method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- Ellis, K. 2009. Beyond the aww factor: human interest profiles of Paralympians and the media navigation of physical difference and social stigma. *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 19, no. 4: 23-35.
- French, S. 1994. Dimensions of disability and impairment. In *on equal terms, working with disabled people*, ed. S. French, 17-34. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Gilbert, K., and O.J. Schantz. 2008. *The Paralympic games, empowerment or sideshow?* Maidenhead: Meyer and Meyer Verlag.
- Glaser, B.G., and A.L. Strauss. 1967. *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Golden, A.V. 2003. An analysis of the dissimilar coverage of the 2002 Olympics and Paralympics, frenzied pack journalism versus the empty press room. *Disability Studies Quarterly* 23, no. 3/4. <http://www.dsqsds.org/article/view/437/614>
- Gradwell, L. April 1997. Sporting connections. In *Coalition*, ed. I. Stanton, 5-7. The greater Manchester coalition of disabled people.
- Gratton, C., and I. Jones. 2010. *Research methods for sports studies* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. London: Routledge.
- Hardin, M.M., and B. Hardin. 2004. The 'supercrip' in sport media: wheelchair athletes discuss hegemony's disabled hero. *Sociology of Sport Online* 7, no. 1. [http://phsyed.otago.ac.nz/sosol/v7i1/v7i1\\_1.html](http://phsyed.otago.ac.nz/sosol/v7i1/v7i1_1.html)
- Howe, P.D. 2008. *The cultural politics of the Paralympic movement, through an anthropological lens*. London: Routledge.
- Howe, P.D., and C. Jones. 2006. Classification of disabled athletes: (dis)empowering the Paralympic practice community. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 23, no. 1: 29-46.



- IPC.2012. Official website of the Paralympic movement.  
<http://www.paralympic.org/TheIPC/HWA/AboutUs>
- Jones, C., and D.P. Howe. 2005. The conceptual boundaries of sport for the disabled, classification and athletic performance. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, no. 32: 133-146.
- Kim, E. 2011. 'Heaven for disabled people': nationalism and international human rights imagery. *Disability & Society* 26, no. 1: 93-106.
- Lakhani, N. 2012. Paralympic sponsor engulfed by disability tests row. *The Independent*, August 29.
- Legg, D., and R. Steadward. 2011. The Paralympic games and 60 years of change (1948-2008): unification and restructuring from a disability and medical model to sport-based competition. *Sport in Society* 14, no. 9: 1099-1115.
- Miles, M., and A. Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Oliver, M. 1996. A Sociology of disability or a disablist sociology? In *Disability & Society: emerging issues and insights*, ed. L. Barton, 18-42. Essex: Longman.
- Peers, D. 2009. (Dis)empowering Paralympic histories: absent athletes and disabling discourses. *Disability & Society* 24, no. 5: 653-665.
- Silverman, D. 2000. *Doing qualitative research: a practical handbook*. London: Sage.
- Shakespeare, T. 2000. *Help*. Birmingham: Venture Press.
- Smith, A., and N. Thomas. 2005. The 'inclusion' of elite athletes with disabilities in the 2002 Manchester commonwealth games: an exploratory analysis of newspaper coverage. *Sport, Education and Society* 10, no. 1: 49-67.
- Stanton, I. April 1997. Editor's comment. In *Coalition*, ed. I. Stanton, 3-4. The greater Manchester coalition of disabled people.
- Tännsjö, T. 1998. Is our admiration for sports heroes fascistoid? *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, no. 25: 23-34.
- Thomas, N., and A. Smith. 2003. Preoccupied with able-bodiedness? An analysis of the British media coverage of the 2000 Paralympic games. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, no. 20: 166-181.

Thomas, N., and A. Smith. 2009. *Disability, sport and society, an introduction*. London: Routledge.

UKDPC. 2012. Members. <http://www.ukdpc.net/ukdpc/pages/members.php>

Vehovar, V. and K. Lozar Manfreda. 2008. Overview: Online surveys. In *The sage handbook of online research methods*, eds. N. Fielding, R.M. Lee and G. Blank, 177 -194. London: Sage,