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Townsend, RC and Huntley, T and Cushion, CJ and Fitzgerald, HF (2018) 'It's not about disability, I want to win as many medals as possible': The social construction of disability in high-performance coaching. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. ISSN 1012-6902 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690218797526>

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‘It’s not about disability, I want to win as many medals as possible’: The social construction of disability in high-performance coaching.

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Abstract

This article draws on the theoretical concepts of Pierre Bourdieu to provide a critical analysis of the social construction of disability in high-performance sport coaching. Data were generated using a qualitative cross-case comparative methodology, comprising eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in high-performance disability sport, and interviews with coaches and athletes from a cross-section of Paralympic sports. We discuss how in both cases ‘disability’ was assimilated into the ‘performance logic’ of the sporting field as a means of maximising symbolic capital. Furthermore, coaches were socialised into a prevailing legitimate culture in elite disability sport that was reflective of ableist, performance-focused and normative ideologies about disability. In this article we unpack the assumptions that underpin coaching in disability sport, and by extension use sport as a lens to problematise the construction of disability in specific social formations across coaching cultures. In so doing we raise critical questions about the interrelation of disability and sport.

Keywords: disability, high-performance sport, paralympic athletes, coaching, symbolic capital.

It has been suggested that sport provides a context that can challenge and influence the social and cultural perceptions of disability and disabled people (Howe and Silva, 2016). This is reinforced by binaries that often frame discussions about Paralympic and disability sport. Examples of such dualisms include debates about ‘ability-disability’ (e.g. Purdue and Howe, 2012a), ‘empowerment-disempowerment’ (e.g., Howe and Silva, 2016; Peers, 2009; Purdue and Howe, 2012b), and ‘elite sport-disability sport’ (e.g. DePauw and Gavron, 2005). Interrogating the space between these polarisations offers opportunities to establish a dialogue on the way disability is positioned in social spaces. Indeed, sometime ago DePauw (1997) alerted us to the disruptive potential of sport due to its stratified social relations. These social relations ‘construct, produce, institutionalise, enact and perform disability’ (Smith and Perrier, 2014: 12).

Naturally, such discussions concern the ontological position of disability in sport. In this study, we locate our theorising of ‘disability’ within a social relational framework (Thomas, 1999, 2004, 2007). The social relational model offers a subjective, internalised understanding of disability in relation to social structure and cultural discourses about disability. Understanding ‘disability’ as socially constructed, culturally fashioned, and lived (Smith and Perrier, 2014; Thomas, 1999), in relation to sport provides a powerful lens (Townsend *et al.*, 2016) through which to examine the discursive principles that organise fields and structure individual practices (Bourdieu, 1990). Understanding the construction of disability particularly important when coaches’ perceptions of disability are often framed in medical model discourses (cf. Townsend *et al.*, 2017) and in high-performance sport, disability occupies a tenuous, hierarchical and often contradictory position (cf. Purdue and Howe, 2012a). However, debate about the social construction of disability in sport coaching has been noticeably absent within the literature.

Coaching is characterised by its own taken-for-granted logic (Cushion and Jones, 2006), with a hierarchy of species of capital, and orthodox practices (Denison *et al.*, 2015). As such, it can be usefully conceptualised as a field located within the broader field of – in the context of this research – disability sport. The centrality of coaches in maintaining the structure and ideals of high-performance sport is recognised (Cushion and Jones, 2006) but often overlooked in disability sport. Furthermore, coaching was identified as a priority for research in disability sport over 30 years ago (DePauw, 1986), and literature has begun discovering something of the complexity of coaching in disability sport (e.g. Taylor *et al.*, 2014). It is important to note that most of the established research tends to distance itself from discussions about impairment (Townsend *et al.*, 2016), with the construction of disability being forced into the background, or ignored. Only recently has work looking at coaching in disability sport engaged with models of disability (e.g. Wareham *et al.*, 2017; Townsend *et al.*, 2016) as a means of examining the interrelationships between disabled people and practices in sporting contexts. Interrogating elite disability sport through a critical lens is an important step as coaching is a de-limited field of practice that is “imbued with dominant values and common beliefs that appear natural and are therefore taken-for-granted” (Cushion and Jones, 2014: 276). Research has demonstrated that the relationship between coaches, athletes and the context in which practice unfolds is permeable to the influence of other constructed discourses within society, such as gender (e.g. Norman and Rankin-Wright, 2016), race (e.g. Rankin-Wright *et al.*, 2016) or in the case of this paper, disability (Townsend *et al.*, 2017). However, coaches are generally not trained in the specifics of disability sport and recent evidence suggests coaching is organised and constrained by medical model discourses reflecting largely ableist attitudes (cf. Townsend *et al.* 2017). Therefore, if sport is to function as a platform for empowerment (Purdue and Howe, 2012b), it is crucial to examine how the social practices of coaching are “generated and sustained within social systems and cultural formations” (Thomas, 1999: 44) such as disability sport. To do so

it is important to discuss critically the productive forces – the social relations of production and reproduction – and the ideological constructions of disability found across disability sport (cf. Thomas, 1999).

The aim of this paper was to examine how disability was constructed in high-performance sport coaching contexts. Specifically, we explored the intersecting fields of high-performance coaching, within Paralympic sport and disability sport. Paralympic sport refers to sports that compete in the Paralympic Games, a quadrennial multi-sports competition organised by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC). Disability sport is a broad term used to describe sports that accommodate people with physical, sensory and intellectual disabilities (DePauw and Gavron, 2005). Given the developmental goals of the IPC, ‘Parasport’ is often used as an umbrella term to accommodate both Paralympic and Disability sport. This intersection provided shared understandings across the multi-sport Paralympic context and a single elite sport positioned separately to the Paralympic games. The significance of this research is in extending discourse on the social construction of disability in sport and through coaching, extending debate on ‘empowerment’ in sport, and highlighting the unintended consequences of well-intended actions. In this sense, our critical tradition was focused on deconstructing taken-for-granted conditions that disabled people face, which can be exacerbated in social formations such as sport where power relations mediate who has voice, autonomy and identity, and who does not.

Bourdieu and high-performance coaching

The relevance of Bourdieu’s theory to this research is that it has at its very centre a “concern with the body as a bearer of symbolic value” (Shilling, 2004: 111). Bourdieu’s view of the social world as a “collective work of construction of social reality” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 239) and his conceptual tools of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* together help to explain how cultural settings function according to an internal logic, and can be used to highlight and

challenge the conditions under which ideologies are formed. This shares concerns with disability studies in its “interrogation of cultural categories, discourses, language, and practices” (Thomas, 2004: 36) that constitute disability. In particular, Bourdieu’s work can be understood as a philosophy of the relational (Bourdieu, 1998), which aligns with the central tenets of the social relational model, especially his attempt at addressing the issue of agency and structure, and “articulating the relations of production between the individual, their body and society” (Brown, 2005: 4; Thomas, 1999).

In sport, the disabled body is, as Edwards and Imrie (2003) argued, a “site of contestation” (p. 240) where impairment and its effects (physical and intellectual) can “function as distinctive signs and as signs of distinction, positive or negative” (Bourdieu, 1989: 20). These distinctions can be shaped by the structures of the field, and thus the use of Bourdieu can highlight the cultural resources and frameworks drawn upon in practice and the meanings attributed to disability within coaching in disability sport.

In sport coaching a Bourdieusian approach provides an understanding of the two-way relationship between objective structures of the coaching context and the dispositions of individual agents to provide a reciprocal view of the way disability is constructed. With coaches engaging in a role and process that is neither benign nor neutral, Bourdieu allows for the deconstruction of the power relations and interactions that shape social practice. Such analyses of disability focus on the power that social categories have in constructing subjectivities and identities of self and others (Thomas, 2004), enabling the examination of the social conditions of coaching that constitute and legitimise ways of thinking about disability (Bourdieu, 1977). Indeed, Purdue and Howe (2015) argued that Paralympic and disability sport are inherently shaped by such power struggles, with coaching further characterised by a struggle for the legitimacy of disability. Thus, coaching research requires the application of sociology to reveal

and to challenge dominant values and ideologies that influence disability sport and by extension the way disability can be understood and reconstructed in society.

Methodology

Following institutional ethical approval, data were generated within a cross-case comparative research design over two phases of data collection (Miles *et al.*, 2014). The first and second authors were both coaches within these fields, enabling the production of a contextually-informed picture of coaching in disability and Paralympic sport. This enabled immersion *within* “real activity as such” (Bourdieu, 1977: 96), and in practical relation to the world of inquiry. The first author conducted an 18-month ethnographic case-study in a specific high-performance disability sport context. Data were generated through participant observation, interviewing with coaches, and focus groups with four athletes and twelve parents within a national learning disability sports team (see table 1 and 2). Participant observation meant full participation in the setting with a formal coaching role working with the players and the management team. Immersion in this context provided sustained access to an institutionally-supported and integrated coaching process within a specific national governing body (NGB) and generated data that had both temporal and spatial meaning (Thomas, 2004).

Insert tables 1 and 2 about here

To add a layer of theoretical breadth in developing a shared understanding of coaching, the second author employed comparative in-depth semi-structured interviews with five Paralympic medal-winning coaches and five Paralympic athletes (see tables 3 and 4) alongside the ethnographic fieldwork. The in-depth semi-structured approach to interviewing allowed participants to express and elaborate on their experiences and perceptions in relation to a common guide covering: development in sport and coaching, perceptions of the Paralympic games and effective coaching in this context. Participants for the comparative interviews were

sampled theoretically to enable analysis (Ritchie *et al.*, 2003) across sports and across coaching cultures. Importantly, none of the coaches across either study had impairments, perhaps reflecting the relative lack of disabled coaches within the coaching workforce (Fitzgerald, 2013). The process was iterative in nature, and enabled the generation of themes according to comparative analysis of two distinct and meaningful coaching populations across a particular field (Ritchie *et al.*, 2003). Together, data were captured through comprehensive written field notes whilst as a coach immersed within the Paralympic field and transcripts of audio-taped interviews and audio data captured *in situ*. All field notes were dated and included contextual information such as location, those present, physical setting, type of social interactions and who composed them, and activities. The fusion of these methods provided focused data on coaching disabled athletes across the fields of elite disability sport and Paralympic sport.

Insert tables 3 and 4 about here

Data Analysis

The purpose of the analysis was to build a “critical and defamiliarising” (Alvesson and Solberg, 2009: 172) view on coaching in disability sport. Data were therefore analysed inductively to build a system of organising categories about coaching in disability sport from the unstructured data. This inductive process enabled categories, themes and narrative to be built from the ‘bottom up’, by organising the data into increasingly more abstract meaning units (Creswell, 2013). As Creswell (2013) describes, the inductive process involved working back and forth between the analysis and the dataset until a comprehensive set of themes was established. Next, theory was used in a deductive manner against the empirical material which resulted in the generation of three inter-related themes related to “*Disability, high performance and symbolic capital*”, “*Empowerment, Misrecognition and (Dis)ability Identity*” and “*Acceptance and Symbolic Violence*”. Importantly, though maintaining degrees of abstraction the process was

always grounded in the data and used to inform the analytical process. These themes are necessarily discussed separately, however they should be understood as layered, interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

Analysis and Discussion

Disability, high-performance and symbolic capital

A field is defined as networks of social relations, structured systems of social positions within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over resources, stakes and access (Bourdieu, 1990). Fields are organised both horizontally and vertically. At the ‘top’, and thus working across all others is the field of power. The field of power exists ‘horizontally’ through all fields and mediates the struggles within each through the control of the ‘exchange rate’ of the forms of cultural and social capital between fields. For Bourdieu, power is an active property and presents itself in three fundamental species of capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992); cultural, economic and social, and importantly, can be both material and embodied. Each field values certain species of capital that are recognised as symbolic, where those with symbolic capital are better placed to control the specific logic of the field.

Fields (and capital) therefore have a critical role in generating social practice. Rather than having clearly demarcated boundaries, fields are symbolic insofar as they are determined by the limits of that which people feel is at stake in the field and are worthy of contest (*illusio*), and that activities within are guided by an underpinning logic of practice. A specific example of *illusio* and the tensions caused at the boundaries of a field is shown by the way elite ‘performance’ values and practices held symbolic capital:

The element that I’m involved in is a performance programme. To the point where as far as possible disabilities are left at the door when they come in. Actually, this has grown so much now and the national squads have come on so much that there is a need for a performance element to this. I felt you know *if we’re gonna have credibility in*

this game there needs to be a (performance) pathway structure because otherwise it devalues disability sport. (Brian, Performance Director – interview; emphasis added).

Fields operate semi-autonomously and are responsible for the production of values and beliefs which rationalise the ‘rules’ of behaviour or logic of practice for its occupants, which in this case related to coaching disabled athletes. As a result, coaches commonly articulated their roles in relation to high-performance sport, thus subsuming ‘disability’ within a powerful high-performance logic:

It’s my first coaching role in a performance environment and the opportunity to work in a performance environment was too good an opportunity to miss, so work with the physio, the head coach, the manager, an SandC coach. (Steve, Coach – interview).

This squad has become more high-performance, as in the environment we’re creating. I see it as a performance environment. It’s all about performance mate - I don’t give a shit (about anything else). I think, really, if you can coach disability, then you can almost coach anybody. (Theo, Strength and Conditioning Coach - field notes).

These data are illustrative of coaches who understood the ‘rules of the game’, where aligning with a high-performance logic had more symbolic capital than disability. This process was reinforced by the concept of doxa - the conditions of existence or the order of things - where coaches embodied a socially and culturally constituted way of perceiving, evaluating and behaving, that was accepted as unquestioned and self-evident, i.e. ‘natural’ (Bourdieu, 1977). In working to the doxa, the coaches and athletes were able to generate symbolic capital by means of recognising competencies associated with high-performance sport, minimising the distance between *disability sport* and *high-performance sport*, while at the same time maximising the distance between *disability* and *disability sport*:

Sport is that unique environment where they’re seen as sportsmen first, people with a disability second. And for the people we work with and coach in this particular squad it’s refreshing for them because they’re treated like adults, like...“normal”, not only are they being treated with respect as an athlete, because they’re at the peak of where any sportsperson wants to be, which is representing their country, they’re given that respect, they’re given that respect as an adult. (Bert, Team Manager – interview).

These binaries, or relations of homology (Bourdieu, 1998), were part of a conscious struggle for the coaches to consecrate their own symbolic attributes within the ‘performance’

environment. In so doing, the coaches attempted to maximise their symbolic capital and secure their positions within the high-performance field by subverting attention away from ‘negative’ disability-specific associations:

I don't want to pigeon hole myself as a disability sport coach, I'm a coach. It doesn't interest me...this is just a stepping stone for me". (Steve, Coach – field notes).

In this sense, there was a tension between ‘disability sport’ and ‘high-performance sport’ which acted in opposition and were used to “lend meaning to the world” (Everett, 2002: 66) forming the basis for a hierarchy of power within coaching practice:

I see it as equal (Olympic and Paralympic sport). I think that gives a reassurance and a power to when I say that isn't good enough (training and competition). So I do know what world class able-bodied looks like, I do know what world class ‘para’ looks like. (Charles, Paralympic coach - interview).

Thus, ‘disability’ was assimilated into the logic of high-performance sporting practices, and coaching was shaped by a doxic structure where disability identity was closely related to performance and athletic bodies. In this way coaching practice was shaped by binaries (i.e. disabled/non-disabled; high-performance/disability sport), that functioned to provide, what Bourdieu (1977) described as, a *sense of limits* of practice. These limits served to frame the ‘right’ or ‘correct’ way of coaching:

Players were often given ‘individual’ time in which they would go and work in small groups on different aspects of the sport. Commonly, the players would receive direction from members of the coaching staff or were encouraged to work off their ‘action plans’ which defined areas for improvement. During this particular session, the coaches were observing a group of players.

“The players seem to be working well”.

Steve (coach) laughed. “These drills are great for them. I can go an entire weekend without thinking these boys have a disability- I forget about their disabilities. I coach these boys like I would a 13-year-old boy, in the same way. It's true!”

Later, I questioned Steve “What did you mean earlier, when you said you forget about disability?”

“Well, it’s simple. Otherwise I’m changing my beliefs as a coach, aren’t I? Which would mean I’m coaching the disability not the (athlete)”.

(Field notes)

There was a clear attempt by the coaches to impose the “legitimate definition of a particular class of body” (Bourdieu, 1991: 362) through the reconstruction of disability according to able-bodied norms. This was in contrast to the athletes, where impairment and its effects were an legitimate part of their athletic identity:

It's just sport to me. I don't see anybody as disabled, I've never known them (team mates) not be in a wheelchair so, I just treat them as that's how it is. They treat me as I am. If they want help, like everyone needs help at some stage but I don't treat them any differently, I never think about it. I completely forget. It's normal. (Jeffrey, Paralympic Athlete, interview).

Together this discourse illustrates the relationship between sport and society in the social construction of disability (cf. Bourdieu, 1984) and highlight how these constructions influenced coaching practice. The interest and subsequent influence demonstrated by these discourses framing the coaching process can be understood as “part of the larger field of struggles over the definition of the legitimate body and the legitimate uses of the body” (Bourdieu, 1993: 122), where disability represents a form of negative symbolic capital when defined in relation to a field framed by high-performance sport discourses. Indeed, it can be argued that the reconstruction of disability was an exercise of consecration, as Bourdieu (2000: 97) argued, “once one has accepted the viewpoint that is constitutive of a field, one can no longer take an external viewpoint on it”.

‘Empowerment’, Misrecognition and (Dis)ability Identity

For the coaches, the logic of the field described above was characterised by an opposition between labels of ‘disability’ and ‘athlete’. This binary created a situation where coaches rejected notions of ‘disability’ in their practice, instead affording distinction to high-performance and elite ‘athletic’ identities, which were used as ‘sense-making’ frames to direct

the coaching process. This was evident, for instance, in the discourse Judy used to shape her coaching:

I don't think of them as being disabled, I think of them as being athletes - so an athlete who uses a wheelchair. (Judy, Paralympic Coach –interview).

In this instance, disabled athletes were subject to assumptions about their abilities framed by normalisation and judgement against ableist standards (Townsend *et al.*, 2016). Importantly, such a position created a hierarchy of power where the athletes were assigned aspects of identity that were viewed as antagonistic to notions of disability, constituting a form of 'empowerment'. This runs counter to an often taken-for-granted humanistic discourse that frames identity (Groff and Kleiber, 2001), where primacy is given to agency and individual psychology. Instead, the analysis illustrates how identity was imposed upon the athletes through a hierarchy of power where their agency was constrained within the structural conditions of 'elite' sport coaching and governed by the coaching discourse:

I: Can you describe your role as a coach?

Trevor: Giving athletes a sense of ownership...not...avoiding the word empower, erm, because of its association with me having the power to empower, me having the right or I'm the only one that can allow this person to be empowered, but more giving or creating environments, creating scope and opportunities for athletes to shape something themselves. I think if we are looking at somebody being the best in the world, then I think that freedom to explore, that freedom to have some ownership and control that the athlete has themselves is important (Paralympic Coach - interview).

Empowering people and getting the best hidden talent from them... and they need empowering...they should be able to perform everything without me (Phil, Paralympic Coach – interview).

These data highlight the way in which notions of 'empowerment' were entrenched within the coaching discourse as a result of exposure to doxic social conditions. 'Empowerment' in this sense was constructed by the high-performance field which referred to the rejection of disabled identities and the superimposition of 'athletic' identity (Purdue and Howe, 2012b) as a frame of reference for coaches and athletes. As such the coaching process provided an illusion of

empowerment whereby athlete ‘control and mastery’ (Wallerstein, 1992: 1998) was in fact shaped by the coaches through a legitimised performance coaching process. Thus, coaching was based on value-judgements about disability where athletes had to align to a coaching environment permeated by high-performance logic, values and practices:

I treat them just like I do any able-bodied player, I’m going to drive them hard, I’m going to push them hard. I don’t allow them to give up, I’m not going to allow them to tell me that they can’t do something’. (Benjamin, Paralympic Coach – interview).

What’s my attitude towards disability? ‘Disability’? It’s just a fucking label. It doesn’t exist. I’ve not once approached the environment here as a disability environment. (Steve, Coach – interview).

Here, ‘effective’ coaching in disability sport was defined in relation to symbolic competencies involving a rejection of disability and the inscribing of distinctive dispositions (‘athletic’ identity) into coaching practice, a process that Bourdieu (1990) called the institutionalisation of distinction. Importantly, the rejection of disability fulfilled an important practical function (Bourdieu, 1998). For the coaches in the study, empowerment was conflated with performance ideals providing a sense of structure and practical mastery (Townsend *et al.*, 2016) to direct coaching:

I: How do you view the athletes you coach?

Stephanie: They are the same as any able bodied athlete, the same needs. It is, and the need is going to depend on the phase they are in. There are certain needs that are more highlighted due to the complexity of the disability, erm, and that might change but they are still humans... A lot of the athletes know a lot about their disabilities and they can teach you a lot and guide you to become an expert on the disability and how to manage the disability. (Paralympic Coach – interview).

I: How do you understand the difference between disability and impairment?

Bert: There’s no difference between disability and impairment, because actually we should be looking at it going, actually, they’re athletes first – people first, athletes second, someone with a disability impairment third. Not the other way around like some people say it. (Bert, Team manager - interview).

Hence, coaches sought to reframe disability identity according to what DePauw (1997) described as the ‘invisibility of disability’ whereby disability was forced into the background of the collective coaching consciousness and the reality of impairment disregarded:

What’s the difference between impairment and disability? [11 second pause]. Crikey, to be honest I go through my little world not even thinking about either. If I’m honest I genuinely, never consider or look at it as anything different from training a different population. (Trevor, Paralympic Coach - interview)

When I first started out with this squad it took me a while to understand what they actually need, but the more I coach them I actually understood that they just need what everyone else needs. For me (disability) it’s irrelevant I’m dealing with people with impairment, disability whatever you want to put it, they’re just a *group of players* which just have slightly different needs to another group of players; you’re just coaching a group of people, just an athlete who wants to be coached. (Oscar, Strength and Conditioning Coach – interview; emphasis added).

In this sense, the coaches, from their position of power, subverted what they considered a ‘disabling gaze’, thus distancing themselves from discussions about disability:

I: Given the context that you work in, how do you understand the difference between disability and impairment?

Steve: No, I don’t want to know, I’m not – to me I don’t overthink it that much, I don’t, disability, impairment, you know, whatever you want to call it, it doesn’t interest me, I’ve got no interest in that. To me that question is, I don’t know, I’m not being blasé, but it doesn’t affect, disability, impairment or the difference between it, would not affect how I run a session, would not affect how I deliver the session, how I deliver a team talk, it just doesn’t even affect me mate, so I don’t know. (Coach - interview).

Here, the data shows how the coaches and athletes were engaged in a symbolic struggle of classifications (Bourdieu, 1998) about the position of disability. In direct contrast however, was the athletes’ attempt to reconcile labels of ‘athlete’ and ‘disability’ within the Paralympic field:

I am an elite athlete and I’m a Paralympic champion, double Paralympic champion, because that seems to be, that’s the thing people are impressed by. If you haven’t got the gold then no one really cares, but a Paralympian is a proud title to own. Even though we call all disabled athletes Paralympians and it annoys the hell out of me, I know that I earned that name. It has the same, to me, it means the same as if I was an Olympian. It’s the same level. I have reached the top, like the absolute top of my sporting prowess. (Zoe, Paralympic Athlete – interview).

It's good because of my disability it's (sport) pushed me a long way through. That's a good thing I guess, I think there's nothing wrong with having a disability, everyone can be the same. Just don't treat, treat us differently. I mean, I'm proud of my disability really, shouldn't be ashamed of it. (R, Player – focus group)

Here the construction of disability had a number of effects. The coaches monopolised the discourse regarding the construction of disability. This provided a sense of structure to their coaching reality and brought with it the most amount of symbolic capital. This clear alignment to the doxic structure further reinforced the social divisions between 'ability-disability' (Howe and Silva, 2016). That is, for the athletes social structure and power were determining of identity and not individual autonomy. Hence, for these athletes, the coaching conditions influenced by a rejection of disability limited the range of agentic choices and strategies available to shape their experiences:

Okay we're labelled as having a disability but that shouldn't be a reason for us to be belittled by the title, we have the same opportunities to compete as the professional players do. You have that little bit more of a challenge to take responsibility which obviously helps us as individuals with our life skills. (J, Player – focus group)

Thus, it was in the *interests* of the athletes to conform, "such is the paradox of the dominated" (Bourdieu, 1987: 184).

Acceptance and Symbolic Violence

The athletes, in assessing their position within the coaching culture, applied "a system of schemes of perception and appreciation which is the embodiment of the objective laws whereby their value is objectively constituted" and attributed "to themselves what the distribution attributes to them" (Bourdieu, 1984: 473). This was not always an 'empowering' position:

(The coach) is super competitive and he is always right. I feel like I can't make mistakes, you know, like, I'm not allotted mistakes the way other people are. So that definitely puts more pressure on me. In practice...you kind of almost forget about, you know, people's limitations. You don't really give people like much leeway or excuses for their limitations. We don't really cut people much slack. (Nia, Paralympic Athlete - interview).

Attributing an ‘athletic’ identity to the players had associated symbolic capital and a pre-defined set of valued expectations and dispositions, as the imposition of a recognised name i.e. ‘athlete’ was an act of recognition of “full social existence” (Bourdieu, 1984: 482):

One of my key observations when I first came into the environment was that we were wrapping these boys up a little bit, which I think can be, can be done, in a performance environment because you’ve got the SandC here, you’ve got the physio, you’ve got the coach, you’ve got the nutritionist, you’ve got all these roles, and people will feel they need to justify roles, and I think that there’s a danger with that, that we can molly-coddle these boys and wrap them up...We need to push these boys more, we need to give them more, a bit more respect maybe...what...they can achieve *if we allow them to*. I felt we protected the boys too much and were very quick to state ‘ah well that’s because of their disability’...so I think that there’s a danger that...we attribute everything negative to a disability. There has to be an element of allowing these guys to fail. Since I came into the environment we’ve had tears, we’ve had sweat, we’ve had bleeding, you know we’ve had all of that, a lot of tears from different players, because they’ve never been challenged and so to me that’s bollocks. I’d rather them fail, or be in tears, or be frustrated around us, because we can help them with the strategies and tools required to bounce back from it. The bottom line is that, like any performance squad, or any team, you change your culture, you change an ethos, you challenge people. (Steve, Coach – interview; emphasis added).

Symbolic violence is the imposition of meaning experienced as legitimate (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) that when applied to coaching positions coaches and athletes according to dominant and dominated groups. In this example, coaching practice functioned as an instrument of domination that was justified as an exercise of empowerment and disability-specific resistance *by the coaches* (cf. Bourdieu, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984; Thomas, 1999). In this case, reconstructing disability was seen as empowering as it was linked with the development of athletes’ embodied cultural capital related to elite performance.

Symbolic violence is achieved through pedagogic action; “a process of inculcation which must last long enough to produce habitus reflective of a “cultural arbitrary capable of perpetuating itself after pedagogic action has ceased and thereby of perpetuating in practices the principles of internalised arbitrary” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 31). Symbolic violence was related to the methods used to coach disabled athletes in elite sport:

I'm constantly looking for me to challenge the guys... I think that they value people having raised expectations of them. I think...that's one of the stereotypes they've probably encountered quite a little bit is that people have reduced expectations. (David, Head Coach – Interview).

I want to win as many medals as possible and I want to kick everybody's ass and dominate. That's why I am there and that's what it's about. It's not about challenging people's perception of disability. (Charles, Paralympic Coach - interview).

By subsuming disability into high-performance ideals, and reconstructing 'disability' through the rhetoric of empowerment, the doxic nature of the field constrained and influenced practice to the extent that it was illustrative of the process of symbolic violence. That is, the coaching practices were so 'accepted' that they were unquestioned. This had a more subversive effect, where impairment effects could be positioned as the dominant barrier to achieving the coaches' outcomes:

Their spectrum of disability, it's probably the hardest one to coach to get the desired quality and improvement I want. The fact that these guys aren't going to be able to do everything perfectly at the same time and do they necessarily understand what they're doing, where they want to get to. They don't understand. It sounds bad but you realise at this camp actually how dumb they are. (Theo, SandC Coach - field notes).

Coaching practice therefore functioned as a direct method of symbolic violence insofar as it was “the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power” (Bourdieu and Passeron (1977: 5). The coaching environment and methods were, for the most part, left unchallenged and coaches constructed objects for intervention (disabled *athletes*) and drew on normative ideology to coach (cf. Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2012). Such was its influence and power that the athletes recognised, accepted and conformed to the pedagogic action of the coaches through the acquisition and internalisation of dispositions that had symbolic capital (Dumais, 2002):

I went from a normal job, a nine-to-five job every day to then after one year I equalled world record. Now we've got a contract. Now coach owns me and I have to do what coach wants. (The sport) isn't fun anymore, it's now a job. (Jeffrey, Paralympic athlete - interview).

I'm going to work hard, challenge myself and you know, see where I can end up and to push myself (Esther, Paralympic Athlete - interview).

J: The [coaching] stuff is high intensity, I enjoy that.

A: Making a player cry in a way is...no I don't think it is taking it too far because you've got to break people from time to time, but I think what you can do is get it too far, I think getting them out of their comfort zone is good.

R: I wanna get pushed to the limit, that's just the way I go, I would never cry because I want to improve my game and I want as high intensity as possible I don't care if the coach screams at me if I'm doing something wrong I'll still push to the limit until I physically can't do it, that's the way I am.

J: Yeah, I mean we're up for it as well.

A: We're up for it and the coaching staff.

PJ: Know we'll do it.

(Athlete focus group).

Symbolic violence is “violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 167). Here, the data illustrates the relations of symbolic violence, specifically how the athletes strengthened the power relations that contributed to the “legitimacy of domination” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 5). That is not to suggest that dominated necessarily meant passive (De Certeau, 1984). For the athletes in this research, the focus was on the reinforcement and refinement of a particular athletic habitus, embodying symbolic capital, as it was valued by the coaches and legitimised through the social structures in which they were immersed. The athletes were therefore constrained by the powerful high-performance logic underpinning coaching that served particular interests which were presented “as universal interests, common to the whole group” (Bourdieu, 1979: 80).

Conclusion

This research found that coaching in both Paralympic and disability sport constructed a logic of practice which acted as the the “principal locus” (Bourdieu 1990: 89) for the production of generative schemes, hierarchies and classifying systems about disability. This logic was based

on the production and maintenance of high-performance values. Exposing the logic of practice had important implications for the social construction of disability as a process of misrecognition equated the assimilation of disability into more valued high-performance discourses with ‘empowerment’. This had a dual function. On the one hand coaches were encouraged to look beyond the ‘disability’ in order to challenge and develop the players. On the other hand, there were tensions whereby the distance between disability and sport was maximised as it brought with it the most amount of symbolic capital. We argue that within these conditions coaching was a method of symbolic violence where coaches had the “power to impose the legitimate mode of thought” (Bourdieu, 1977: 170; Swartz, 2012) about coaching disabled athletes. For the athletes, the power to challenge these coaching discourses was not located in individual autonomy but constrained within stratified social configurations which had all the appearances of being a liberating structure. In this sense, we contribute to the discourse on empowerment in coaching, suggesting that under certain conditions ‘empowerment’ is a largely taken-for-granted term that is fundamentally linked to issues of power, ideology and domination.

Importantly, the way that disability was positioned through the structures of coaching formed an orthodox discourse that was difficult to displace. In this respect, whilst the disability sport field may be understood as a site of resistance, whereby disabled athletes can be ‘empowered’, it may be further conceptualised as a site of domination whereby coaches and coaching position disability in opposition to high-performance sport. These understandings were accepted and unquestioned within the structural conditions, constituting a taken-for-granted view of coaching that “flows from practical sense” (Bourdieu, 1990: 68). More concerning is that these conditions, secured by doxa, form the basis for cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1990). On this matter, we call for further research to inform coach education, otherwise disabled people will continue to be subject to the methods and practices of symbolic

violence in Paralympic and disability sport. Our findings further highlight the hierarchical tension between disability and high-performance sport, where disability was reconstructed according to the volume and efficacy of the different forms of capital available.

In this research, our critical tradition focused on deconstructing doxic or taken-for-granted conditions that disabled people encounter. Such socially and culturally accepted conditions can be exacerbated in social formations such as sport where power relations mediate who has 'voice' and autonomy, and who does not. This research contributes to current sociological debates, within and beyond the sociology of sport, in theorising the interrelatedness of disability and distinctive cultural formations. It is an important first step in shedding light on, and challenging, the social construction of disability and its effects on social practice.

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1 **Table 1 – Ethnographic Study Participant Demographics**

Participant	Age	Role	Years with the team	Coaching and Educational Qualifications
David	37	Coach	6+	UKCC L4 and qualified teacher.
Steve	29	Coach	3	UKCC L3 and qualified teacher.
Bert	41	Team Management	5	UKCC L2 NVQ L4 in Health and Social Care NVQ L4 Registered Managers Award
Theo	29	Coach	1	UKSCA Accreditation Educated to degree level
Oscar	27	Coach	4	UKSCA Accreditation Educated to degree level
Brian	N/A	Performance Director, Management	N/A	N/A

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6 **Table 2 – Ethnographic Study Participants - Athletes**

Athlete	Age	Years with the team	Impairment(s)
A	23	6	Moderate Learning Disability Autism Spectrum Disorder
J	24	9	Moderate Learning Disability
PJ	18	2	Moderate Learning Disability Autism Spectrum Disorder
R	18	4	Moderate Learning Disability Autism Spectrum Disorder

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17 **Table 3 – Paralympic Coach Demographics**

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Coach	Age range	Years of Coaching Experience	Education level and Coach qualifications	Coaching Role	Medal Winning
Phil	45-55	10+	Postgraduate degree and highest international certification.	Head Coach of a Paralympic sport containing multiple impairment groups.	Multiple
Judy	40-50	15+	Postgraduate degree and highest national.	Head Coach within a Paralympic sport event group.	Multiple
Benjamin	50-60	20+	Postgraduate degree and highest national.	Head coach of a Paralympic sport.	Multiple
Stephanie	30-40	10+	Postgraduate degree and highest national.	Lead coach of multiple athletes.	Multiple
Trevor	30-40	8+	Undergraduate degree and highest national.	Head coach of a Paralympic sport.	Multiple
Charles	35-45	10+	Undergraduate degree and highest national.	Head coach of a Paralympic sport.	Multiple

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21 **Table 4 – Paralympic Athlete Demographics**

Athlete	Age	Years competing	Impairment	Medal Winning and sport
Jeffrey	20-30	10+	Acquired Spinal Cord Injured and wheelchair user.	Multiple in individual sport
Zoe	20-30	10+	Congenital neurological and wheelchair user.	Multiple in individual sport
Nia	30-40	10+	Acquired amputation and ambulant.	Multiple in team sport
Esther	20-30	10+	Congenital sensory and ambulant.	Multiple in individual sport
Adam	20-30	10+	Congenital limb deficiency and ambulant.	Multiple in individual sport

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23 Note: All sports have an Olympic equivalent but due to the nature of athlete impairment the rules have been adapted for the Paralympic games.

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