Para athlete activism: a qualitative examination of disability activism through Para sport in Ireland.

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Abstract

Objectives: Little attention has been given to how Para athletes use their platforms for disability activism. This paper fills this gap by examining how Irish Para athletes take actions to create social change around disability.

Methods: A qualitative methodology was adopted. 28 elite-level Irish Para athletes were recruited and participated in interviews. The data set was analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis.

Results: Three themes: 'Para athlete activisms' captures different ways of doing disability activism; 'tensions between different activist identities' concerns (hyper)critical discourses about various activist identities; 'ableist influences on Para sport culture' captures contexts that enable or prevent performing disability activism.

Conclusions: The central theoretical contribution is an interpretation of Para athlete activism in terms of a contextually informed continuum of behaviour change. This article is an evidence base for Para sport cultures that wish to connect with disability activism. Practical opportunities are discussed around the psychology of adversity, social legacy value, identity politics and challenging ableism.

Key Words: athlete activism; disability sport; critical disability studies; social change; Paralympic studies.

Introduction

There has been a recent growth of research focused on sport and social justice (e.g., Long, Fletcher & Watson, 2017). For instance, scholars within the fields of sport and exercise psychology (e.g., Schinke et al., 2018; Schinke, Stambulova, Lidor, Papaioannou, & Ryba, 2015), sociology of sport (e.g., Darnell & Millington, 2018) and sports management (Cunningham et al., 2019) have produced positions on how sport contexts can help towards changing aspects of society for the better. Professional associations are taking positions on social justice too. For example, the *International Society of Sport Psychology* (ISSP) issued a mission statement to disseminate the general principles required to craft sport contexts in order to promote social, political or community agendas (Schinke et al., 2015). Moreover, sports organisations "on the ground" are increasingly embracing positions on social justice through anti-discrimination initiatives and campaigns such as the *Kick it Out #kickitoutgeneration* anti-racism initiative through UK football or the *Stonewall #rainbowlaces* LGBTQ awareness campaign in UK sport.

Linked to sport for social justice has been the rise in research on athlete activism. According to Tibbetts et al. (2017) athlete activism occurs when athletes use their 'sporting platforms' (e.g., inherent social power, visibility) to speak out or build awareness about a social cause or issue (e.g., racism, gender based discrimination, disability rights, LGBTQ rights, mental health issues). This happens when athletes advocate for social change within their sport and/or utilise their sport as a platform to address wider issues in society. Recent research on athlete activism has contributed to knowledge in several areas such as: advice for sport practitioners (e.g., coaches) to support athletes who become activist (Tibbetts et al., 2017); sports media coverage in an era of athlete activism (Schmidt, 2018); workshops to facilitate student athlete activism (Mac Intosh & Martin, 2018); discourses that develop

as a result of high-profile incidents of athlete activism (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016); the positive consequences (e.g., sense of purpose, vocational skills) and negative consequences (e.g., stress, burnout, public criticism) for athletes who engage in activism (Kaufman, 2008); commercial endorsement of athlete activists (Cunningham & Regan, 2011); the dimensions of sport that can enable athlete activism (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010); the history of social activism through sport (Kilcline, 2017); sports fans reactions to athlete activism (Smith & Tryce, 2019); and the types of athlete activism including community engagement, collective action, public statements or protests (Cooper, Macaulay & Rodriguez, 2019).While there has been a substantial rise in research on athlete activism, this article addresses an important knowledge gap.

Athlete activism research has predominately focused on how elite *non-disabled* athletes use their sporting platforms to address social issues such as race and gender. In comparison, the experience of elite *disabled* athletes using their sporting platforms to address disability issues has received much less attention. That said, Para athlete activism research is becoming an emerging field of enquiry (see Haslett and Smith, 2019). For example, Smith, Bundon, and Best's (2016) UK based research defined Para athlete activism as action to resist and transform discourses, attitudes, non- verbal acts, policies, and environmental structures that can socially oppress disabled people, both inside or outside of sport. Braye's (2016) study, also based in the UK, used a qualitative approach to explore retired Paralympians' views about disability politics. In addition, Choi, Haslett, and Smith (2019) used a mixed methods approach to examine Para athlete activism in South Korea. While Para athlete activism research is beginning to grow there is still a lot of room for development. This study aims to add to the emerging field by using a qualitative approach

to examine Para athlete activism within an Irish sociocultural and Para sport context. This aim is important and timely for the following reasons.

First, Para sport is becoming increasingly popular in Ireland providing Irish Para athletes an increasing social platform (e.g. social media) to raise awareness about disability issues (Brittain & Beacom, 2016; Pate, Hardin & Ruihley, 2014; French & Le Clair, 2018). For example, in 2018, Ireland hosted the *World Para Swimming European Championships*. Second, inequality within Para sport contexts, as Bundon and Hurd Clarke (2015) said, is inextricable linked to disability politics in wider society, such as structural barriers to participation in Irish Para sport (see Haslett, Fitzpartick & Breslin, 2017). Third, social missions through Irish sport contexts are becoming increasingly popular such as recent mental health awareness campaigns through Irish Rugby (see www.tackleyourfeelings.com) or the *20x20 #ifshecantseeitshecantbeit* gender equality movement in Irish sport (see www.20x20.ie).

In addition, it is of timely importance to examine activism through Irish Para sport because Ireland is undergoing a significant period of progressive political change. In 2015, after the successful *Yes Equality* activist campaign, the Irish state voted to amend the constitution to permit same-sex marriage. Then in 2018, a referendum as was passed to remove the constitutional ban on abortion following the Yes Equality activist campaign. Also, in 2018, the Irish government became one of the last countries in the world to ratify the 2006 United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Moreover, whilst the disability rights movement and Paralympic sport have had an historically tumultuous relationship (for overview see Haslett and Smith, 2019) the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) increasingly aims to promote disability activism through Para sport. For example, objective 3.4 of strategic priority 3 of the International

Paralympic Committee (IPC) strategic plan 2019 to 2022 (2019) aims to "cultivate a generation of Para athletes to act as advocates for disability rights". For these reasons the aim of this study is to examine how, if at all, Irish Para athletes create social change around disability. To address this aim, along with sport psychology literature, we draw on the literature known as critical disability studies.

Critical disability studies allows scholars to re-imagine disability *in* Para sport contexts by going beyond the social, political and economic aspects of disability, as theorised in the traditional field of disability studies, to encompass and engage critically with the discursive, cultural, psychological and relational dimensions of disability (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). For example, scholars have recently drawn on critical disability studies to shine a light on how disability is conceived, or could be conceived, in various areas of sport such as transitions out of Paralympic sport (Bundon, Ashfield, Smith, & Goosey-Tolfrey, 2018) and the media representation of Paralympic sport (Kearney, Brittain, & Kipnis, 2019). Adopting a critical disability studies perspective is appropriate to the aims of this study because it helps us to think as disability activist researchers (Goodley, 2013). For instance, this is research that actively works to re-imagine a politics of disability by challenging conditions of disablism - the (direct or indirect) social, political or psycho-emotional exclusion of people with impairments (Reeve, 2014) and ableism - a culturally normative favouritism for certain characteristics within social institutions (Campbell, 2008). We do this by viewing Paralympic sport as a cultural context involving discourses, materiality, and practices that can further oppress disabled people and/or transform societal understandings of disability. This involves remaining attentive to processes that can contribute either to the exclusion and/or inclusion of disabled people. Importantly, connecting with critical disability studies involves adopting an openness to using an eclectic

range of theories and lines of inquiry such as transformative critical social theories (Goodley, 2018), intersectionality (Campbell, 2008), future-forming modes of inquiry (see Gergen, 2015, 2016) and interdisciplinary connections (e.g., psychology and sociology).

The purpose of this exploratory study is to understand how Irish Para athletes' create social change around disability. The research questions are a) how, if at all, do Para athletes act to create social change around disability b) how should athletes do 'disability activism' and c) what are the factors that prevent and enable Para athlete activism.

Methodology

The design of this study is framed within a qualitative methodology because of our need to understand experience and context (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The authors' philosophical assumptions (see Sparkes & Smith, 2014) are ontological relativism (i.e., reality is mind-dependent, multiple and malleable) and epistemological social constructionism (i.e., the path to knowledge is subjective and constructed through relational interactions). Demonstrating epistemological coherence (see Poucher, Tamminen, Caron, & Sweet, 2019) these stated philosophical assumptions have informed our research questions, methodology, interpretations of the data and how we discussed the findings.

Participants and sampling

After gaining university ethical approval for the study, participants were recruited through purposive sampling strategies (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). A criterion-based strategy ensured that participants shared inclusion criteria attributes. The criteria for inclusion attributes were a) aged 18 or older b) with a physical impairment that classifies for participation in structured Para sport and c) an elite Para athlete. An elite Para athlete was defined as someone who has participated in elite talent programmes and/or represented their country at high level events like the World Championships or Paralympics, and/or, have experienced

some sustained success at the highest level of their sport (Swann, Moran, & Piggott, 2014). Para sports included were structured Para sports that were, are, or plan to be, events at the Paralympic Games. A maximum variation strategy ensured that sample represented a variety of experiences. By this we mean effort was made to include participants that represented different ages, genders, Para sports and career stages. For example, we included athletes from high-profile more established Para sports (e.g., Para athletics) and less established Para sports such as Boccia or Powerchair Football. A snowballing strategy was drawn upon also to ensure that participants provided useful data. For example, participants were asked to recommend other Para athletes that might have different views that could provide 'different' data. A sample of participants were recruited directly through the Irish Para sport system. For example, letters were sent to different contacts in different Irish Para sport organisations inviting athletes who met the sampling criteria to take part in the study. The research was described as a study on disability, sport and social activism.

The result of this process was a diverse sample (having variation) of 28 participants who agreed to take part (15 males and 13 females aged between 18-49). The sample included athletes at different points in their careers. For example, 15 participants were Paralympians (i.e. represented Ireland at a Paralympic Games), 13 were state funded Para athletes at the time of the study and four participants described themselves as 'retired Paralympians' but still actively involved in Para sport. Seven athletes have won World Championship or Paralympic Games medals. Participants reported a range of impairment experiences (e.g., spinal cord injury, spina bifida, visual impairment, amputation, cerebral palsy) and nine athletes described their impairments as being acquired. Ten sports were represented in the sample (e.g., Wheelchair Basketball, Wheelchair Rugby, Boccia, Amputee Football, Powerchair Football, Para cycling, Para athletics, Para table-tennis, Para

swimming). Nine participants held positions within in Para sport organisations (e.g., employees, board members, athletes commission members). Demographic information was collected via a questionnaire and interviews.

Data collection

Data were collected through one-to-one semi-structured recorded interviews. Twenty interviews were conducted face to face. For the remaining eight, digital methods were used (i.e., via Skype) and written survey interviews were used for nonverbal participants. In person interviews were conducted in convenient, quiet, accessible, agreed-upon locations such as hotel lobbies, universities, sport training grounds or offices. The research team, drawing on previously cited literature (e.g. Smith et al., 2016), developed the interview guide. Examples of questions included in the guide were: Can you tell how you feel about social change around disability in Ireland in 2018?; What does disability activism mean to you?; Can you describe your experiences advocating for change in your sport or in wider society?; How do you feel your actions contribute to social change around disability? To further facilitate the interview process, researcher generated photographs and videos were used to invoke memory and elicit accounts from the participants (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). We decided to use the technique of researcher generated (in contrast to participant generated) photo-elicitation in order to elicit conversations about the many different forms of activism. Examples of elicitation techniques drawn upon were photographs or videos of disability activism (e.g., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjvYZ2jvvp8) and photographs of types of activism through sport (e.g., overt public protest, community projects). The recorded interviews (lasting between one and two hours) were transcribed verbatim. This data collection process resulted in a large and qualitatively rich data set.

Data analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was used to organise themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). TA is appropriate for our research interests because it is a flexible method, enabling us to analyse the data inductively at times (e.g., focused on new experiences), deductively at times (e.g., guided by previous literature), critically at times (e.g., questioning social norms) and reflexively (e.g., considering our position within the study). TA is an iterative (recursive) method of data analysis that involves working back and forth through a framework of six phases. The first phase - data familiarisation through the process of immersion - involved forming ideas about patterns in the data by listening and re-listening to interviews, and then reading and re-reading transcripts. In the second phase, codes (segments of data that appear interesting to the researcher) were generated from the data set relevant to the objectives of the research. In the third phase, the codes were clustered together that share meaning to develop themes. A theme is meaning related to a central organising concept. The aim of this active process was to develop themes from codes that share meaning to "say something" about the data relevant to the research question (Braun et al., 2016).

In the fourth phase – reviewing and refining the themes - the researchers drew on "critical friends" (e.g., academic colleagues) to challenge the construction of themes (Smith & McGannon, 2018). In addition, themes were further refined after feedback from colleagues at disability and sport conferences. In the fifth phase, themes were defined in order to 'capture' the essence of each theme (e.g., to show each theme's scope and boundaries) and to clarify how each theme fits into the overall "story" of the research, in relation to the purpose of the research. Finally, the sixth phase involved writing up the report (i.e., this article). To do this, we drew on advice from Braun et al. (2016) that the final analysis must provide a concise, logical, coherent, non-repetitive and interesting account of

the story. For example, concise data extracts (e.g., participant quotes) were chosen to exemplify the prevalence of themes.

Methodological Rigour

For this study, we used a list of criteria to enhance the rigour of the work (Smith & McGannon, 2018). These criteria, as well as the strategies used to achieve them, were embedded throughout the research process. Regarding *credibility* (is the research plausible and persuasive?) we have a) provided in-depth illustrations of the data to show culturally situated meanings and have demonstrated expansionistic depiction by showing the unfolding complexity of interpretation (Tracy, 2010). Regarding *reflexivity* (how has the interpretation of the data been challenged and developed?) we sought critical friends (e.g., colleagues in sport organisations, external researchers, peer-reviewers) to provide "a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, multiple and alternative explanations and interpretations as these emerged in relation to the data and writing" (Smith & McGannon, 2018 p13). Regarding *philosophical assumptions* (are assumptions stated and consistent with the research processes and conclusions?) epistemological social constructionism and ontological relativism have informed our research questions, methodology, interpretations of the data, and how we discussed the results. Regarding *resonance* (i.e., can the research meaningfully reverberate and affect the audience?) we have offered thick descriptions and rich interpretations of the data that could be transferable to different situations (i.e., naturalistic generalisability, Smith, 2018).

Findings and discussion

Our analysis resulted in a final analytic structure of three themes. We theorise these themes as novel domains of Para athlete activism. By this we mean the themes capture the way participants described areas that will have important implications for understanding

disability activism through Paralympic sport. The first theme 'Para athlete activisms' captures many ways of doing activism as a contextually contingent continuum of actions, rather than as binary – 'I'm an activist or not an activist'. The second theme 'tensions between different activist identities' captures tensions between various disability activist identities as well as the consequences of tensions. The third theme 'ableist influences on Para sport culture' captures the social, cultural and political contexts that enable and prevent the performance of disability activism. We do not provide frequency counts when reporting our results, but as a general rule, "few" refers to less than a quarter of the participants, "some" to less than a half, and "most" to around two-thirds or more. At times, summary quotes have been 'cleaned-up' for ease of reading.

Para athlete activisms

There were different ways of doing activism that we theorise as 'Para athlete activisms'. 'Activisms' here are defined as a *continuum of actions* towards transforming discourses, attitudes, non- verbal acts, policies, or environmental structures that socially oppress disabled people in their everyday lives (Smith et al., 2016). The participants described a taxonomy of 'activisms' within this continuum and how and why they adopted different actions.

At one end of this continuum were descriptions of institutionalised actions. For example, most participants felt that the institutionalised action of just being a disabled athlete in the public eye contributed, by-default, towards transforming attitudes. As Goodley (2016) says, Paralympians' sporting actions compliment disability activism because they "wonderfully confuse traditional deficit models of disability through their demonstration of elite athleticism" (p16). Also, across their lives most athletes in this study gave 'life-story' talks or interviews (e.g., podcasts, schools, workplaces, disability initiatives).

Through these activities, athletes' passive and often unreflective actions were potentially transformative. For instance, they talked of 'societal trailblazing' such as being the first disabled person to attend their mainstream school, being a founder of the first disability sport club in their university, or the first wheelchair user to work in the fitness sector in Ireland. Furthermore, most participants welcomed being situated by-default as role models for disability in society because, as one male Paralympian said, across the disability landscape Para athletes were "leading the way" (ath17) in terms of the relative quantity and quality of disability representation in the media. A quote from another male Paralympian exemplifies how most athletes saw their institutionalised contribution to disability activism:

> The societal perception of disability is that it's a negative. So, if you look at the Paralympic athletes. They're out there. They're doing things that everybody else is doing, and they're doing it independently. They're doing it positively. They're achieving. And that, as a message to the rest of society is very powerful. So that gives society the role models and sight of what can be done. So that to me is where sport for people with disabilities really comes into its own. Because from an attitudinal societal point of view that's really where it's powerful (ath32).

Moving along the continuum of 'activisms' were descriptions of ad-hoc actions. Most participants described occasional conscious decisions to take actions towards challenging the social oppression of disabled people. For example, a few of the athletes in the sample attended disability rights protest marches and some athletes 'lent their profile' to one-off disability awareness campaigns, but as one female Paralympian said, "I don't go looking for them" (ath31). In addition, most athletes, at times, challenged discrimination in their day-to-day lives or posted 'statements' online. As one younger female Paralympian said, "our generation is so involved in social media even just if you're re-tweeting [about a disability

issue] you kind of feel like you're giving a little" (ath7). Athletes did ad-hoc actions for different reasons such as to show solidarity with the wider disability community or as a result of experiencing/witnessing forms of disablism (the social, political or psycho-emotional exclusion of people with imparments, Reeve, 2014). For instance, athletes explained how involvement in Para sport had broadened their political perspective on disability through cross-cultural experiences (e.g., traveling to compete) or cross-carnal comparisons (e.g., witness to multiple forms of disability experiences). Deciding to do an ad-hoc action was influenced by context. For example, contexts that prevented actions involved the social expectations of remaining passive while being 'unintentionally' patronised or the fear of being viewed as 'problematic' when highlighting inaccessibility. As one female Paralympian said "you just can't go around with a big angry head every day"(ath31). Goodley (2016) explains this as maintaining emotional labour (e.g., regulating anger for fear of being positioned as resentful, ungrateful or unhinged) and explains how this can be psychologically exhausting in a 'demanding' able-bodied world. However, contexts that provided opportunities for humour and creativity facilitated ad-hoc actions. As one male elite athlete said:

> Sport is a great opportunity to open people's eyes up to disability rights. Like a few months ago, in the gym where I work, the door that I use is the wheelchair access door. But there [is constantly] a car parked in front of it. We kept just saying to the owner "you can't park there, it's wheelchair access". And then one day I discussed this with some people and my boss, and we made a [humorous] video of me crawling into the gym saying "this is what it's come to, this is how our coach has to get into the gym because of people's obnoxiousness and all this"…. *laughs*…. yeah it blew up on Facebook. It got 2000 shares or something. I think it's had 200,000

> views or something like that. It was ridiculous. That kind of opened a lot of people's eyes. They heard me talking and they were like "aw I never would have realised that". So, I found it good that way just using my own platform. I'm an elite athlete but I'm not that well known. But even just there like, it seemed to open a lot of people's eyes (ath2).

Moving further along the continuum were descriptions of 'activisms' in the form of specific social missions. Here a few athletes explained why they utilised their platforms strategically and actively to develop a focus on specific areas of social change. One specific social mission focused on mental health. This involved athletes' frequently and publically (e.g., talks, seminars) disclosing how they used psychological coping skills developed through sport (e.g., goal setting, confidence) to deal with mental distress connected to the experience of their impairment (e.g., low self-esteem, physique anxiety).

The focus on mental health, as a social mission, was however discussed through two key narratives. The first narrative involved athletes placing the source of mental distress at the level of biological adversity (e.g., an acquired impairment leads to mental distress). This narrative supports a medical model of disability that views disability as a 'loss' that can be 'fixed' through psychological intervention (Smith & Perrier, 2014; Wood, Turnner & Barker, 2019). The second narrative involved athletes placing the source of mental distress at the level of social adversity. For example, they highlighted how discriminatory societal attitudes from non-disabled public led to mental distress and poor performance in sport. This narrative supports the concept of psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve, 2014) and connects the material context of social inequality with psychological wellbeing, rather than locating it in the individual.

Another specific social mission focused on environmental barriers. This social mission involved developing projects aimed at breaking down barriers in specific structural areas such as transport, employment or public access. For this social mission we also interpreted two narratives across the data. The first narrative involved athletes working 'outside systems' to transform policy or environmental structure. For example, public displays of rights-based political rhetoric, and co-orientating with politicians and disability activists outside sport. The social model or human rights model of disability provide a conceptual framework for this narrative, viewing disabled people as socially oppressed (Smith & Bundon, 2018). The second narrative related to social missions focused on environmental barriers, involved athletes working on projects 'within systems', such as being employed in disability organisations or carrying out research projects on disabling barriers (e.g., town planning, employment discrimination).

Athletes also explained that they were motivated to engage in these specific social missions for different reasons. For example, athletes described 'utilising their platform' to benefit their career ambitions (e.g., politics, media, academia). Being involved in dual careers had benefits such as enhanced future employment opportunities (EU guidelines on dual careers of athletes, 2012). Athletes were also motivated by a sense of responsibly to contribute to an ongoing social legacy while a few athletes explained how their social missions had been instigated from an ad-hoc action, as one female Paralympian said:

> I've had so many opportunities in my life that I wouldn't have had if it wasn't for Paralympic sport and I think now it's my time to give back. When I'm gone there is another generation coming up and you just have to make sure that they are okay. Like [physique anxiety] affects people's mental health as well, so like it probably

> affected me a lot more than I realised when I was younger. My insecurity and that might have transferred to the pool and I mightn't have been as good as I was.
>
> Interviewer: How did your social mission develop?
>
> [the TV channel] were interviewing people in the lead up to Rio [Paralympic Games] and during my interview the reporter asked was I ever insecure [with my body]. I was like "oh yeah, of course" and I'd never really said it out loud before but I was like "but swimming kind of gave me the confidence, because all I had was my hat, my goggles and my swimsuit. There's nowhere to hide". And people just ate that up, they just loved it and they just wanted to hear more and more about it. And that where all the opportunities I get came from (ath13).

Bundon, Ashfield, Smith & Goosey-Tolfrey (2018) explain how Para athletes use opportunities like this provided during their sport careers to prepare for post sport careers, and how this experience is an important part of preparing for their life after sport as 'disabled people' rather than 'athletes with a disability'.

At the other end of the continuum of 'activisms' were high-risk actions. These were actions that risked the withdrawal of emotional (e.g., trust), tangible (e.g., sponsorship), and informational (e.g., advice) social support (Smith et al., 2016). Public statements by disabled athletes that implied people (e.g., politicians, journalists) or organisations (e.g., media, sport bodies) were not doing their jobs correctly was an example of this activism. Bundon & Hurd Clarke (2015) explained how Para athletes use different forms of advocacy in different situations depending on the power/status they have within a sports organisation. For example, athletes in this study described how the risk in 'speaking out' was mitigated through having multiple identities (e.g., dual careers) or a high social status (e.g., sporting success). As one male Paralympian said:

> See for me, my career [outside sport] was always very important and if [sport organisation] weren't happy with me I was willing to say that's fine. This is not meant in a big-headed way but on my first races I won world championships and after that I had a couple of run-ins with [sport organisation] and I said to them listen if you're not happy don't select me. It is much easier for someone like me than someone who is new. But some athletes are coming in you know at a younger age. They haven't proved themselves at results and they're finding it harder. So, in those circumstances they will not speak out as much (ath29).

Tensions between different activist identities

There were many different opinions regarding how Para athletes should advocate for social change that we term '*tensions between different activist identities'*. This refers to the tensions, contradictions and paradoxes of disability activist identities. Through (hyper)critical discourses about how platforms should (not) be used for social change, participants described how and when their activist identities were pulled in different directions, as well as, the consequences of these tensions.

Most athletes explained how they were, at times, pulled towards adopting an affirmative disability identity. An affirmation model of disability is a non-tragic view of disability that encompasses positive social identities (Swain & French, 2000). For example, a few participants expressed concern at a perceived rise in high-profile disabled athletes using their platform to misrepresent disability as a tragic or negative experience. In reaction to such tensions, athletes used their profile to create images of pride in their disability experience. This involved actions such as highlighting the benefits of the disability and describing positive luck in life *because of* disability rather than *despite* disability. Or as one male athlete said, "embracing disability":

> But what I'm saying is they [some Paralympians] don't embrace disability at all. Why would you not embrace disability? You could be helping so many different kids. I did a [television] ad campaign and the amount of [positive] messages I was getting off mothers of people with disabilities. I was bawling my eyes out. The ad was shot in my house and the director says, "I want you sitting on your bed". And I was like "yeah yeah that's no bother". So, I jumped on my bed. They were shooting and he went to take my wheelchair away, and I was like "no no no, you're not taking my wheelchair away. He was like "why?" I said that I wanna highlight that I'm a wheelchair user and I'm proud of it. He said, "that's fantastic, I'm so sorry, I didn't even think of that, yes we'll keep the wheelchair in". That chair wasn't going anywhere and I was consciously, absolutely consciously, embracing [disability]. There's gonna be kids out there with physical disabilities. There's not enough [embracing disability] in Ireland (ath5).

Adopting an affirmative disability identity can mobilise people towards disability activism by restoring pride in disability (Mallet & Runswick Cole, 2014). However, many athletes also described a tension with this form of identity politics because it could re-enforce problematic categories of us (the disabled) versus them (the non-disabled) (Mallet & Runswick Cole, 2014). As one male Paralympian said:

> Sometimes disability activists say "we're different, we're like a sub group and we're going to celebrate and be proud of it, look at us, we're here, we're disabled, we're going to march for it"… I hate that, I absolutely despise it" (ath17).

This type of tension also connects with work by Purdue and Howe (2012) about how Para athletes have to simultaneously perform 'ability' to be seen as athletes and to perform 'disability' to demonstrate solidarity with disability communities and disability politics.

Concerns for being stereotyped as self-centred also pulled athletes' activist identities in different directions. In reaction to the tension of being stereotyped as self-centred when highlighting inaccessibly environments, a few athletes explained the benefit of stressing that they were using their platform as a voice for others. As one male Paralympian said:

> [Disability activist] is a friend of mine but when I heard him on [the TV channel talking about inaccessible transport] it drove me nuts… and a lot of people said to that the interview made him sound like an asshole because it was like he is the only one affected by this [inaccessibility issue], and he's not…if it's about you fine, but if you're going to go out publicly about it, don't make it about you because it's not about you specifically… you have a platform to go "yes it affects me but how many others does it affect…?"… [that's why] I kept saying when I did my interviews, this issue wasn't just about me, not about me, not about me, it's how it affects everybody else (ath30).

While a few athletes used strategies like this to highlight wider structural inequalities in society, the tension of being stereotyped as either complaining, angry or passive for highlighting inaccessibility pulled some athletes away from acting to transform environmental structures and towards acting to transform attitudes. For example, one female Paralympian said, "I got invited to a disability [activist] meeting and it was just loads of disabled people complaining about inaccessibility…. a lot of people with disabilities just complain too much…. whenever you see a happy disabled person it's kind of shock" (ath13). The social model of disability, often adopted as the theoretical backdrop to disability activism, has been critiqued largely for a preoccupation with explaining disability in terms of inaccessible environments (Smith & Bundon, 2018).

Despite this preference towards transforming attitudes, most athletes had a deep understanding about how environmental forces can influence behaviour, such as disabled people internalising discrimination and placing self-imposed limitations on what they feel they can become (Reeve, 2014). This understanding connects with emerging cultural sport psychology research (e.g., McGannon & Smith, 2015; Schinke, Blodgett, Ryba, Kao, & Middleton, 2019) that promotes intervention at a socio-political level in order change behaviour amongst marginalised populations (e.g., advocating for policy change to create social diversity). Paradoxically however, most athletes favoured using their platform for intervention directed at the behavioural level, thus connecting with dominant sport psychology perspectives that promotes interventions for social adversity at a behavioural level (Smith & Perrier, 2014). For example, athletes explained that public declarations about how they changed their own attitude to disability were popular and likely to receive more support (e.g., from sport organisations) and positive feedback (e.g., marketing opportunities). As the same female athlete went on to say "you could never face backlash for telling someone to be happy. Whereas if you're pointing out that people are doing their jobs wrong, then you can face backlash for that" (ath13). Moreover, athletes described how context counts. As one female wheelchair user said:

> You'll never see me march down [main street in Dublin protesting about disability rights]. But you might see some of my teammates do it. That's brilliant. That's happy days. That's a confidence that they have. I mightn't have that type of confidence to do that. But I'm confident enough to tell someone "you've got a step into your pub". There's different ways of raising awareness (ath26).

Furthermore, in line with findings from Beachy, Brewer, Van Raalte, and Cornelis's (2018) psychological research, a few athletes highlighted that performing an disability activist

identity (e.g., acting to create socio-political change) could be incompatible for some Para athletes with a strong athletic identity (e.g., focused on sport).

The consequence of these tensions and paradoxes are many reasons to avoid disability activism altogether and many reasons to avoid co-orientated action. But this situation also provided athletes with opportunities to be strategic. For example, at times athletes described contexts where they utilised negative disability stereotypes (e.g., tragic, inspirational) to build their platforms (e.g., sponsorship, fund-raising, accident awareness campaigns). One female athlete said:

> I'm not comfortable with a lot of stuff I do when I think about it too long. But actually, I weigh up whether it's gonna help somebody else or not. I kind of put my ego aside and I'm like alright fine if you [e.g., media company] want to show that [e.g., tragedy stereotype], I can live with that. I'm just very conscious [of being stereotyped] (ath4).

In other contexts, athletes were critical of how other athletes utilised disability stereotypes. As one male Paralympian said:

> She seems to use her life changing injury to build her profile. I don't agree with that. You're there to compete at the highest level, and up on the screen it's coming up 'how she thought she was gonna die' and all this. I don't see a need for it. Certainly, if [sports organisation] had asked me to do that I'd refuse. I wouldn't want to. (ath1)

For younger athletes, these conflicting narratives provided a diversity of activist styles to connect or disconnect from, or as one athlete said, "find their own way". For example, a few younger athletes described how they were becoming attracted to disability activists who used their platform to primarily "normalise" (ath1) disability and secondarily to highlight oppression in the right context. As one younger female Paralympian responded to the

question: is using your platform to create social change something you would like to go on and do, in the future?

> Yeah, I think so, I think it is important but I think it's important as well to do it in the right way and in the right kind of circumstances. Like, I am following [Irish disability activist] on Instagram and Twitter and I always see her doing stuff that I think is really cool. She makes her points [e.g., highlights oppression] but she is just doing all this cool stuff too. I just think like she is definitely kind of at the forefront of [disability activism]. Because she has the unique angle- like she wants like diversity in fashion. Which is interesting, and which is not something that you would even think. And I think [Irish female Paralympian] definitely has a rising platform at the moment. I suppose they just represent disabled people as people who happen to be disabled doing things that are completely unrelated to their disability. Which I think is the way that it should be represented. Whereas disabled people being disabled and just wanting things because they're disabled…[sighs] you know? (ath7).

Ableist influences on Para sport culture

There were many environmental forces influencing Para athlete activism that we term 'Ableist influences on Para sport culture'. This here is defined as the social, cultural and political influences of activist performance in a fluctuating ableist world. Ableism refers to a cultural favouritism for certain traits and characteristics found within social institutions (e.g., families, workplaces, disability sports organisations) such as walking, talking, independence, maleness and homonormativity (Campbell, 2008). Ableism can fuel and quell disability activism. The participants described how sociocultural changes in sport and society impact ableism, enabling or limiting the performance of activism.

At the time of data collection, Ireland was undergoing a significant period of progressive political change with recent major legislative reforms in the areas of LGBTQ rights (e.g., same sex marriage in 2015), gender equality (e.g., legalised abortion in 2018) and disability rights (e.g., ratification of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2018).Athletes described how this political change can limit activist performance. For example, younger athletes described how ableism was being increasingly eroded in the context of their increasingly inclusive institutions (schools, universities, sports clubs). As one younger male international athlete said:

> Places like… take the school here. They've done nothing but been accepting of me. You know there's never been students or anything kind of pointing like. Obviously you do get one or two people who kind of stare at you for a second. But they're not staring at me going "oh he's disabled". They're staring at me for stupid things, like I used to run around on the pitches in PE. So, you would see the class maybe turning their heads and kind of going "what the hell", but in awe rather than "oh God he's disabled" you know? I think nowadays especially people don't sit there and go "oh well you're disabled and we don't want you here". There is a much better attitude towards [difference]. Definitely. (ath21).

At the same time, athletes described how this political change also provided an intersectional discourse that enabled activist performance. Intersectionality considers how markers of difference (e.g., gender, sex, race, disability, class) support the constitution of one another, and how challenging an ableist society connects activism associated with these multiple markers (Goodley, 2016). When performing activism, athletes found it helpful to position disability and social change within the context of these wider political movements. For instance, expressing frustration that disability is often 'left off the diversity train',

explaining how disability activism is less attractive or popular than other forms of activism (e.g., LGBTQ activism), or contrasting disablism (often covert) with racism or homophobia (often overt). In the context of Para sport, a few athletes highlighted the irony of disability sport organisations embracing some forms of social activism (e.g., gay pride, gender equality) but rejecting disability activism. As one male Para athlete said "I found it ridiculous when Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby got behind the gay pride thing, with the rainbow laces campaign. They got behind that! They did their own version with rainbow headbands, but yet they've never done anything about disability rights!" (ath2)

Although some athletes supported formally promoting disability activism initiatives through Paralympic sport contexts (e.g., initiatives, statements, policies), most athletes described how the degrees of disability activism will be influenced by sociocultural changes within Paralympic sport. As Paralympic sport become more popular and professional, increased disability representation will enable more contexts of different forms of activism. However, athletes explained how the direction of representation can also limit activist performance. This because increasingly, representation favours more 'able-bodied' disabled athletes from more 'able-bodied' disability sports (e.g., athletics, swimming, cycling) who are less likely to directly experience forms of disablism. Silva and Howe (2018) explain how disability representation in Para sport is directional towards 'the able' because, against the hegemonic power of ableism, only highly functioning athletes will be seen as presenting elite sporting prowess. One experienced female Paralympian explained how direction of representation has developed:

> I don't think [low-functioning] athletes are represented well…it is kind of only the 'sexy athletes', the athletes that look kind of normal, kind of like everyone else. You know, I'm sure loads of people could name the likes of X and Y. But they don't know

> the boccia players. Like multi-medal winning boccia players, no-one knows about them. I think people want to look at someone who looks like them on television, you know. I suppose being well-articulated as well like…Y looks like everyone else you know. I think Z would probably be the most you know severely disabled that you'd see in the public eye. You don't really see most of the other athletes on telly. They might be in a chair but they're very low para, so they're moving and functioning kind of as any other able-bodied person would…It's interesting the way it has developed, you have to be presentable and with more of a minimal disability (ath31).

Likewise, whilst recognising a marked improvement in recent years, most athletes explained how discourses surrounding Paralympic sport continue to objectivity disabled people and lower the bar on disability sport. The Paralympic Paradox (Purdue & Howe, 2012) is the perceived organisational pressure to market Para athletes towards the perceived desires of a non-disabled audience at the expense of the desires of a disabled audience. For example, promoting inspiring stories of 'superhumans' overcoming adversity through sport or promoting the 'awe' of disabled bodies participating sport. Therefore, some athletes felt their primary social role was to challenge misrepresenting discourse by advocating for people to "see the sport not the disability". Athletes explained that introducing disability activism (e.g., rights-based rhetoric), although theoretically progressive, could add more confusion to an able-bodied audience that still struggles to separate 'disability' from Paralympic sport and still views disability predominantly though a lens of medicine and/or charity.

That said, we also identified sub-cultural differences about disability activism within the wider Irish Para sport landscape. While some Para sport contexts organised around affirmative discourses away from disability activism such as, "[in our club] we leave our

disability on the side of the pitch" (ath18) or "[in our club] we're about the ability not the disability" (ath2), thus positioning disability as negative by inferring that disability is the opposite of ability. Other clubs actively communicated their shared values towards disability activism through sport. One male Paralympian inferred this might be to do with disabled people in positions of influence in sport contexts; he said:

> Interviewer: But some Para sport organisations don't want anything to do with disability politics?
>
> Male athlete: I would say that [our] club is not afraid to espouse views on what's generally taken as the right thing to say.
>
> Interviewer: Why is that?
>
> Male athlete: Well I suppose myself and X set it up and we invited people on to it. And although you have to be able to play the sport, we invited people who are positive thinkers I think. That wasn't a prerequisite. We didn't do interviews. But we did bring in people who are very positive and really good role models for disability…subconsciously.
>
> Interviewer: What do you mean by positive role models?
>
> Male athlete: …everybody kind of embraces their disability, is proud of their disability, is proud of the club that they're associated with, is proud of how we advocate for ourselves, and proud of how we conduct ourselves on and off the court. So, we've good positive role models in so far as people aren't afraid of their disability. They don't hide it. They embrace it. We've done exhibitions. And like I said, that [disability activist] initiative about the wheelchair parking campaign. So, we involve ourselves in those things (ath3).

General discussion and conclusion

Drawing on a large qualitatively rich and rigorously developed data set, this is the first study to explore how elite Irish Para athletes engage in disability activism through Paralympic sport. The article contributes to the field of sport and exercise psychology by offering new meaning to Para athlete activism. Before discussing these new meanings, we must first highlight ways our data from an Irish sociocultural and Para sport context support findings from the limited previous UK based research by Smith et al. (2016) and Braye (2016). For example, most Para athletes in this study also confirmed a preference *towards acting to create change* within sport contexts (e.g., advocating for increased participation in Para sport) in contrast to *creating changes* in wider society. In addition, most athletes in this study also did not explicitly *identify as* disability activists but felt that their *actions contributed towards* disability activism. In contrast, however to this UK based research, most participants in this study felt that in the context of Ireland disabled people are largely treated unequally and disrespectfully in society. Critically, in this article we provide an analytical distinction between three areas of athlete activism, and we argue for the importance of context in influencing why, how and when Para athletes do activism. Therefore, the central theoretical contribution of this study is an interpretation of Para athlete activism as a contextually informed continuum of behaviour change

In answer to our first research question about how Para athletes act to create social change around disability, we argue that theorising 'activisms' as a continuum means that some actions will be more passive and some will be more active. Accordingly, because there are many different ways of doing activism, some stories of activism will connect with some people and disconnect with others. This disconnect played out in our second theme in the form of tensions and paradoxes, evident through (hyper)critical discourses about different activist identities. Therefore, answering our second question about how athletes *should do*

activism, we argue that researchers that seek to find out how athlete *should do* activism are in danger of producing a dichotomy. For example, in contrast to previous work by Smith et al. (2016) and Powis (2018) we question a direct connection between preference for identity first language and a political activist identity (e.g., "I'm as disabled athlete" in contrast to "I'm an athlete with a disability"). Therefore, we challenge research that characterises athlete activism by a dichotomy (e.g., this athlete either *is* or *is not* a political activist). Answering our third question about what are the factors that prevent and enable Para athlete activism we argue for the important influences of ableism on Para sport cultures and the performance of disability activism. Importantly moreover, viewing Para athlete activism through a lens of critical disability studies, as we have, illuminates eclectic ways of doing activism. This eclecticism in turn can have profound implications.

One potential implication of this diversity of actions is that it limits a collective story required to make strong social change. For example, conflicting narratives can be confusing making disability activism less likely to be taken seriously or more likely to be ignored. However, this diversity can also create a transformative space in which a more useful future-forming research question is how athletes *might do* activism. For instance, the many narratives offer athletes opportunities to do activism in different ways in different places at different times to different degrees. Furthermore, this article develops the following novel insights for Para sport contexts that wish to engage with disability activism through support, research, policy or action.

The first insight is that our results provide further evidence in support of a radical theoretical shift in the direction of disability sport psychology research. Whilst there has been a growing amount of disability sport psychology research, such work often unquestionably views disability from a bio-medical lens. For example, developing rational

emotive behaviour therapy (REMT) research that assumes psychological challenges (e.g., lack of autonomy, compromised self-identity, diminished self-worth, depression) are linked to specific biological 'conditions', such as visual impairment (e.g., Wood, Barker, Turner, & Thomson, 2018; Wood, Barker, Turner, & Sheffield, 2018). Problematically, such an approach can, either implicitly or explicitly, suggest that social oppression is an individual's responsibility to overcome and that adopting a disability activist identity is not compatible with an athlete identity (e.g., it can distract from performance). However, athletes' understanding and responses to psycho-emotional disablism in this data supports what disability activists have been saying about the psychology of adversity for the last half-century (see Goodley, 2016). Therefore, we challenge research that eschews a disability activist identity from an athlete identity. We provide evidence to suggest that future disability sport psychology research should connect with critical disability studies to understand socio-historical-economic-political forces that construct, produce and institutionalise psychological adversity (Smith & Perrier, 2014).

The second insight concerns athlete social legacy value. Paralympic sport is often promoted in terms of *individual health legacy* value by highlighting the psychological and physical health contributions of participation (Mascarinas & Blauwet, 2018). However, this study promotes an *athlete social legacy* value by highlighting the many societal and political contributions of Para athlete activism. An athlete social legacy value is becoming more important in Para sport contexts that a) increasingly distinguish disability awareness from disability equality in relation to athlete wellbeing (see Duty of care in sport review, 2017). and b) recognise that social legacy value (e.g., advocating for increased participation) is becoming an increasingly important criterion in the allocation of their funding (see www.uksport.gov.uk).

The third insight concerns a disability activist identity. Disabled identity has become a major factor in disability activism in terms of promoting shared oppression and political mobilisation (Mallet & Runswick Cole, 2014). However, the use of identity politics in disability activism has been problematised in several ways. For example, many disabled people do not consider themselves disabled and others consider biological impairment, not social oppression, to be their political point of departure (Hughes, 2009). In addition, identity politics can reduce, stereotype, other and homogenise disability (Moran, 2018). However, explaining activism as we have can address these problems in number of ways. One way this promotes a regard for disability identity as non-essentialist (e.g., changeable, able to be decided upon, contextual) and this can help repel persisting older philosophical meanings of identity (e.g., fixed, permanent, innate). Another way to address problems of identity politics can be resolved by reference to intersectionality because the multiplicity (e.g., shifting interconnecting identities such gender, race, class, religion) of lived experience of oppression is not always reflected in disability activism (Mallet & Runswick Cole, 2014). Finally, as Moran (2018) explains, there is a value in reserving identity politics as a term to refer only to politics that mobilise *specifically* and *meaningfully* around the concept of identity. For example, there are contexts where disability activism deploys around conceptualisations of justice, equity or equality - and not identity.

The final insight is a concern for Para sport culture. As demonstrated in this study, Para sport contexts are by no-means immune to the influence of an ableist ideology. Silva and Howe (2018) urge Para sport cultures to reflect on the multiple ways they fail to challenge ableism, or worse, reinforce ableism. One way to challenge ableism in Para sport is by replicating the heterogeneity of Para sport at all levels of governance and practice (e.g., coaching, management). As Mallet and Runswick Cole (2014) say “organisations *for*

disabled people aim to provide services and support to meet the needs that professionals have identified and defined, whereas organisations *of* disabled people aim to provide services and support to meet the needs that their members themselves have identified" (p.91).

Our methodological approach to understanding Para athlete activism was not without limitations, however. As discussed by Armstrong, Butryn, Andrews & Masucci (2018), the language in which athlete activism research is framed and discussed can be a limitation. While academics are comfortable with terms like social activism and 'future forming' approaches to research (e.g., research that aims challenge disablism and ableism), we found these 'loaded' terms and 'political' approaches are capable eliciting negative responses from athletes and sport organisations. Especially when linked to politically emotive concepts around social inequality, nationalism and political responsibility. On top of this, the language of disability politics can be, as one participant said, "a minefield". Reflecting on our approach, we found that people can be put off this type of research by the perception that academics hold predetermined ideas about how Para athletes *should* use their platforms for socio-political purposes.

In summary, as most non-disabled people learn about disability through culture and media and not through individual interactions with disabled people, media and culture should be at the forefront of disability activism. Paralympic sport is an increasingly influential cultural context within a wider disability landscape. In addition, an understanding of disability in society is increasingly shifting away from that of individual medical adversity towards one of human social diversity. This shift, coupled with the rise of sports activism, provide Para sport cultures with an opportunity to think differently about disability and disability activism. As athlete activism becomes a regular feature of Paralympic sport, the

more understanding researchers have of different perspectives will be important. For example, Para athlete activism should be understood within the wider context of disability activism because disability rights scholars are only recently beginning to acknowledge the potential of Paralympic sport towards disability activism after an historically tumultuous relationship (see Haslett & Smith, 2019).

We hope this article has encouraged scholars to think more critically about the potential of Paralympic sport as a vehicle to address inequality. Likewise, we hope to stimulate a debate within Para sport systems about how the contours of athlete activism can be amplified for positive social change and affirmative ways of becoming.

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