

Extraordinary Normalcy, Ableist Rehabilitation, and Sporting Ablenationalism: The Cultural (Re)Production of Paralympic Disability Narratives

Emma Pullen Daniel Jackson and Michael Silk
Loughborough University Bournemouth University

P. David Howe and Carla Filomena Silva
Western University

In the United Kingdom, significant changes have occurred in the Paralympic media production environment and style of Paralympic broadcasting. Given the generative nature of media texts on cultural representation, the authors explore the circulation of disability narratives in contemporary Paralympic media coverage. Drawing on an integrated data set that brings together textual analysis and audience perceptions, the authors highlight the presence of three disability narratives, termed: extraordinary normalcy, ableist rehabilitation, and sporting ablenationalism. The authors unpack the ways these three narratives differ from the widely and commonly used “supercrip” critique and discuss the implications of these narratives, and the wider cultural discourses and dialogue they generate, in terms of inclusion/exclusion and progressive social change.

The Paralympic Games is both a popular sporting mega event and one of the most hyper-visible displays of disability in the media (Pullen, Jackson, Silk, & Scullion, 2018). With extensive broadcast coverage across mainstream and digital media platforms and huge global audiences (International Paralympic Committee, 2017), it is perhaps the single most powerful mediated representation of disability. Unsurprisingly, Paralympic coverage has presented a site of cultural critique for scholars interested in the media representation of disability and the wider impact on everyday discourses and perceptions of disability (e.g., Beacom, French & Kendall, 2016; Ellis, 2009; McGillivray, O'Donnell, McPherson, & Misener, 2019).

Previous studies have typically depicted the “supercrip” narrative as the most dominant in Paralympic representation (e.g., Howe & Silva, 2017; McGillivray et al., 2019; Silva & Howe, 2012), a representation characterized by inspirational stories of personal determination to “overcome” disability and achieve success (Kama, 2004). However, in recent years, supercrip iconography has received some attention from disability scholars (see, Grue, 2015; Schalk, 2016), who suggest the need for a more focused critique that pays attention to genre, narrative context, and reception/consumption (see Beacom et al., 2016).

Indeed, and with Schalk (2016), media texts—and the circulation of cultural narratives—are not static or final. These are contextually and historically situated practices shaped by interrelated cultural processes of production, representation, and consumption (Ellis,

2019). This is the case in the United Kingdom with the Paralympics, where there have been significant changes to the broadcast/production environment with the entry of Channel 4 (C4) as the U.K.'s official broadcaster of the Paralympic Games since 2012 (Pullen et al., 2018). As a public service broadcaster, C4 had a statutory remit that included challenging dominant disability representations through a distinctive “style” of parasport coverage not seen in the history of disability broadcasting (Walsh, 2014). Given C4's production practices and wider remit to represent social minorities, it presents itself as a powerful cultural agent in shaping and (re-)presenting disability media narratives (see Pullen & Silk, 2020).

The shift in the Paralympic broadcast environment offers a compelling space from which to pay renewed attention to disability narratives in parasport coverage. What *other* (beyond the supercrip) disability narratives circulate? How do they add nuance to current understandings of the supercrip? And how are they consumed, or rather, in what ways do they resonate in wider public understandings of disability? To address these questions empirically, this paper draws on two integrated data sets: qualitative textual analysis of some 90 hr of C4's 2016 Paralympic broadcasting, and focus groups with over 200 audience members across England and Wales. While remaining mindful of the supercrip praxis and drawing on theoretical contributions from across disability and cultural studies, we explicate a number of narratives that framed the stories of para-athletes and resonated in Paralympic audiences' perceptions and understandings of disability. In doing so, we highlight how such narratives communicate particular Paralympic knowledge(s) that perform important cultural work in often problematic ways, enhancing our understanding of how Paralympic representation has a very *real* and *powerful* impact on social attitudes toward disability. We begin to document the narrative shifts occurring in contemporary Paralympic media coverage since the entry of C4 and tentatively propose a number of research agendas derived from our findings that might inform future Paralympic inquiry.

Pullen is with the School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire, United Kingdom. Jackson is with the Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, Poole, United Kingdom. Silk is with the Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, Poole, United Kingdom. Howe is with the School of Kinesiology, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada. Silva is with the Western University, London, Ontario, Canada. Pullen (E.L.Pullen@lboro.ac.uk) is corresponding author.

Disability, Paralympics, and the “Supercrip”

Paralympic research is an expanding area of scholarship across sport sociology (e.g., Brittain & Beacom, 2018; Schantz & Gilbert, 2001; Silva & Howe, 2012; Solves, Pappous, Rius, & Kohe, 2019). In Paralympic media studies—where we locate this study—research has often focused on issues of representation (see McGillivray et al., 2019; Silva & Howe, 2012; Solves et al., 2019). Mostly, scholars have pointed to the extent to which Paralympic representations are predicated on a number of wider cultural narratives of disability (see Ellis, 2019; Kama, 2004, McGillivray et al., 2019), such as medicalized, vulnerable portrayals of disability preventing full participation in everyday life; supercrip narratives with an emphasis on inspirational stories of determination and personal courage to overcome adversity; or portrayal of individuals with disabilities as less than human, presented as villains or “freaks” (Ellis, 2009). While examples of these narratives can be found across the media industry, the most widely identified in Paralympic coverage is the “supercrip” (Ellis, 2009; Howe & Silva, 2017; Silva & Howe, 2012).

The supercrip stems from an existing cultural narrative encompassing broader ableist assumptions about disability (Kama, 2004). These foundational assumptions are that (a) impairment is essentially and always negative (and therefore it needs to be overcome); (b) disability is inherently an individual problem to be overcome by individual effort, and (c) building upon the previous two assumptions, the social expectations of disabled people (irrespective of impairment) regarding what they can do as productive members of society are low, grounded in ableist benchmarks of success, and thus, everyday accomplishments are interpreted as extraordinary (see also Grue, 2015). This narrative has been criticized for establishing a hierarchy of disability preferences among audiences whereby disabled bodies closer to ableist norms of functionality, ability, and corporeality are deemed more “palatable” and thereby culturally more accepted (Purdue & Howe, 2013). The supercrip has been used to critique the representation of an individual who accomplishes ordinary daily tasks *despite* disability, termed “regular supercrip,” to disabled people who achieved more extraordinary feats (even by able-bodied standards), deemed “exceptional supercrips” (Howe & Silva, 2017).

A review of Paralympic studies focusing on representation (e.g., Berger, 2008; Beacom et al., 2016; Brooke, 2018; Ellis, 2009; Howe, 2011; Kim, Lee, & Oh, 2017; Marques et al., 2015; McGillivray et al., 2019; Silva & Howe, 2012; Solves et al., 2019) demonstrates the widespread application of the supercrip as an analytic concept across a range of media platforms, from television (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Quinn & Yoshida, 2016), to printed media (Beacom et al., 2016; Misener, 2012), to promotion and marketing (Silva & Howe, 2012). For the most part, empirical focus has been on newspaper coverage and marketing material as the single site of analysis (see Howe, 2011; McGillivray et al., 2019; Silva & Howe, 2012). Important as newspaper coverage is in a critique of representation, broadcast journalism is one example of a particular narrative medium (or genre) with distinct journalistic cultures and narrative conventions that shape its sports coverage in particular ways (Solves et al., 2019; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). In the current moment, despite shifts in media consumption patterns, live sports broadcasting (or, more specifically, video), given the increasing consumption of sports highlights made for mobile and

online consumption, is the dominant way audiences consume sport (see, Wayne, 2018).

Recently, a number of Paralympic studies have identified subtle but important shifts in Paralympic media coverage, potentially extending our understanding of the supercrip as it intersects with discourses of gender, celebrity narratives of technologically enhanced Paralympians (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Misener, 2012), sporting nationalist frames, and “legacy” and “equality” rhetoric (Misener, 2012). In their analysis of print media content of the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, McGillivray et al. (2019) identify discursive shifts in Paralympic representation, highlighting how discourses of nationalism, militarization, and celebrityization are increasingly present in Paralympic media. These shifts reflect the recent transition of the Paralympic games to a global spectacle and the dictates of the mega-event marketplace with an emerging accoutrement of advertising and sponsorship revenues, celebrity economy (Pullen & Silk, 2020), and disabled military personnel (see also Batts & Andrews, 2011). Despite this important finding, however, McGillivray et al.’s (2019) analysis remains framed on a supercrip praxis, concluding that such discourses and subjectivities are simply being “absorbed” into the supercrip narrative.

Certainly, McGillivray et al.’s (2019) study, when read alongside contemporary disability scholarship (e.g., Mitchell & Snyder, 2015; Puar, 2017), does point to the extent the Paralympics is sutured by, and reflective of, wider biopolitical disability relations—what McRuer (2010) has termed “crip nationalism” or, following Mitchell and Snyder (2015), recent “ablenationalisms.” Both terms conceptualize the way neoliberal inclusionary discourses—centered on ableist norms—have begun to cultivate renewed forms of inclusion and exclusion and promote the increasing visibility of “normatively disabled” bodies across cultural economies. Indeed, on the surface, forms of crip nationalism are writ large in Paralympic media representation (see Puar, 2017), yet they remain absent in the theoretical moorings of recent readings of the supercrip narrative.

Media Narratives and Paralympic Audiences

The Paralympics, as with all media texts, is a popular and pedagogically powerful form of communication, and one that is influential in shaping everyday public perceptions and attitudes toward disability (Howe, 2011). It is through narrative that media—and other cultural texts—communicate and organize (or “frame”) experiences, stories, and events (Ryan, 2004); mobilize and legitimize affective investments in particular identities (see also Caddick, 2019); and provide shared cultural resources in the interpretation of social practices and events (Smith & Sparkes, 2008a). The media condition how narratives are presented in structure, plot, and aesthetic/visual form (e.g., from broadcast to microblogging [see Trevisan, 2017]), while also providing an important vehicle in investing certain narratives with forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). However, narratives are never static or final; they are continually in the process of revision by cultural actors—adopted and combined with other available narratives—relational to counter-narratives and imbued with ever-shifting power relations (Plummer, 2016).

Narrative has provided a fruitful analytical framework across disability studies and provided important insight into how stories of disability are always embedded within, and reflective of, wider cultural and political discourses. Scholars have explored how personal stories of disablement and impairment are typically embedded in Western medicalized narratives, where “suffering,

survival, surpassing and transcendence” (Smith & Sparkes, 2008b, p. 218) of disability form the dominant structure. Propagated by an ableist culture that assumes medical progress, the dominant medical narrative—termed the “restitution narrative” (see Frank, 2013)—frames disability as simply transitory within a wider narrative arc that plots life and the body resuming “normal” functioning.

Cultural mediums, such as film, TV (see Ellis, 2014), and literature (see Mitchell & Snyder, 2000)—and, increasingly, online digital spaces (see Trevisan, 2017)—act as important cultural locations in making particular narratives familiar and accessible to audiences; studies have demonstrated how the disabled body, its corporeality, and lived experience, is scripted as a complication or problem in textual representation. This has invoked what Mitchell and Snyder (2000) term as a form of “narrative prosthesis,” a process that attempts to resolve or “correct” stories of bodily deviance or which reconstructs stories to fit with dominant cultural narratives. This is typically achieved through narrative plots that mark and then “cure” difference (as seen in the restitution narrative), that “rescue . . . the despised object from social censure,” or that construct an “alternative mode of being” (p.54) that can be located within ableist discourses and practices of living.

Alongside a consideration of narrative production and performance, we also need to consider audiences as social actors that actively participate in the co-construction of dominant disability narratives and cultural knowledge (Ellis, 2019). Importantly, identifying the narrative frames constructed by broadcasters and how they are interpreted by audiences are central aspects of the wider process of cultural (re)production and discourse beyond representation. Yet, excluding a handful of studies, audience perceptions and interpretations of Paralympic narratives remain a neglected area of research. The few studies that explore cultural reception are concerned with para-athletes’ perceptions of the supercrip narrative (Berger, 2008; Hardin & Hardin, 2004), highlighting the extent to which this narrative frame is perceived by them as positive in facilitating audience interest and raising the visibility of disability sport. Perhaps the most contextually relevant study of audience data is the work by Hodges, Scullion, and Jackson (2015), who identified a range of cultural discourses that often overlapped with or affirmed those of the supercrip through a qualitative analysis of audience meaning-making in the context of the 2012 Paralympics. Outside of our own work in this area, this remains the only study to date to have explored audience perceptions of U.K. Paralympic broadcast coverage.

At present, the cultural critique of disability narratives in Paralympic media has yet to explore the circulation of other disability narratives and if—and how—such narratives act *on* audiences. Leaving the supercrip narrative aside for a moment is important to explore how other disability narratives may contribute to the wider cultural texts and perceptions of disability and to understand how such narratives may reflect (and contribute toward) forms of inclusion/exclusion and/or social change. In this paper, we analyze a number of narratives mediated through Paralympic broadcasting and manifested in Paralympic audiences’ perceptions of disability.

Method

To enable empirical study centered on the production and consumption of representations of disability through the Paralympics, our methodological approach was integrative, bringing together interviews with C4 senior production staff, qualitative textual analysis, and audience focus groups. In this paper, we focus on

our analysis of the Paralympic text and audience focus groups, while also considering the production context and intention of cultural agents through our previous work drawn from elite interviews with C4 production staff¹ (see Pullen et al., 2018).

Qualitative Textual Analysis

Grounded in existing disability studies literature, qualitative textual analysis was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 entailed a complete reading of the 90 hr of C4’s broadcast material via a systematic process that identified and split segments of text depending on how they operated within the broadcast (e.g., as live sport, commentary, or prerecorded athlete video). Phase 2 included a focused reading of the prerecorded athlete videos, what we term here as “backstory” features. These short (1–4 min) features were central to C4’s editorial decision making (see Pullen et al., 2018), with 50 features overall being broadcasted, then repeated at peak viewing hours. These segments provided audiences with an insight into the biographies of para-athletes, narrating compelling stories of disability (see Pullen et al., 2018). For our analysis, backstory features provided a persuasive textual form where disability narratives could be read more closely using a narrative approach. Following Smith and Sparkes (2008a), we paid careful attention to (a) structure—how narratives are “held together,” plotted, and certain events rendered meaningful; (b) themes—a focus on the content of the story and the manifest types of cultural discourses and knowledges; and (c) performance—the ways in which actions are effected and events inferred through context, mediation, and affect, and the relations of power operating across the representational assemblage.

Audience Focus Groups

Between June and December 2016, 23 focus groups lasting between 60 and 90 min were conducted with 216 members of the public. These were held in public meeting rooms (e.g., university seminar rooms, hotel meeting facilities) at city centers across England and Wales, with participant numbers relatively equal in each site. Recruitment involved a purposeful sampling technique against inclusion criteria that required participants to be aged over 18 years; to be able to provide full informed consent; and to have watched at least some of the C4 Rio 2016 Paralympic Games coverage. At each site, multiple focus groups were conducted, with up to 10 participants per group split equally between groups who self-identified as disabled and nondisabled. The data used in this paper are drawn from audiences who were identified as nondisabled. The demographic (age, gender, class, race, and ethnicity) and geographic spread of participants was intentionally wide-ranging to capture varied “voices”; however, the data set contains self-selection biases that result from the inclusion criteria. The most visible bias was a declared interest in disability issues, from a general curiosity in disability to an interest in elite para-sport, evident in those who self-identified as nondisabled.

The focus group guide was structured around audience backgrounds and experiences of disability, perceptions of Paralympics coverage (with a focus on para-athlete backstories), wider attitudes toward disability, and the impact of the Paralympics on their perceptions of disability. Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with all participants assigned pseudonyms prior to the transcripts being entered into the QSR NVivo data management program. Manual interpretive coding entailed a process of open coding and identification of major thematic categories

across the transcripts to capture descriptions or expressions of manifest content; this was followed by a process of subcoding of categories to produce subcategories, whereby themes were condensed to capture dominant and recurring themes (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Analysis of themes was grounded in the previous Paralympic literature and disability theory.

Bringing together the two data sets, we identified three dominant narratives across the C4 coverage and visible through the audience data. Grounded in existing disability literatures, we have termed these narratives as extraordinary normalcy, ableist rehabilitation, and sporting ablenationalism. Below, we draw on several emblematic examples in backstory features and audience data to demonstrate the manifestation of each narrative.

Extraordinary Normalcy

As with all cultural narratives, the body and its corporeal characteristics partly shape what, and how, stories are told (Smith & Sparkes, 2008a). Alongside the genre and the wider mediated context in which a narrative is located, careful attention needs to be paid to the types of stories certain disabled bodies can, and do, tell. Following Cleary (2016) and Snyder and Mitchell (2010), mediated popular narratives perform to story the “other” body within a knowable ideological and discursive register for public consumption. This is typically the case in a media culture structured by neoliberal ableism, or more specifically, where the machinations of neoliberal discourse propagate and celebrate idealized subjectivities centered on able, productive, adaptable, laboring, and aesthetic (healthy, fit, sexual, and heteronormative) bodies (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019)—certainly, a culture where disability has long been seen as materially and discursively incompatible with both popular media and sport (Silva & Howe, 2012).

This can be seen across a number of C4’s backstory features, but the media representation of Paralympian Sophie Christensen is emblematic of this “incompatibility.” While Christensen is a highly successful Paralympian, having competed in the dressage event and won a number of gold medals at the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, she remains one of the least-visible athletes across both live broadcast coverage and athlete features. While the extent of her visibility has been linked in part to a “hierarchy” of parasports that see events, such as swimming and athletics, receiving the most coverage (Pullen & Silk, 2020), it is arguably a further manifestation of the degree and property of her impairment; Christensen has severe cerebral palsy. In attempting to make her impaired body both “knowable” for a consuming audience and discursively “compatible” with sport, Christensen is represented through a narrative of extraordinary normalcy (Cleary, 2016).

To provide some context, the feature of Christensen is dominated by visuals of her riding a horse with a male coach by her side providing encouragement (“Well done, keep going”), as she narrates a story that emphasizes “the balance between education and sport” and using parasport as a way to “just have fun.” Despite being one of the most successful dressage para-athletes, the narrative is one of amateurism characterized by an infantilization where her parasport identity is juxtaposed against an “alternative” identity (i.e., as a student). Furthermore, given the role of the male coach in this context, this narrative is located within an important set of disability-gender relations (see also Pullen & Silk, 2020) that further compounds the effect of infantilization.

Across the backstory features, this narrative coalesces around para-athletes whose impairment is particularly severe and visible. In popular culture, following Cleary (2016), disabled bodies such

as Christensen’s are often textually located and narrated on a dominant discursive register of “extraordinary normalcy,” a body performing a conventional normalcy *despite* otherness. The ableist assumption of the incompatibility of certain severe forms of disability with both sport and everyday life evokes a form of narrative prosthesis (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000) whereby disablement—for the audience—is resolved through a plotline centered on the “ability” of the disabled body to participate in everyday “normal” life. In the feature on Christensen, we see this discourse in the narration of her identity as both Paralympian and university student, as a body that *can* and *does* both. While it subverts the elite sport narrative in this context, extraordinary normalcy operates to align Christensen closer to neoliberal ableism (i.e., the productive and functional body, emphasizing individual agency and self-sufficiency), further corroborated by visual production aesthetics that present her throughout the feature in control of her horse, known to visually mask the signs of cerebral palsy.

The narrative of extraordinary normalcy shows discursive overlap with the everyday “supercrip,” insofar as it depicts overcoming disability and the ability to successfully navigate ableist institutions (e.g., education). Yet, in our attempt to add nuance here, we suggest that this narrative draws from, and is reflective of, neoliberal ableism (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019) and discourses of disability inclusion (see Mitchell & Snyder, 2015). Indeed, it is a narrative that centralizes ability and access but continues to nourish neoliberal ableist expectations and ideas of “success” through emphasizing the capacity of the disabled body to be “predictively productive under neoliberalism” (Fritsch, 2013, p.142).

The narrative of extraordinary normalcy frames a number of life-story features on para-athletes where impairment is deemed severe. For instance, in the feature on Ali Jawad—a successful powerlifter born without legs—Jawad is introduced to the audience through scenes that depict him undertaking the everyday activities associated with taken-for-granted ableism (e.g., getting out of bed, food shopping, and driving to training). Again, the feature foregrounds Jawad’s independence and functionality—*despite* having no legs—demonstrating his ability to navigate normative (able) structures. In contradistinction to Christensen, Jawad’s story is partly characterized by a sporting rivalry and his quest for a gold medal in Rio. This is, again, indicative of the gendered nuances inherent in emerging forms of Paralympic representation where, in spite of disability, masculinity, and its emphasis on individual achievement and competitiveness, can be performed with greater integrity than femininity within the material-discursive conditions of elite sport (see Pullen & Silk, 2020).

While this narrative, unlike more traditional trends in media coverage (see Thomas & Smith, 2003), makes more severe forms of disability *visible*—a focus of C4’s Paralympic coverage (Walsh, 2014)—it does so in a way that aligns with extant neoliberal and ableist discursive registers. It is unsurprising, then, that a subtle hierarchy of disability preferences and moral judgements, as previously acknowledged by Purdue and Howe (2013), remains manifest across the audience data set. This hierarchy is hinted by audience members, who claimed:

I think there’s a difference between people who are disabled from an accident and people who are disabled from a sort of illness or something they were born with . . . for example, cerebral palsy, I think there’s more of an issue.

I think for me it’s the difference between the physical impediment and the mental umm or you know, internal problems.

There is then a perceived discomfort among some audiences in viewing some para-bodies for whom the “internal problems” are still deemed as an “issue.” While the use of the term “issue” here is instructive of an othering process, the narrative of extraordinary normalcy subtly circulates through the audience data to resignify the dominant perception that disablement readily equates with an inability to participate in everyday life (Ellis, 2009).

They can work, they can play, they can have a laugh, they can go out socialising with mates just like we can . . . Rather than thinking: “aww disabled people can’t do anything.”

They seem to get on with everyday tasks perfectly fine and that is a nice little change to see, I think.

While the above extracts imply a low level of expectation for people with impairments (Silva & Howe, 2012), they also represent a shift away from perceptions of disabled dependency in previous representations (Ellis, 2009) and, therefore, are telling of the effects of stories characterized by inclusionary discourses. This process is inaugurated by the praise of athletes’ ability to “work” as an important marker of independence, a perception that further structures greater inequalities upon disabled bodies for whom upward mobility (and, by implication, “work,” “play,” and “socializing”) is less achievable. Such value placed upon “independence” is particularly problematic when considered amidst a context of economic austerity, polarized labor markets, and personal independence payments (Brittain & Beacom, 2016).

Ableist Rehabilitation

The second dominant narrative is the *ableist rehabilitation narrative*. Told through the bodies of para-athletes who have sustained impairment through an accident, occupational hazard, or military service, the ableist rehabilitation narrative is characterized by stories that feed “conceptions and practices aiming to restore the ‘normal’ life and body that ableism upholds as leitmotifs of successful citizenry” (Monforte, Smith, & Pérez-Samaniego, 2019, p. 3). This narrative frame succinctly plots the story of life before, during, and after impairment propagated by dominant cultural binaries inherent in medical discourses (see also Frank, 2013): able/disabled; normal/disrupted; functional/nonfunctional; meaningful/nonmeaningful. Although this narrative can be identified across a number of backstory features and throughout the wider rhetoric of live coverage, we draw on two examples here (Tom Agger and Micky Yule) where it is particularly manifest.

In the feature on Tom Agger, a Team GB para-rower, the story focuses on an accident during his time at university that left him paralyzed from below the waist. Characteristic of this particular narrative structure, Agger narrates how his “old life” revolved around nondisabled university sport, signifying a body once physical, productive, functional, and meaningful. As expected, Agger’s accident becomes the key event in the story, followed by claims of resolution such as [he] “needed to stop thinking about [his] old life and the things [he] used to do” and to “start moving forward in [his] life,” with rowing being the vehicle to “turn [his life] around.” A similar plotline is narrated in the feature on Micky Yule, a former soldier who served in Afghanistan, where he lost both his legs after an improvised explosive device explosion. Following a number of operations, Yule described training for the Paralympics as a way to “[feel] himself again.” Importantly, parasport becomes the vehicle or, rather, acts as the narrative prosthesis in maintaining narrative progression toward a level of

physical functionality where meaningful disabled existence is achieved. Indeed, parasport provides an alternative mode of “near able” being, one that is embedded in the ableist practice of sport and that can perform, at least to some degree, the physical athletic practices of the successful able body.

Engendered by highly affective production aesthetics, the ableist rehabilitation narrative organizes stories of very visceral and embodied experiences of disablement characterized by sudden disruption, corporeal conflict, and resolution *through* participation in sport. Although there is a focus on “getting better,” the ableist rehabilitation narrative differs from both the restitution narrative and the supercrip narrative, insofar as a disabled identity is not necessarily overcome but accepted as part of the “new self,” although arguably *because* it can continue to approximate a level of independent functioning through sport. Relatedly, it is a narrative that has gained currency or symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) within the current cultural moment and is intrinsically wedded to a specific disabled embodied experience. For instance, in the framing of ex-military personnel, this narrative reflects the increasing cultural accommodation of bodies in sporting spaces where disability has been acquired traumatically as a result of sustained military intervention in other nationally privileged spaces (see also Cree & Caddick, 2019). This narrative locates disability as an existential threat, the result of heroic action, or a personal “it could happen to anyone” tragedy. At the same time, the celebration of such stories disguises the risk of certain populations (especially in the case of military personnel) to disablement as a product of economic and political/state power and intervention (Puar, 2017). Through the focus on rehabilitation and successful inclusion in parasport, the ableist rehabilitation narrative operates to legitimize certain disability rehabilitation “success” stories for specific population groups while marginalizing stories of individuals who don’t, or can’t, achieve a level of functionality to successfully approximate ableist forms of rehabilitation.

The embodied, dramatic nature of the stories structured by ableist rehabilitation in Paralympic coverage has a particularly powerful effect on audiences. It acts, like other narratives of sporting heroes, to create an affective attachment (Horsdal, 2011; Sparkes & Stewart, 2019) and direct the emotional investment of audiences in a particular disabled experience and body. As an audience member claimed, dramatic stories of impairment “made you want to support them, you want to back them and watch them.” This sentiment was expressed across several audience responses, captured below:

But for someone like a soldier who, you know, is in peak physical condition and then, you know, just in an incident perhaps loses a leg or whatever, there’s a whole learning process that happens and an emotional thing that happens as well . . . I feel a bit proud of them.

I remember they did a story and the lady that was in the London bombing that did the volleyball . . . but they did quite a lot of that in the build up to the event so you knew people to watch as well, it made you like increase your interest.

Like with the ableist rehabilitation narrative, affective narratives are particularly evident in mediated sport culture (including the Paralympic Games) and act *on* people by structuring investments in sports people (see Sparkes & Stewart, 2019), teams, and nations and mobilizing celebrity sporting economies and “affective atmospheres” of national celebration (Closs & Stephens, 2016). Indeed, as Grossberg (1992) claims, the importance of affect lies in

its power to “invest difference . . . [and] the ways specific differences come to matter [as] markers of identity” (p.60). Here, audiences become emotionally invested in a particular form of disablement, reinforcing the legitimacy of the “hero” within the narrative and, by proxy, one that promotes parasport as a legitimate and culturally valued space for the successful rehabilitation of “broken” bodies. This message may subsequently reinforce the perception of a disabled life—outside of sport—as less meaningful. In the account below, one audience member expressed disability as a form of dispossession—“you have got nothing”—a quite literal articulation of bodily debilitation (Puar, 2017).

You lose your legs or whatever That’s it, you have got nothing, you go the bottom, drugs or kill yourself. But they have got a goal now, they have seen everything else, and I believe that [Paralympics] has helped.

Sporting Ablenationalism

The most dominant narrative present across Paralympic coverage, somewhat revising Mitchell and Snyder (2015), is the *sporting ablenational narrative*. Operating under the auspices of what Mitchell and Snyder (2015) term “ablenationalism” and McRuer (2010) also terms a form of “crip nationalism,” sporting ablenational narratives are told through the most “able-disabled” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015) bodies wholly centering on successful para-athletes, intrinsically tied to bodies where impairment has been “exceeded” through technological “capacitation” (Puar, 2017), or where impairment is not visible or severe enough to disrupt neoliberal ableist bodily norms (see also Pullen & Silk, 2020). Here we draw on two examples: Richard Whitehead, who embodies technological capacitation through his bilateral above-the-knee advanced prosthetic technology, and Lauren Steadman, born without a lower right arm.

The life-story feature centered on Richard Whitehead opens with a series of images that make visible his carbon fiber “cheetah” prosthetics. As we have argued elsewhere (see Pullen & Silk, 2020), the textual representation of Whitehead demonstrates the transformative ability of advanced mobility technology in enabling a very able, highly functional, and technologized sporting body displaying a form of technological stylization previously identified by McGillivray et al. (2019). The visual images of Whitehead’s technological sporting body are interpolated with a story centered on sporting success based in rhetorical celebratory language portraying sport as a vehicle to leaving a “legacy” and providing “inspiration” and “positivity” for disabled people. Based on extant understandings, a surface reading indicates what Howe (2011) has previously identified as an inspirational overcoming story (or the “ultimate supercrip”) typical of technologically enhanced parabodies. However, we would argue that this representational assemblage performs far more nuanced narrative work when read alongside the work of Mitchell and Snyder (2015), whose concept of ablenationalism draws on the cultural capital invested in the hyper-technological national disabled body.

Certainly, technologically enhanced bodies that demonstrate a level of “technohuman” ableism (see Howe & Silva, 2017) embody the cultural and material resources to tell stories of successful inclusion. While their experiences are vastly disconnected from most people living with impairments, their approximation to both ableist *sporting* corporeality (muscular, athletic, and powerful) and neoliberal ableism (adaptable, laboring, and independent), and their privileged upwardly mobile position with access to

technological support—notwithstanding material, structural, and socioeconomic barriers—positions them as the idealized disabled neoliberal body.

Sporting ablenational narratives are equally present in the representations of other “able-disabled” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015) para-athletes who are not technologically capacitated. Again, the materiality of the body is essential given its approximation to norms of neoliberal ableism and “fit” with the material-discursive conditions of elite sport. The feature of Lauren Steadman, a para-triathlete born without a lower right arm, is one example of this narrative. Similar to Whitehead, she is depicted across the feature through a number of stylized scenes that signify normative sporting and gendered actions (running, swimming, cycling, brushing her hair, and wearing a dress), corroborated by claims of “bring[ing] home a gold medal,” training to “stay ahead of the rest of the world” and to “never be forgotten.”

Importantly, sporting ablenational narratives do important affective work on audiences. Indeed, as part of a wider representational assemblage—compounded by enhanced production logics and celebratory language of sporting success and inspiration—sporting ablenationalism invests certain technologically enhanced disabled bodies with disabled sporting capital (Bourdieu, 1984). In this sense, and to borrow from Ahmed (2004a), it begins to construct “sticky” associations around able-disabled athletic parasport bodies that direct positive cultural perceptions toward disability for audiences. The quote below is an emblematic example of this:

Years ago you had a wooden leg or plastic leg, it’s all changed. . . when in the past they would be hiding it, now there is a guy in the gym who walks in, in his shorts and he has got no legs from knees down and he is in the gym. It has changed what it means to be disabled. And then when he changes, he’s got a new set of legs he puts on he’s got trainers on and he takes them off and he’s got the Union Jack and they are proud, you can see it, they’re wearing them out in the street with colours and they have made them more fashionable now.

Positive audience perceptions toward able-disabled bodies cultivate forms of emotion and comfort toward some disabled bodies, demonstrating, to some extent, *how* hierarchies of disability in parasport coverage are made manifest (Purdue & Howe, 2013). Certainly, the account above highlights the role of prosthetic technology as an important embodied “sticky” surface that signifies ableism and thereby displaces previous notions of disability. In this sense, prosthetic technology inculcates a kind of “commodity fetishism” (Ahmed, 2004b) in audiences, a disabled body that can meet the demands of normative (and able) cultural consumption activities—for instance, through the commodification and “fashioning” of prosthetics—that resonates with the consumerist activities of an idealized neoliberal citizen.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the affective power of sporting ablenational narratives and the discourses of neoliberal inclusivity and equality that underpin the plotline, this narrative invokes heightened sentiments of national pride and an illusion of the United Kingdom as “leading” disability rights-based agendas among audiences. In this instance, audiences internalize sporting ablenationalism as part of the wider public disability discourse:

I think Great Britain is probably one of the most forward thinking when it comes to disability in the world, I think. I’m sure, like the real places which are discriminating against people with disabilities, it’s not Great Britain.

While a proportion of the audience are reflective that “we’re doing more than everyone else . . . but that doesn’t mean we’re doing enough,” sporting ablenational narratives have captured the imagination of Paralympic audiences. Indeed, our data highlight the extent to which they feed a cultural imagination where *everyone* will desire mobility-enhancing technology. As one audience member expressed:

Will there be a point where people want those sort of things because they make our work life better or anything you know, can a person with prosthetic legs run 100 miles per hour, compared to you know the average person? . . . So that is always the thought with me you know, how far will it go and how much more advanced will it become?

This is far from the reality for most disabled people who, despite having access to mobility-enhancing technology, sit outside of the highly privileged position some para-athletes maintain within the Paralympic space, or others for whom there are no technological “solutions” for their impaired bodies (Howe & Silva, 2017). Yet, what the data demonstrate is the extent to which highly affective sporting ablenational narratives “take hold” of audiences. Indeed, it is a narrative that nourishes extant neoliberal relations of power and continues to legitimize “accepted” able-disabled subjectivities through positive affective circulations that work through audiences to shape everyday disability discourse.

Reflections

Mindful of the supercrip praxis and drawing on theoretical contributions by scholars, such as McRuer (2010) and Mitchell and Snyder (2015), we have attempted to extend the work on Paralympic media narratives by paying renewed attention to narrative types within contemporary Paralympic coverage. In doing so, we highlight three disability narratives—extraordinary normalcy, ableist rehabilitation, and sporting ablenationalism—that circulate within Paralympic coverage.

These narratives “story” parasport bodies and experiences in certain ways, draw on differing cultural discourses and narrative resources, act on audiences in various ways, and are rendered meaningful in the highly nationalized, affective, and symbolic context of Paralympic sport. They begin to demonstrate how Paralympic disability narratives shift in relation to the cultural moment and perform important cultural work in the (re)production of dominant disability discourses. Connecting narrative content and reception, we have demonstrated how Paralympic representation affects social understandings of disability by providing a pedagogically powerful and celebrated shared cultural medium in the interpretation of disability stories that continue to be structured by forms of inclusion, exclusion, and marginalization.

Without denying the polysemic nature of media texts, and the important contribution of the “supercrip” narrative thus far, the three narratives presented here are indicative of the important sociocultural shifts that have occurred across U.K. Paralympic media since the entry of C4 in 2012. They present, at least on the surface, an expanding narrative repertoire in the mediated representation of disability that is not wholly centered on the supercrip praxis. However, it would be remiss not to recognize the extent to which these narratives collectively continue to nourish the logics of neoliberal ableism (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019) and share important synergies. Indeed, sporting ablenationalism and ableist rehabilitation—both highly affective narrative forms—require the

presence of extraordinary normalcy to operate. The extraordinary normalcy narrative, which attempts to reduce the “othering” of more severe forms of disability, provides the very grounds in which certain, select, disabled bodies can, and are, *exceptionalized*. Both the sporting ablenational narrative and the ableist rehabilitation narrative are thus made pedagogically persuasive, affectively powerful, and highly circulated by virtue of the relatively low presence, less affective, and less powerful narrative of extraordinary normalcy. It is possible to conclude that a hierarchy of disability, as Purdue and Howe (2013) recognize, continues to manifest in Paralympic coverage through the stories structured by these contrasting—yet symbiotic—narrative frames.

We hope to offer a portable conceptual framework, more nuanced than the “supercrip” critique, to guide future work looking at media production and beyond broadcasting through Paralympic news coverage, marketing, promotion, and iconography. While we have identified some gendered nuances, more research on the gendering of para-bodies is needed to complement initial but limited knowledge in this area (see Pullen & Silk, 2020). For instance, how does gender complicate these three narrative types, and how do they impact on perceptions of gendered disabled para-bodies in audiences? Given the importance of media narratives in shaping social identities and experiences, it is important to explore the ways these narratives may expand or restrict the narrative repertoire available to both para-athletes and disabled people to story their own identities. Relatedly, for media practitioners working in public service broadcasting—those with the power to mediate—these findings provide an opportunity to actively shape narrative content that can subvert, contest, and challenge the dominant ideological register of neoliberal ableism that continues to underpin the expanding repertoire of disability media narratives. Looking forward, the narratives presented here are not definitive but intended to incite the sociology of sport and disability studies disciplines to continue to critically explore the important cultural role of the Paralympic Games as a powerful cultural text in the (re)production of disability discourse, and the implication of this in terms of representation, inclusion/exclusion, and progressive social change.

Note

1. The wider Arts and Humanities funded project (AH/P003842/1) integrates elite production interviews, large-scale audience interviews, quantitative and qualitative content analysis, archival analysis, and public pedagogic forms (including a series of performances/documentary film). Given space restrictions, we cannot present our elite production interview data in full detail here, but much more detail is given in our previous work on this topic (Pullen et al., 2018).

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