

The social empowerment of difference: the potential influence of parasport

Synopsis

In this paper, we explore the significance of parasport in highlighting an emancipatory understanding of difference and enhancing social empowerment. By illuminating the influence of ableist ideology upon people with impairments we draw upon the field of disability studies. We ultimately argue that rather than being suppressed, difference should be recognised and valued in parasport practices and ideologies, leading to a pluralist culture, in which further and wider social emancipation can be grounded. Acceptance of difference is an absolute and essential pre-condition for parasport cultures to promote positive social change for people with disabilities.

Introduction

A year after the 2012 London Paralympic Games, the Guardian newspaper brought to the public attention the failure of Paralympic Games in changing how society views “disabled people”. “British Paralympians' success in 2012 brought celebrity status but has done little for the daily life of the disability community”¹. This assertion is hardly surprising despite claims made by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) regarding the empowering potential of sport they largely have been unsubstantiated⁽²⁻⁴⁾. It is, of course, extremely difficult to evaluate to what extent sport events ignite social change, let alone the potential of empowerment, due to both conceptual and methodological weaknesses. Conceptually, it is difficult to clearly define the sphere of influence of mega sport events and to theoretically support the causal relationship with social change. Methodologically, the difficulty lies in defining indicators of

empowerment as well as employing reliable methods to measure the extent of those outcomes, asserting a relation of causality between the two ^{5,6}.

The potential of sport for social good is limited, because the scope of interventions and evaluations fail to consider the multidimensional nature of social exclusion, the structural causes of systemic systems of social inequality⁷. Thus, it is very rare that significant social change can be correlated with specific sport events or programs, in isolation from concerted interventions in other dimensions of social life, such as welfare, employment or education⁸. As such, to assume that the Paralympic Games should be any different is misguided. While we believe in the social power of sport, the uncritical view that positive social change is intrinsic to sport detracts from realising this potential. Believing in the magical power of sport prevents us from actively driving forward positive change, in the form of well-designed, purposeful action that effectively reduces social exclusion of people identified as socially marginal, such as participants in parasport. When we refer to parasport we are referring to the practice community⁹ of disability sport from the grassroots to high-performance that engage in sport as governed by the rules and regulations of the IPC¹⁰. We believe that to effect sustainable positive social change it must be initiated within the grassroots of parasport if the rhetoric of the IPC around empowerment is to be achievable.

In this paper, we draw upon Disability Studies literature to identify the most significant sources of disability exclusion and discrimination and to discuss to what extent parasport cultures replicate or challenge this status quo. By examining parasport culture we consider whether it has the potential to truly contribute to the social empowerment not only of athletes but of people with disabilities, more generally. Central to this reflection, should be a recognition, acceptance and valorisation of difference. The focus on difference is critical in any effort aiming at fostering the social emancipation of groups identified as socially marginal, because the source of all discrimination lies in the social cultural meanings ascribed to

difference. In alignment with Iris Young^{11(p163)} our vision of a good society is one that does “not eliminate or transcend group difference. Rather, there is equality among socially and culturally differentiated groups who mutually respect one another and affirm one another in their differences”.

The goal of this paper is to urge actors to engage with parasport critically and reflect upon their own system of beliefs and associated practices, searching for signs of engrained discrimination. This difficult process demands a willingness to suspend old beliefs and be open to self-appraisal and criticism and pluralist democratic discussion within its own boundaries. It is simply impossible for an institution, such as the IPC to promote positive change in the lives of people with disabilities, without addressing its own responsibility in the perpetuation of their social disadvantage. After recognizing the existence of cultural traits which work against the IPCs self-proclaimed goal of empowerment, it is essential to promote and enact the necessary changes in ideologies and practices, so that these are more attuned to achieving this aim for all people with disabilities. We hope this work offers useful guidance to initiate this process of self-reflection and regeneration.

Following this brief introduction, we turn our attention to unpacking the concept of *ableism* – as the primordial source of social disadvantage for people with disabilities. As the process of dismantling ableism presupposes a reconceptualization of difference, we then draw upon different authors’ theorisation of difference to explore some of the ways in which parasport can promote this emancipatory shift.

The paper finishes with the recognition of the challenge that our suggestion to invest in difference as a positive and fundamental tenet of parasport identity imposes upon the IPC and the whole parasport community. This challenge, for which we can use Minow’s¹² term “Dilemma of difference” can be overcome by deconstructing its dilemmatic nature. Thus, this

paper constitutes an explicit invitation for parasport to courageously embrace a “politics of difference”¹¹ as an essential condition to enhance the lives of their constituency and positively impact upon society more broadly.

The hegemonic power of ableist norms

If sporting cultures are to socially emancipate athletes and people with disabilities, this influence will only be significant and long-lasting if it challenges the systemic sources of oppression causing social oppression. The field of disability studies illuminates ideology as the most essential and harmful source of discrimination for people with disabilities. One of the founding fathers of Disability Studies, Michael Oliver suggests that:

The hegemony that defines disability in capitalist society is constituted by the organic ideology of individualism, the arbitrary ideologies of medicalisation underpinning social intervention and personal tragedy theory underpinning much social policy^{13(p44)}.

In reaction against the dominance of an individualistic, medicalised view of disability, disability scholars and activists started, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, to defend a social understanding of disability, diverting from its understanding as an individual problem to be cured to illuminate the multiple ways in which social structures and environments create avoidable disadvantage and exclude people experiencing disability¹⁴. In this sense, disability is more the product of social injustice than the consequences of a biological impairment. This understanding became known as the “social model of disability”. Within this model, the ideology of *disablism*, “a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities”^{15(p4)} has been instrumental in displacing the disability “problem” from the individual impairment to the inadequate social environment. This concept has been instrumental in the politicisation of disability and concomitantly, in the creation and

implementation of legislation and social policies with visible impact upon the lives of people with disabilities. Notwithstanding, while disablism illuminates the social plight of people with impairments the concept has limitations: it fails to challenge the assumption of disability experience as a problem and, crucially, it fails to identify the primary location of disability oppression in the engrained, “naturalised” belief in able-bodiedness as the only viable and valid way of being fully human. From that point of view, “impairment or disability (irrespective of ‘type’) is inherently negative and should the opportunity present itself, be ameliorated, cured or indeed, eliminated!”^{15(p5)}. In essence ableism is:

A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produce a particular kind of self and body (the corporal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human^{15(p44)}.

By focusing solely upon the attenuation of the manifestation of disablism (for instance limited opportunities for participation in sport), neglecting its structural causes (such as ableism), disability advocates reinforce their position as marginal, undermining their proactive role as co-creators of social realities. Thus, disablist perspectives, despite being well-intentioned, continue to generate social responses to disability which attempt to answer the question “What can we do for *them* (the disabled Other)?” Within this paradigm, social responses and interventionist strategies, while important are not sufficient to foster social emancipation because they only mask the symptoms of a harmful social malady, the ideology that being able is the only valuable way of being.

In sporting contexts, for instance, a supposedly emancipatory response to “disablism” is to expand access to the sporting activities which are highly regarded by the able-bodied world (e.g. individual sports such as athletics and swimming and team sports such as

basketball), designed in the image of a normalised view of athletic bodies. The problem is, against the hegemonic power of this able-bodied ideal of athleticism, the disabled athletic body will continue to be seen as lacking elite sporting prowess, except for those individuals seen as supercrips, highly functioning athletes who have undergone the process of cyborgification¹⁶⁻¹⁸. The treatment of disabled athletes who cannot go through the process of cyborgification and be transformed into supercrips is not at all surprising since “The level of literacy about disability is so low as to be non-existent, and the ideology of ability is so much a part of every action, thought, judgment, and intention, that its hold on us is difficult to root out”^{19(p9)}. It is not surprising then, that the athletes whose impairments situate them further from the able-bodied norm²⁰, receive less support, recognition, media attention and seem to be intentionally being excluded from the Paralympics^{16,18}. In other words, in fighting disablism, emancipation and empowerment in parasport translates an emulation of able-bodiedness^{15,21}; and encourages athletes to hide their disability and pass as normal^{19,22}. It equates with the ability to overcome one’s impairment and display able-like qualities, in order to be successful per “normal” standards, for instance, athletes who equal or outperform Olympic athletes²³.

Differently, in fighting ableism, empowerment in parasport reformulates the parameters of success, from the perspective that sporting performances by impaired bodies are intrinsically valid, without the need for comparative assessments with mainstream sport. That parasport is not a paradox and therefore success and respect are granted to both the athlete who runs a specific distance in a time comparable to an able-bodied athlete and the boccia player whose skills of precision, focus and willpower transcends her competitors.

What is fundamental is to unveil the mechanisms and expressions of this ideology of ableism and to critically examine them, acknowledging their harmful effects before advancing to design “emancipatory” strategies. It is absolutely essential for the parasport community to introspectively examine the multiple ways in which it fails to challenge ableism, or even worse,

reinforces it. By anchoring this critical reflection of its emancipatory potential in the concept of ableism, parasport cultures can challenge oppression at its route, by stimulating a new, more positive and realistic social and cultural understanding of the lives of people with impairments.

In order for parasport to challenge ableism is important to consider that this ideological perspective is maintained essentially by the working of two elements: first, “*the notion of the normative (and normate individual) and secondly, the enforcement of a constitutional divide between perfected naturalised humanity and the aberrant, the unthinkable, quasi human hybrid and therefore non-human*”^{15(p6)} [Author’s italic]. Both mechanisms are as powerful as invisible, the notion of the normative leading to an authoritative naturalised acceptance of able-bodiedness; and the divide able/disabled as an ontological, material and sentiency dichotomy enforcing an internalised surveillance system, to which almost all respond with attempts to conform to the hegemonic norm in order to belong to the able-bodied world, in a process of “compulsory able-bodiedness”^{24(p93)}. As it stands, because the able-bodied norm is, for many people, unattainable, challenging this ideology will result in the liberation not only of the disabled minority, but of all citizens. Alongside other authors^{11,25}, we propose that the best way to challenge the hegemonic power of ableism is to recognise, accept and value impairment and the experience of disability as valid and valuable expressions of humanness, that is, to celebrate the merit inherent in *difference* as an enrichment of humanness.

Thus, the core of the fight against ableism locates itself in the concept of difference. Difference entails a disruptive power, which ought to be exploited by parasport cultures, if its political influence is to be exercised. As Young asserts “the assertion of a positive sense of group differences provides a standpoint from which to criticize prevailing institutions and norms”^{11(p167)}. Furthermore, the dissolution of the constitutional divide between the “able majority” (US) and the “disabled minority” (THEM) demands for a fluid understanding of difference “not as absolute otherness”^{11(p98)}, but as the “relatedness of things with more or less

similarity in a multiplicity of possible respects”^{11(p99)}. In this sense, all athletes (including athletes with impairments) may be considered “differently abled”^{26(pxiii)}, rather than disabled, since neither difference nor disability are absolute categories. Can parasport culture drive this cultural shift?

Why difference must matter in parasport

We have now established that ableism is the most important cause of oppression and inequality of opportunities for people identified as disabled. It then follows that a positive account of the difference expressed in parasport holds the power to destabilise the core precepts of ableism, the power of the normative and dilute the constitutional divide between abled and disabled. The present section defends that a reflexive and productive management of difference within and by the para-sport community is paramount to counteract ableism. To do so, we draw upon Hall’s²⁷ (2013), Young’s¹¹ and Minow’s¹² theoretical accounts of difference. Hall’s first two perspectives on difference derive from linguistics and are intrinsically connected to the way cultures are structured. He states “*difference matters because it is essential to meaning; without it, meaning could not exist*” [author’s italic]^{27(p225)} and this meaning arises from the interpreted differences between oppositions (white/black; day/night; feminine/masculine). The problem is that binary oppositions of this type oversimplify and reduce realities’ complexity, often with harmful consequences. For instance, by creating the constitutional divide between US (able) and THEM (disabled), essentialising and dichotomising difference: “Difference, as the relatedness of things with more or less similarity in a multiplicity of possible respects, here congeals as the binary opposition *a/ not-a*”^{11(p99)}. One is either abled or disabled.

Another harmful feature of these dichotomies is that they are seldom neutral, with the first side of the binary being “elevated over the second, because it designates the unified, the self-identical, whereas the second side lies outside the unified as the chaotic, unformed, transforming, that always threatens to cross the border and break up the unity of the good”^{11(p99)}. These categories of meaning usually reflect existent social hierarchies. In this sense, an able-bodied dominant majority defines disability in the same way that ‘blackness’ is defined by the dominant white people. The antidote for these harmful effects is to counteract the understanding of difference as essential and absolute by exposing its relational nature. In other words, “making the taken-for-granted character of normalcy visible and thus open to both exploration and change”^{28(p6)}. This shift implies challenging the need for binary oppositions by proposing an understanding of difference as value neutral, fluid, nuanced, continuous and (culturally and historically) contingent. In so doing we can recognise that difference solely names the differently similar/ similarly different, denying the possibility of absolute differences between human beings. When the difference that disability makes is understood in these terms, athletes with disabilities will be less reluctant to expose and accept their (partial) difference and actors within sport communities (including the public) will be less quick to judge and stigmatise them. They will cease to be “the Other”.

That is, difference is always relational, a product of a purposeful comparative exercise based upon the selection of selected traits, rather than an essential attribute¹². So, how can this shift in perspective be practiced and showcased by parasport communities?

Hall firstly highlights that difference is relational rather than absolute. When parasport was being developed, it was organised by impairment-specific groups. The International Organisations of Sport for the Disabled (IOSDs) each developed their own classification systems designed specifically to create a level playing field for competition^{16,29}. At this point in its development, parasport was illuminating medical differences between groups of people

with impairment. With the advent of the IPC, in 1989, there was a push towards a functional classification system which is still used in the sport of swimming³⁰. The benefit of this system is that it takes bodies with distinctive impairments and groups them together for competition based upon their degree of function in the swimming pool. While the IOSDs classification systems employed in the sport of swimming explicitly highlights difference between impairment groups as essential, the IPC functional classification systems acknowledge the similarity between impairment groups as they relate to swimming proficiency, therefore showcasing the relational character of difference. Thus, the possession of different types of impairments may not constitute a fundamental, absolute difference between athletes, in the same way it does not constitute an absolute difference between people with and without impairments.

The second linguistic theoretical perspective closely linked with the previous one by emphasising the dialogical character of difference: *“we need ‘difference’ because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the ‘Other’”* [author’s italics]^{27(p225)} and so “The ‘Other’, in other words, is essential to meaning”^{27(p225)}. Because the meaning of difference is necessarily dialogic, this opens way to its renegotiation, an opportunity to “enter a struggle over meaning”^{27(p225)}.

Ableism reinforces its cultural dominance through a process of widespread dissemination of the able-bodied experience and culture as a universal perspective, representative of all humanity. This is accomplished by rendering the difference of disability experiences invisible, silencing the perspective of this minority and compromising the dialogic nature of difference. Yet, as Hall himself defends, the meaning of difference can be challenged, negotiated and reconstructed. Its meaning is never fully fixed nor does it belong to a specific group and thus the negotiation of what disability means is a never-ending cultural endeavour,

to be performed dialogically by a multiplicity of voices. From this follows that ableist views of disability as inferior and deviant do not have to be passively accepted.

Parasport is highly instrumental in providing an environment where the meanings of ability and disability, and concomitantly of athleticism can be negotiated, as long as it allows for the free expression of heterogeneity of voices, within a culture of democratic pluralism. However, as Hahn²¹ stresses, parasport can serve to emulate able-bodiedness rather than to subvert it. With this caveat in mind, we prefer to emphasise the potential for parasport to become an active agent in the dialogic process of constructing difference associated with disability. How and why can parasport step up to this role?

Collectively, the parasport community must cultivate an ethos of multicultural dialogue, open to alternative views and creativity. To do so in a socially emancipatory manner, it must embrace the heterogeneity of the public it proclaims to serve. That is, it must represent the diversity of human embodiment. Given the marginal position of athletes with high support needs and the tendency to exclude them from the Paralympic Games¹⁸, special attention must be granted to the expansion and promotion of opportunities for these athletes. There also need to be increased awareness of the additional disadvantage faced by women, particular ethnicities, lower social economic classes, and of marginal sexualities and to the possible amplifying effects of the intersection of these categories. Real opportunities must consider the range of obstacles that particular groups within parasport may face. In order to subvert the dominant and universalising ableist discourse, parasport itself needs to value and embrace diversity of voices. The potential to negotiate dominant views of difference depends upon the opportunities granted to the oppressed minority to participate and disseminate counter-dominant views. Currently, parasport is still governed and managed by a majority of non-disabled people for the disabled, perpetuating dependency and powerlessness^{31,32}. This power imbalance within parasport needs to be urgently addressed.

Thirdly, Hall presents an anthropological account of difference as essential in the making of cultures. He suggests “[t]he argument here is that culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to different position within a classificatory system. The marking of ‘difference’ is thus the basis of that symbolic order, which we call culture”^{27(p226)}. All cultures are framed within symbolic boundaries which promote stability by keeping the defined categories ‘pure’: Hall continues “Stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place”^{27(p226)} (Hall, 2013, p. 226). While these symbolic boundaries are responsible for stigmatising and expelling what does not fit, “it also makes ‘difference’ powerful (...) threatening to cultural order”^{27(p226)}. As such, we see the ideology of ableism as the symbolic boundary that defines disability as deviance.

The IPC and parasport more generally celebrate difference in part because it makes the general public feel uneasy. United Kingdom’s Channel 4 campaign of Paralympics awareness entitled “Freaks of Nature,” which includes the documentary “Inside Incredible Athletes” is an exemplar of this as they were designed to celebrate and exacerbate the difference associated with parasport bodies. Media campaigns such as these are designed to draw the able public towards attending the Paralympic Games, which is the flagship event of parasport. Jönsson has suggested “that describing [the] Paralympics as a ‘freak show’ reinforced the Paralympic identity, an identity that in some ways can be used as a political weapon against ableist politics”^{33(p230)}. While some scholars criticised the use of this theme because of the able-disabled dichotomy it reinforces^{34,35}; following Bogdan^{36(pxi)} we concur that “Freak is not a quality that belongs to the person on display. It is something we created; a perspective, a set of practices – a social construction’. In this way, the celebration of Paralympians as freaks is designed to get the public to engage with the Paralympic Games and parasport more generally and can be used to subvert the cultural premises that created those same images, enacting a form of transgressive appropriation¹⁹.

Hall's final account of difference emphasises the psychoanalytical role that difference plays in the constitution of the Self: "Our subjectivities are formed through this troubled, never-completed, unconscious dialogue with- this internalisation of- the 'Other'"^{27(p227)}. At the individual level, participation in parasport can function as a critical pedagogy. Ethnographic research within a national sitting volleyball³⁷ community has shown how participation in the sport was the catalyst for both people with acquired and congenital impairments to progress from a state of "internalised ableism" to a state of "double consciousness", "when the oppressed subject refuses to coincide with these devalued (...) visions of herself or himself"^{11(p60)}. An informant from sitting volleyball suggested: "When I meet people and I tell them what I have done, they say: "Oh, you're such an inspiration!" Why am I an inspiration? Why? Because, I have a metal leg? Why does that make me an inspiration? I am just doing something that I class as normal. I don't class myself as being disabled because I can do everything you can."³⁷.

This positive subjectivity happens from the confrontation with alternative perspectives on disability. Another sitting volleyball athlete suggested: "Seeing so many people with so many disabilities, how different people moved around was a massive turning point for me... I remember sitting, watching a man, a whole match watching just one man that had a similar disability to mine. And just seeing how he moved and began to think, if he can do that, I can also do it. It was amazing!"^{37(p142)}.

As a non-exclusionary community, sitting volleyball also presents the opportunity for people with and without impairments to interact and collaborate in a context of performative play, that is, the opportunity for both able and disabled to construct their selves in the differentiation in relation to an "Other". The outcome of this can be a more enlightened account of the "Other" as differently abled rather than absolutely different. One non-impaired player reflected: "It makes you think about your own life and how fast you can go from being able bodied to disabled. On the other hand, these people are not unhappy... If you become disabled,

you can still have a good life. My initial apprehension came from not knowing. Not being confronted with that before.”^{37(p143)}.

This psychoanalytical quality of difference can be instrumental in emphasising the relevance of empathy in the acceptance of difference, that is, the ability to understand and feel what it is to be the ‘Other’, from their own perspective, while keeping a clear sense of one’s own distinctive self³⁸. Parasport culture can promote this empathetic understanding if it resists the temptation to enclose itself in disability ghettos and harnesses its power toward the dissolution of the divide between able and disabled.

All these perspectives collude to illuminate the productive power of difference as a political mechanism through parasport. We agree with Hall²⁷ that the political power of difference should welcome the participation of multiple and divergent voices, in this case, able and disabled. We reject therefore the idea that the empowerment potential of parasport is solely predicated upon the activism of athletes and people with disabilities, while interdicting the involvement of non-disabled people. Traditional identity politics is paradoxical in the sense that it incurs in the same exclusionary and essentializing practices that led to marginalization. If the empowerment potential of parasport culture is to be actualized through the acknowledgment, valuing and acceptance of difference, the sporting community itself ought to embody this celebration of difference.

The challenge difference imposes to parasport

What we propose is no doubt, a daring enterprise. The ideology of ableism and the practices that sustain it continuously reinforce and constitute each other, in a continuous symbiosis that is very difficult to break. In aiming to realise its empowerment mission, parasport faces a serious challenge, deriving from the ambivalent character of difference in Western societies, which Minow¹² articulates as the “dilemma of difference”:

“When does treating people differently emphasize their differences and stigmatize or hinder them on that basis? and when does treating people the same become insensitive to their differences and likely to stigmatize them or hinder them on that basis?^{12(p20)}”.

The answer to this question is that sensitive attention to relevant difference can only harm when and if difference is essentialized and understood as otherness. When understood as a relational, dialogical, anthropological and psychological concept, difference will instead support the positive affirmation and liberation of athletes and people with disabilities.

In the quest for cultural recognition as legitimate sport and for wide public acceptance, parasport and the IPC in particular, have often chosen to shy away from difference (as a fluid, relational category) to invest in the most culturally recognisable and already accepted sporting practices and values, prioritising the panoply of dominant sports and competitive values, imposed in part, by its close relation to the IOC³⁹. This IPC strategy, however, largely operates from a stand point of able-bodiedness, in order to earn mainstream social legitimacy, recognition and concomitantly, secure financial viability. Going back to ableism, not only does this strategy emulate able-bodied norms, as it also reinforces the constitutional divide between abled/disabled.

The alternative path, as this paper proposes, is one of recognition, acceptance and valuing of difference (and similarity) inherent to impaired bodies. This path would expand the cultural boundaries of athleticism and sport, by exploring the active and positive potentialities of impaired moving bodies, and harness the development of more inclusive, creative and plural sporting cultures as DePauw has anticipated in 1997⁴⁰. The “dilemma of difference”¹² surfaces in the sense that investing in difference is not without risk, as, institutions such as the IPC are likely to face strong cultural resistance at all levels of sporting cultures, which may be the

reason to date that this most significant institution in parasport has celebrated difference in its public rhetoric but has been failing to action it in practice.

Summary

The assumption that the Paralympic Games can ignite positive social change in the lives of people with disabilities has been received with scepticism by disability activists^{21,41} and researchers⁴²⁻⁴⁵ alike. The short-term nature of the Paralympic Games and its political allure opens the door for its political manipulation by governments, with the rhetoric of empowerment not always reaching the everyday lives of people with disabilities. Parasport communities and cultures can drive change in a much more meaningful, sustainable and long-lasting fashion by forging the emergence of stable, committed and cohesive communities of practice in which a critical pedagogy can develop. In other words, the hegemony of ableism can be actively counteracted by an awareness of its artificiality and coerced nature and by the cultivation of values such as empathy, openness, acceptance of difference and political consciousness. At the core of this pedagogy is a lived perception and embodiment of difference as a relational (rather than absolute) quality through sporting practices within heterogeneous communities. Understood in its relativity and contingency, difference needs not be negated, as to do so reinforces able-bodied sameness as the ideal to which everyone should aspire. Thus, the path towards a more empowering society for people with disabilities ought to be grounded in a cultural understanding of difference as non-absolute (everything and everyone is at the same time, similarly different and differently similar). We propose that only by enacting a “politics of difference”¹¹, that is, a politics grounded in sporting habitus in which difference is accepted and valued, can parasport make a real impact upon the lives of athletes and people with disabilities, more generally.

Drawing upon Hall²⁷, Young's¹¹ and Minow's¹² ideas on difference, the arguments developed in this paper highlight how the situation can improve in the future.

1. The recognition, acceptance and valuing of difference within parasport cultures must naturally drive the emergence of new sports and sporting ethos, more attuned with this attitude and understanding. As mainstream sports were created to respond to an embodiment ideal defined by ableism, this transformation is very much needed. At the Paralympic level, for instance, this may result in an increased promotion of specific parasports such as boccia, goalball and sitting volleyball. New sporting cultures, in which movement practices and the interaction between differently embodied participants are creatively exercised, are very much needed.
2. In attempting to critically educate wider society on the value of difference and pluralism, parasport needs to proactively promote the participation of all people with disabilities, paying particular attention to the exponential disadvantage inherent to the intersection of disability with other categories of difference (gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, etc.), hindering access to apparently accessible opportunities.
3. Fostering an empowering understanding of the difference associated with disability demands for increased participation of people with disabilities as the active creators of parasport cultures, rather than as mere recipients of services “for” them. The heterogeneity of parasport public needs to be replicated in the representation of people with disabilities at all levels of governance and practice (IPC, management of clubs and associations, coaching, education), with particular emphasis on decision making processes and structures.

To close, the political potential of parasport cultures⁴⁵ ought to be embraced by everyone involved. Politics does not necessarily involve the display of grandiose gestures of political

activism, but rather an attitude and aligned practice of openness towards difference, which overflow the boundaries of sporting communities to permeate all dimensions of social life. Following Ghandi's and Michael Jackson's words (*Man in the Mirror*), parasport ought to be the change it wants to see in the world.

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