

## Disability 'Rights' or 'Wrongs'? The Claims of the International Paralympic Committee, the London 2012 Paralympics and Disability Rights in the UK

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*Sociological Research Online*, 18 (3) 16  
<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/18/3/16.html>>  
10.5153/sro.3118

Received: 20 Dec 2012   Accepted: 11 Jun 2013   Published: 31 Aug 2013

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### Abstract

A central aspect of the vision of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) is that the Paralympic Movement is a vehicle for achieving 'a more equitable society' (IPC, 2012a). Building upon the findings of an online survey conducted with disabled activists prior to the London 2012 Paralympic Games (Braye, Dixon and Gibbons 2012), in this short essay we argue that whilst this vision is commendable, the Paralympics has limited impact on the everyday lives of disabled people in the UK. Whilst there was evidence of support for the IPC's view that the 2012 Games would be a positive vehicle for improving equality, there were also protests by disabled activists suggesting some disabled people saw the Games in more critical terms. Despite claims that the Paralympic Games has raised awareness of disabled athletes and wider equality issues for disabled people, such a view is not shared by many disability activists some of whom have controversially used the Games as a vehicle to highlight inequalities. It is concluded that the IPC are distinctively positioned to address disability issues as they relate to a unique and elite sports enclave and perhaps ought to restrain from seeing themselves as anything more until they have opened a dialogue with disability activists.

**Keywords:** Paralympics, disabled people, equality, British media

## **Introduction**

Amongst the IPC's statements on equality issues, their current vision is as follows:

### **The Vision**

To enable Paralympic athletes to achieve sporting excellence and inspire and excite the world.

Enable - Creating conditions for athlete empowerment

Paralympic Athletes - The primary focus, from initiation to elite level

Achieve - Sporting excellence is the goal of a sport centred organization

Inspire & Excite - Touch the heart of all people for a more equitable society

### **Aspiration**

Athletes and the Paralympic Games are at the heart of our Movement. Their performances and incredible stories teach the values of acceptance and appreciation for people with a disability. The Paralympic Movement builds a bridge which links sport with social awareness thus contributing to the development of a more equitable society with respect and equal opportunities for all individuals.

### **Paralympic Values**

#### **Courage**

It encompasses the unique spirit of the Paralympic athlete who seeks to accomplish what the general public deems unexpected, but what the athlete knows as a truth.

#### **Determination**

The manifestation of the idea that Paralympic athletes push their physical ability to the absolute limit.

#### **Inspiration**

When intense and personal affection is begotten from the stories and accomplishments of Paralympic athletes, and the effect is applying this spirit to one's personal life.

#### **Equality**

Paralympic Sport acts as an agent for change to break down social barriers of discrimination for persons with a disability (IPC 2012a).

It is evident from some of the statements above that the IPC's intent is to promote the Paralympic Movement as a vehicle by which equality can be improved. The aim of this short essay is to show that the International Paralympic Committee's (IPC) positive rhetoric on improving equality can also be regarded as having limited effect on the more negative daily reality faced by disabled people living in the UK today. Exploratory analysis of the opinions of disabled activists towards the Paralympic Games (Braye et al. 2012) conducted prior to the 2012 Games identifies negative views towards the Paralympics existed prior to the extensive media coverage during the 2012 Games. Nevertheless, these views are often not heard. Some authors have previously highlighted negative elements around the Paralympics such as: the type of media coverage disabled athletes receive (Thomas and Smith 2003); classification of disabled competitors (Howe and Jones 2006; Jones and Howe 2005); and athletes disempowered by self-appointed, non-disabled, 'disability experts' (Peers 2009; 2012 p.186). The positive, and IPC-media driven, rhetoric of a legacy of change does not acknowledge this growing body of research, nor address the barriers and inequalities disabled people face on a daily basis in the UK.

In what follows we show that some British national press coverage of the London 2012 Paralympics reflected both the terminology which the IPC uses as well as a more critical view of the Games. The latter underpins an alternative view that was obscured by the positive equality rhetoric surrounding the 2012 Paralympic Games. We contend that the IPC has driven forward its own agenda on equality without consulting people from disabled people's organisations (DPOs) who have been involved in wider disability equality issues for much longer (cf. Barnes 1994). It is therefore concluded that the IPC are distinctively positioned to address disability issues as they relate to a unique and elite sports enclave and perhaps ought to restrain from seeing themselves as anything more until they have opened a dialogue with DPOs.

## **Support for the IPC's vision of equality through the Paralympics**

The British newspaper *The Guardian* highlighted that some disabled people supported and shared the IPC's vision on equality during the run up to the London 2012 Paralympic Games. Following the Paralympic opening ceremony on the 29 August, 2012 the newspaper featured a number of interviews with disabled people the following day which were all positive about the Paralympics. One such interviewee, 47 year old Addie Slenderise, a wheelchair user from Holland, is representative of these views when she states:

Being here and being part of this is so important to me. It is really emancipating people with disabilities giving them examples of what they could achieve themselves (Topping 2012 p.2).

The goal of the IPC to be a tangible force for the good of disabled people in wider society had currency with some disabled people during London 2012. The positivity with which the Games were received continued beyond the opening ceremony and into the competition with disabled people still lauding its impact. On 9 September 2012 former Royal Marine, Arthur Williams a television presenter and Paralympic cyclist, wrote on *The Guardian's* official website:

In just one and a half weeks, there has been such a profound change in how people perceive disability and that has taken people by surprise. It has shocked a lot of people. As a country, we were really open-minded going into the Games and it has lived up to expectations. No one has been disappointed (Williams 2012).

Other sections of the British print media, including *The Telegraph*, *The Times* and *The Independent*, continued the generally positive reporting throughout the Paralympic Games, for instance, front page titles with photographs included: 'Success Storey' – in relation to

Sarah Storey winning her 10<sup>th</sup> Paralympic gold (*The Telegraph*, 6 September 2012); ‘THE LEADING LADY’ – with a double front page wrap round photograph of swimmer Ellie Simmonds on her way to victory in the 200m medley (*The Times*, 4 September 2012); and, ‘New King of the Blade Runners’ – reporting Jamie Peacock’s success over Oscar Pistorius in the 100 metres final (*The Independent*, 7 September 2012).

It is evident that the emerging narrative leading up to and during the Games supported the IPC’s message that the Paralympics would bolster equality for disabled people:

The Paralympic Movement builds a bridge which links sport with social awareness thus contributing to the development of a more equitable society with respect and equal opportunities for all individuals (IPC 2012a).

In the following section of this essay it is argued that the ideology of the IPC, supported by some of the British print media, that a sporting event can cure prejudice and increase equality through raising awareness, is not a sound one and is certainly not representative of the reality of inequality faced by disabled people on a daily basis. Additional evidence suggests that all is not as it seems and that an alternative perspective exists that is not quite as positive about the Paralympics. As Campbell and Oliver (1996) note, disabled people are not a homogenous group.

### **A more critical view of the role of the Paralympics in promoting equality**

The IPC have been in partnership with the French IT company ‘Atos’ as a sponsor for Paralympic events since 2002 and have been responsible for distributing marketing rights for the Paralympic Games worldwide over the last decade (IPC 2012b). However, during the 2012 Games a controversy surrounding Atos arose regarding their involvement with the UK

government Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Atos has a £400m contract with the DWP to implement the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) which is the means used to assess disabled people's fitness for work (Ramesh 2012). UK based disability activists have strongly criticized the integrity of the WCA strategy, citing Atos' assessment misconduct and the UK Government's removal of vulnerable disabled people's benefits. This emerging issue has also been highlighted by the media, for example:

The Nursing & Midwifery Council (NMC) is dealing with at least 27 complaints amid similar allegations that the nurses conducting Work Capability Assessments (WCA) have fallen short of the professional code of conduct (Lakhani 2012 p.5).

Seizing the opportunity to capitalize on the media coverage of the London 2012 Paralympic Games, the group Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), staged a week of direct action. Beginning on 29 August, 2012 the day of the opening ceremony, they held protests called the 'Atos Games' at Atos offices in Cardiff, Glasgow, Belfast and London claiming that disabled people have, 'died after being declared fit to work' (Lakhani and Taylor 2012 p.6).

The irony of these protests was that the IPC, in its attempt to seal its self-appointed leadership role on disability equality issues, focused a central part of the opening ceremony on disability rights. Alison Lapper is a disabled woman who was institutionalised from early childhood due to her disability and later graduated from the University of Brighton UK, with a first class honours degree in Fine Art. She posed naked and pregnant for sculptor Marc Quinn and the subsequent marble statue was displayed in Trafalgar Square, London from 2005 to 2007. The Paralympic opening ceremony featured a group of acting 'protesters' holding up a series of banners spelling out the word 'RIGHTS' around a copy of the 'Alison Lapper Pregnant' statue (*The Independent* 2012 pp.28-29). This statue is an iconic part of

disability rights in the UK. Considering the IPC's claim to understand and impact disability issues beyond sport, it was unfortunate that they secured Atos as a Paralympic sponsor and unwittingly handed DPAC an opportunity to highlight inequalities beyond sport. It was ironic that DPAC were organizing nationwide protests on issues that impact all disabled people *including Paralympic athletes*.

It is helpful to see the DPAC 2012 Paralympic protests within the context of resistance to discrimination against disabled people and the emerging use of the Paralympics as a vehicle for such protests. For instance, in 1988 disabled activists in South Korea protested against the government's use of the Seoul Paralympic Games to propagate the idea that disability equality was high on their agenda. More recently, Chinese activists did exactly the same in regards to the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing (Kim 2011). The transition of these protests into the Paralympic Games was perhaps inevitable given the history of protests outside of sport in the UK dating as far back as 1920 (Campbell and Oliver 1996; Barnes 1994). To the uninitiated viewer of the Paralympic opening ceremony it may have looked like the dramatized 'rights now' protest suggested that the Paralympics had achieved exactly that for disabled people. It is understandable with such media coverage why people might conclude that the banner meant 'we have rights now' rather than 'we want rights now'. The latter being the thrust of the DPAC demonstrations.

One of the statements of the IPC is that they aim to, 'Inspire & Excite - Touch the heart of all people for a more equitable society' (IPC 2012a). The idea that people's hearts have to be touched to achieve equality places disabled people in the unenviable position of having to do some 'touching' of wider society in order to receive acceptance in return. To be perceived as in need of heartfelt sympathy is a passive and pathetic position in society, one which certainly does not empower disabled people. The notion of using victimized and

suffering images and dialogue to render disabled people in need of broken-hearted charity has been discussed by academics over many decades (cf. Barnes and Mercer 2011).

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this essay has been to show that the IPC's positive rhetoric on improving equality can also be regarded as having a limited effect on the negative daily reality faced by disabled people living in the UK today. We are not suggesting that the IPC has no knowledge at all about disability issues; its president Sir Philip Craven is himself a disabled person and ex-Paralympic athlete. However, it is clear that the agenda of the IPC is primarily concerned with disability issues as they relate to a unique and elite sports enclave. We suggest that the IPC begin to engage with DPOs across the world to amalgamate the impact of the Paralympics with the wider views of disabled activists. The IPC have so far failed to respond to the fact that many disabled activists used the 2012 Paralympics as a vehicle to highlight inequalities. From a UK perspective, surely the British Paralympic Association (BPA) and the United Kingdom Disabled People's Council (UKDPC) along with other British DPOs have the capacity to work together to address real inequalities faced by disabled people on a daily basis. This is hardly a new idea, suggestions to this effect having been made by disabled activists in the UK as far back as 1997 (Braye et al. 2012). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that some disabled activists are interested in sport. For instance, Tara Flood, Director of The Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE), was interviewed by *The Independent* during the Games and is a 'former Paralympic gold medal winning swimmer' (Lakhani 2012 p.1). Jaspal Dhani the CEO of the UKDPC is also a national standard ex-wheelchair tennis player. The popularity of the Paralympics could be used to do much more to highlight the inequalities disabled people face in their daily lives outside the global spectacle of the



Games. The IPC could also draw attention to some of the discrimination that certain athletes face just like other disabled people do, in housing as an example which remains a problem post London 2012 (Ahmed 2013).

Finally, disabled activists are interested in the Paralympics but the IPC appear to have no interest in the political nature of disability activists. Moreover, disabled activists may not necessarily be sports people but Paralympic athletes are disabled people, and therein remains the connection.

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