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The Rio 2016 Paralympic Games: The Visibility of People with Disabilities in Brazil as a Possible Legacy

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Abstract

There are claims that the Paralympic Games (PG) might contribute to a better world for people with disabilities (PWD). However, there are also claims that the PG might in fact be counterproductive to the PWD's rights movement because they might promote the medical model of disability and/or ableism. In this context, we developed a qualitative exploratory study to investigate the legacies of the Rio 2016 PG from the perspective of disability rights activists and people involved in Paralympic sport managerial positions. In this paper, we discuss one of the main perceived legacies: that the PG fostered PWD's visibility and a change in society's perception of PWD. We conducted 24 open in-depth interviews and found that, for our participants, the PG worked as a showcase for PWD who were rarely seen in the media and in public spaces before the Games. This visibility helped to challenge negative stereotypes and stigmas associated with PWD, as well as possibly opening new doors for them. Our interviewees believe that we shouldn't expect that the PG alone can change people's perceptions and PWD's status overnight. They are part of a larger and complex set of actions that are slowly contributing to this process.

Key words: Paralympic Games; legacy; people with disability; visibility; Rio 2016.

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Introduction

The Paralympic Games (PG) are one of the largest sporting mega-events on the planet. The last edition - Rio 2016 –included 4,328 Para athletes, attracted 2.15 million spectators, and was covered by the media in 154 nations (International Paralympic Committee (IPC), 2016). According to the IPC, the core regulatory institution for Paralympic Sports and for the Paralympic Games (PG), one of the chief objectives of the PG is “to act as a catalyst that stimulates social development and leaves a positive long-term legacy that benefits communities in the host country and across the world” (IPC, 2017; p.7). Also according to the IPC, “the Paralympic Games are the world’s number one sporting event for transforming society’s attitudes towards impairment (IPC, 2015; p.14).

Considering the IPC’s abovementioned goals, those who have been bidding to host the Olympic Games (OG) and the PG have been committing themselves - if they win the bid – to deliver positive legacies for people with disabilities (PWD). In the case of the 2016 PG edition, for example, the Rio Bid Committee indicated that one of the driving principles of the PG would be to promote accessibility, a more “inclusive culture”, “inspiration”, and “changes in the perception of people with disabilities” (Rio 2016 Bid Committee, 2009; p.169).

Pondering the prospects of positive legacies for PWD, such as those highlighted above, we conducted a qualitative exploratory study that had as its goal to investigate the legacies of the Rio 2016 PG from the perspective of Brazilians who are either disability rights activists or who are involved in managerial positions in Paralympic sport institutions or sport projects. The results of this study highlighted three main perceived legacies: visibility and change of

perceptions in relationship to PWD, inspiration, and sport development. The purpose of this article is to explore one of these perceived legacies: the “visibility and change in perception”. We will discuss the two others in different papers. We elected to interview PWD’s rights advocates because they are potentially more aware of PWD’s needs and demands and therefore, could present a more informed view on the potential legacies of the Games. We chose to also interview people involved with the offer of sports for PWD because they could offer some insights related to the sporting legacies of the Games. We will discuss our findings by contrasting them with the work of authors who have been discussing these themes using the lens of critical disability studies. Some of them, as we will see below, claim that the kind of visibility fostered by the PG might in fact be counterproductive for the PWD’s rights movement, because it supposedly promotes the medical model of disability and/or ableism (c.f. Braye et al, 2013).

The medical model of disability is based on the belief that disability is a biological condition. It is a pathology and a “problem” that needs to be overcome by the individual. In contrast to the social model of disability, the medical model neglects the role of society in giving support to PWD so that they can develop to their fullest potential (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Oliver, 2009). Ableism is an umbrella term that includes various forms of “isms” such as sexism, racism and ageism. It favors and values some characteristics and abilities and uses this predilection to negatively judge others. This favoritism is used to promote and to justify demeaning treatment and a lower status of people who do not fit into expected standards. The internalisation of ableism tends to generate a sense of inadequacy. People who do not meet the expectations start to believe that their personal characteristics are a problem that need to be fixed. As a consequence, they tend to feel bad about themselves and try to hide and/or to fix their supposedly inferior characteristic (e.g.; impairments, sexual orientation,

physical appearance), so that they can fit into what is considered “normal”. As this is usually not possible, this process tends to be frustrating (Campbell, 2009; Wolbring, 2008).

According to some critics, the PG reinforce the medical model of disability as it reproduces narratives that send subliminal messages that to have an impairment is a problem, and that this “problem” needs to be overcome by the individual him/herself (Misener et al., 2019; Silva & Howe, 2012; Smith & Bundon, 2018). The PG may therefore, reinforce ableism as they emphasize the idea that the more PWD can do to overcome their “problem” and the harder they try to adjust to non-disabled norms, and achieve high performance, the better. One of the consequences of ableist thinking is that it raises people’s expectations regarding what PWD can do. This generates frustration in those who - for one reason or another - do not meet these expectations (Hardin, 2012; Silva & Howe, 2012). It also leads people to regard and treat PWD as inferior (Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Howe & Silva, 2016; Kearney, Brittain, & Kipnis, 2019; Silva & Howe, 2012, 2018).

According to various scholars, both the medical model and ableism are reinforced through supercrip narratives. These plots refer to athletes as if they were “super” for overcoming their impairments – and the difficulties usually associated with them - and performing above the level that is usually expected from them (Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Maika & Danylchuk, 2016). These narratives reinforce individual merit and generate the expectation that “all people with disabilities should be able to accomplish at the level of Paralympic hero. Consequently, other PWD are judged by the supercrip standard” (Hardin & Hardin, 2004; p.6). These narratives tend to neglect different variables that may affect the individual’s accomplishments (Brittain & Beacom, 2016; Coakley, 2014; Misener et al., 2019), e.g. their type and degree of impairment, health conditions, chronic pain, family support, and financial conditions.

Braye, Dixon, & Gibbons (2013) also investigated the legacies of the PG from the perspective of disability activists. More specifically, they surveyed the perspective of 32 activists with disabilities, affiliated with the United Kingdom Disabled People's Council, regarding the legacies of the London 2012 PG. According to their findings, the narratives that surround the London 2012 PG misrepresented the reality of PWD, and presented an overly optimistic viewpoint that does not match with the lived reality of most PWD who, in many cases, live with pain and illnesses associated with their impairments, do not have their most basic human rights respected, and do not have access to the same opportunities and assistive technologies as athlete with disabilities. According to the authors, this unrealistic view of PWD generates an expectation that other PWD should achieve the same high levels of success as the Paralympians. They concluded therefore, that the PG "can be counterproductive to disability rights beyond sport" (p. 984). The results of this study are consistent with the criticisms against the PG mentioned previously above. Our study, however, partially challenges these findings.

It is especially important to investigate the possible legacies of the PG in countries like Brazil so that we can generate knowledge that can help with the development of strategies to leverage positive legacies in future events in these places. According to the last Brazilian demographic census, 23.9% of the population declared to have some kind of disability (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística - IBGE, 2012). While Brazil does have advanced legislation regarding PWD's rights (Brasil, 2015), this legislation is far from being effectively implemented for reasons such lack of political commitment, lack of meaningful enforcement mechanisms, and lack of public awareness of PWD's issues (Kirakosyan, 2016). There are still significant discrepancies between the reality of PWD and those who do not have a disability (PWND). For example, while 48.2% of Brazilians 15 years old or older did not complete elementary school education, the figure for PWD was 61.1%. A further

example is that, whilst 37.1% of PWND receive less than the Brazilian minimum wage - which is around U.S.\$ 210.00 per month as of 8th June 2020 - this is the case for 46% of those who have a disability (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística - IBGE, 2012)¹.

Unfortunately, there isn't much dependable data about the reality of PWD in Brazil. A study by the Brazilian Senate that is worthy to mention, though, reveals that 77% of Brazilians with physical, visual and hearing impairments (people with intellectual disabilities were not included), registered in the data base of the Brazilian Institute for the Rights of People with Disabilities feel that the rights of PWD in Brazil are not respected (DataSenado, 2010).

This exploratory research offers some insights into the possible impacts of the PG in Brazil and other countries with similar contexts. It offers a contribution to the almost non-existent literature on this topic outside of the Australian, European and North American contexts.

Methodology

The participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The research began by identifying and interviewing some people who were actively involved with the disability rights movement in organizations, or sections of organizations, dedicated to such advocacy in Curitiba, capital of Paraná, 870 KM south from Rio. We wanted to investigate the perspectives of people who lived outside Rio so that we could explore some possible legacies of the PG away from the host city. After the interviews, based upon set criteria the interviewees were asked for some names of further people who could possibly participate in the study. Based on their suggestions, we selected participants who were either disability rights activists or people in sports managerial positions, in line with the maximum variation sampling approach (Patton, 2015). We recruited people with different types of disability and people without disabilities. We also chose people involved and not involved with sports, and

people who worked in different kinds of organizations so that we could explore distinctive perspectives on the PG legacies. When we invited the interviewees to participate in the study, we did not have as a criteria that they had watched the PG in the media or in person. We discovered later, however, that they had all seen some of the competitions and/or news related to the PG. Four of them had also seen some of the Games at the venues as a spectator.

We ended up with a sample of 14 males and 10 females. Amongst them, 17 were actively engaged with the elaboration and/or defense of public policies for PWD and 14 had some kind of disability. Within the sample, there were people with the following profile: Presidents or Vice-Presidents of PWD's associations, individuals who worked with or represented PWD in city, state or federal level offices; and people involved with the management of Paralympic sport organizations or projects. Some of the latter were also professors of adapted sports in universities, coaches, and athletes or ex-athletes (amongst them, four were retired Paralympians). Details of participants can be seen in table 1.

Table 1

Profile of the research participants

Name	Type of disability	Activist	Sport involvement	Background
Adriana	ND	N	Y	Coordinator of adapted sport projects; adapted sports professor.
Andrea	ND	Y	N	Board member of the "Reviver" Down Syndrome Association
Betina	PD	Y	N	Vice-president of the Paraná Association for People with Physical Disability (ADFP); councillor of the Municipal Advisory Office on the Rights of PWD (CMDPcD)
Brune	MD	Y	N	CMDPcD Councillor.
Carlos	PD	N	Y	Coordinator of Paralympic sport project; coach.
Darlan	ND	N	Y	Coordinator of Paralympic sport project; coach
Décio	ND	N	Y	Coordinator of Paralympic sport projects; adapted sport professor; coach
Denise	ND	Y	N	Director of the Municipal Advisory Office on the Rights of PWD

Elizabeth	ND	Y	N	Representative and ex-attorney of the APAES ⁵ Federation; advisor of public policies for PWD for a Brazilian senator
Ênio	VD	Y	N	President of the Paraná Association of the Blind; councillor of the State Council of the PWD's rights (COEDE)
Fernanda	ND	Y	N	CMDPcD director assistant
Flávia	VD	Y	N	Social inclusion coordinator of the PWD Public Policies Department of Paraná; COEDE counsellor
Irajá	PD	Y	Y	Ex-vice-president of the Brazilian Paralympic Committee and Head of the Research Centre of the Paraná Rehabilitation Association; retired Paralympian
Jessani	ND	Y	N	Director of the Secretariat of the Specialized Educational Services for Inclusion of the Municipal Department of Education
Jorge	ND	Y	Y	Director of the Paraná PWD Special Secretariat
Junior	PD	Y	Y	President of the Paraná Association for People with Physical Disability, ex-athlete
Fernando	PD	Y	N	CMDPcD councillor
Mário Sérgio	VD	Y	Y	Coordinator of para-sports of the Paraná Sport and Tourism Secretariat; COEDE counsellor; retired Paralympian
Mauro	PD	Y	Y	Ex-president and current vice-president of the ADFP; COEDE councillor
Moisés	PD	Y	Y	Public policies advisor for the Coordination of Para-Sports at the Paraná Sport and Tourism Secretariat; retired Paralympian
Ruth	ND	N	Y	Ex-coordinator of adapted sport projects; professor of adapted sports; ex-athlete
Tanhoffer	PD	N	Y	Coordinator of Paralympic sport project; Paralympic sports coach.
Vililarinho	PD	Y	Y	President of the Institute for the Defence of the Rights of PWD; counsellor in the COED; board member of the Free University for Human Efficiency; ex-athlete
Vital	VD	N	Y	Ex-president of the Brazilian Paralympic Committee; retired Paralympian

Note. M = male; W = female; PD = physical disability; VD = visual disability; MD = multiple disabilities; ND = no disability; Y = yes; N = no ND = no disability; Y = yes; N = no.

The first author led face-to-face in-depth unstructured interviews from March to June of 2019. The interviews lasted between 1.5 to 2.5 hours and had two parts, each one with only one leading question. In the first part, participants were asked for their views on the positive and negative legacies of the Rio 2016 PG in general. Our question did not discriminate different kinds of disabilities and did not demand that they talked about the legacies for sports or for people involved with sports. In the second, they were made aware of some of the criticisms regarding the PG that were outlined in the introduction of this paper and asked their opinions about them. They were informed that some international scholars believe that the portrayal of athletes as heroes or superheroes might generate an expectation that all PWD

can be as successful as the athletes – be it in sports or in other areas - if they dedicate themselves to do so. This, according to these scholars, can consequently generate frustration in those who are not successful. It can also lead people to negatively judge those who are not perceived as successful for supposedly not having tried hard enough. The research participants were also told that for these reasons – amongst others - some authors believe that the PG might be counterproductive to the PWD's rights movement. They were then asked to express their opinion on this issue. The participants freely answered the two interview questions. The interviewer, when necessary, asked some other questions to deepen her understanding and to probe her interpretation of their arguments. The interviews were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Following the interviews an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted using NVIVO to organize and code the data, as well as to group the codes into meaningful categories and subcategories. During the analysis process descriptive and analytical memos were written so that we could organize and explore the ongoing insights that emerged from the data and from the literature (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). All the participants signed an informed consent form and stated that they preferred that we used their real names in all publications. The research was approved by the Brazilian Research Ethics Committee/ National Research Ethics Council System (CEP/ CONEP).

Findings and Discussion

All participants stated that one of the main legacies of the PG was PWD's visibility, and most of them said that one of the most important outcomes of this legacy was that it has fostered, or might have fostered, a change of people's perceptions of PWD. Most of them disagreed with the criticisms of the PG presented to them in the second part of interview. To present and discuss these findings, we have organized the data in three sections. In the first, we focus

on the visibility issue. In the second, we concentrate on the possible modification of the public's perception of PWD. In the third, we discuss the participants' reactions to the criticisms.

The PG as a Showcase for PWD

All participants said that visibility was one of the most significant legacies – if not the most important - of the Rio 2016 PG. According to them, the PG provided Brazilians with a rare opportunity to learn about the existence of PWD.

People did not know of the existence of PWD. With the PG they started to realize that they exist! The biggest legacy is visibility! (Décio, ND)

The impact was very positive, especially as a showcase, right? The Brazilian citizen had the opportunity to get to know PWD. (Mauro, PD)

Half of the interviewees remarked that the PG helped to promote PWD's visibility not only through the media, but also through other actions that were carried out in connection with the Games. Among different actions, eight participants talked about PG related events in schools that involved the practice of Paralympic sports, workshops, and talks by athletes with disabilities. Three of them also mentioned that Curitiba's Department of Education and the city's Department of Sport, Leisure and Youth produced a magazine related to the PG that was distributed to all primary school children and invited para-athletes to visit schools and talk to teachers and students about Paralympic sports and about their experiences as athletes.

Whilst all of the interviewees mentioned and recognized the importance of the visibility that the PG gave to PWD, seven expressed a resentment that the PG received less media attention than the OG. The same kind of resentment was also expressed in a study on the legacies of the London 2012 PG in the UK (Hodges, Jackson, Scullion, Thompson, & Molesworth, 2014).

One thing that bothered me ... was the disproportionate coverage of PG compared to OG The PG were a world event happening in Brazil! I expected that we would have a more proportional media coverage! (Flávia, DV)

The PG did not have the same coverage as the OG The media missed a great opportunity to be promoting Paralympic sports! (Darlan, ND)

Unfortunately, there is no reliable research on the extent to which PWD are usually portrayed by the Brazilian media. There is also no reliable data on the amount of coverage that the PG actually received on Brazilian television. Therefore, we are unable to make any comparisons of the levels of the coverage before, during and after the Games. The only dependable information available relates to what was officially planned to be broadcast. The Globo group, who bought the transmission rights, planned to show in its public channel a few competitions that involved prospective Brazilian medalists. It also scheduled a daily late-night special programme about the PG. In addition, it prearranged 150 hours of transmission plus two special programmes dedicated to discuss the daily news about the PG in four of its private channels that are exclusively dedicated to sports (Marra, 2016). The Globo group did not widely transmit the PG in its public channel, but it did sell part of its transmission rights to “TV Brasil”, which is a public channel owned by the Brazilian Federal government.

This TV network planned to have 10 hours a day of transmission for the PG (Marra, 2016), which would be publicized in partnership with local State owned TV channels (Redação Portal Imprensa, 2016). If we compare the time that the Globo group planned to transmit the PG with what it had planned for the OG (2.400 hours in 16 channels) (Marra, 2016), the PG received relatively very little attention. However, it should be noted that never before had Brazilian TV ever had this level of coverage of the PG as it had for the Rio 2016 PG. This is most likely related to the fact that Brazil hosted them, and therefore, there were many political and commercial interests involved in the promotion of the event, as well as a higher demand by the public to watch some of the competitions and to receive information about them.

The print coverage of the PG in Brazil also gained more attention than ever for the Rio 2016 Games. Two studies have highlighted the evolution of the coverage of the PG in Brazil by the print media based upon the two most widely circulated newspapers in Brazil. The first, by Santos, Furtado, Poffo, Velasco, & Souza (2018) investigated the coverage by Folha de São Paulo and the second by Hilgemberg (2019) investigated the coverage by Globo. Both analysed coverage in terms of news items published per day for the PGs from Atlanta 1996 to Rio 2016, starting the day before the opening ceremony and ending the day after the closing ceremony. The results of the two studies are shown in table 2.

Table 2

The coverage of the Folha de São Paulo and O Globo from 1996 to 2016

	Folha de São Paulo* (News Items per day)	Globo** (News Items per day)
Atlanta 1996	0.6	1.3
Sydney 2000	2.8	1.5
Athens 2004	2.6	1.6
Beijing 2008	2.6	1.5
London 2012	2.8	1.5
Rio 2016	8.1	10.5

Note. *Santos, Furtado, Poffo, Velasco, & Souza (2018); ** Hilgemberg (2019).

After the Rio 2016 PG, the Brazilian media appears to have gained an interest in Paralympic sports. It is now possible to see, from time to time, some coverage related to them in the news and in TV special sport programmes such as “Esporte Espetacular²”. This kind of news also became more common in sport-related online sport platforms, such as the Globoesporte.com, which is one of the most popular sport information sites in Brazil. This site now has a special section dedicated to Paralympic sports³. There is some evidence that the visibility of PWD in the media has increased also in the UK after the London 2012 PG. In the UK case, however, PWD apparently became more visible not only in programmes dedicated to sports. They started to appear more in other kinds of programmes including TV game shows (Brittain, 2018).

The PG as a Tool to Change People’s Perception of PWD: Challenging Old Stereotypes and Stigma

Twenty three interviewees highlighted that one of the advantages of the athletes’ visibility was that as it displayed the athletes’ abilities, it also highlighted some of the potential of PWD. This, in turn, might have changed – or might have helped to change - people’s perceptions towards PWD.

My daughter studied at a municipal school. They [the students] were learning about the OG and PG, and an athlete with a disability was invited to the school. He was presented as an athlete ..., someone who challenges the limits of the body. When he appears in the media, he also appears in this prominent place The athlete is this figure that conquers! [...]. He breaks paradigms! (Fernanda, ND).

They started to realize that PWD are capable The people who went with me to watch the PG in Rio [...] didn't know that PWD could do certain things The PG changed their perception. Now they see PWD differently! (Adriana, ND).

Twelve participants pointed out that a fundamental legacy of the PG was that it helped to change the way families' perceived their relatives with disabilities.

They [the PG] led PWD's families to realize that they [their children] do not have to stay in the house because of their impairment' (Décio, ND)

The PG helped families to become aware that he [the person with a disability] is not a poor thing. He is an ordinary person like anyone else and he can do things! (Junior, PD).

The interviewees mentioned above implied that families' change of perception was quite important because they have a fundamental role in PWD's development and self-determination (e.g., Shogren & Turnbull, 2006) and in their involvement – or not - in physical activity (e.g., Shields & Synnot, 2016).

What makes a difference for a person to stay in the house or go out and develop is the family environment. ... There are families that believe in PWD's potential and provide them with opportunities in different areas [...]. There are super protective families that treat the person with disability as if he were a box made of glass ... and end up isolating him You also have an environment that is negative ... in which the family does not accept the disability and the person remains abandoned inside the house. So in fact

what makes the difference ... for PWD is the family! ... He becomes a victim if his family turns him into a victim. If his family works from another perspective on disability, he will never be a victim! (Décio, ND).

Twenty three participants claimed that the PG helped to break - or might have helped to break - old stereotypes and stigmas normally associated with PWD.

Society thinks that disability is linked to disease The PG helped to combat this.
(Júnior, PD)

The PG showed them who we are People treat us like poor things, right? And when they see the athlete competing ..., this takes away the stigma that you are a poor thing!
(Carlos, PD)

Stigma is a perceived negative attribute that limits people's ability to see themselves or others as whole human beings. The focus is on a supposedly negative attribute and not on the person as a whole. The individual ends up being perceived only through this characteristic or through what could be called, a "spoiled identity" (Goffman, 2004). The fact that the abilities of the Paralympians challenged stigmas associated with PWD might have helped them to be seen beyond their impairments and/or presumed limitations. The change in perception by the public can possibly be explained by contact theory, first elaborated by Allport (1954) and thoroughly discussed in the literature since then. As Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ (2011) remark, based on a meta-analysis of 515 studies that involved this theory, there is evidence that the direct or the indirect contact with the "other" or groups of "others" might help diminish prejudice.

Five participants were critical of the supercrip model for one or more of the following reasons: i. it sends the message that to have a disability is a problem that needs to be solved; ii. it fosters the myth that the individual did everything by himself or herself (the myth of individual merit); iii. it might promote the expectation that others do as well as the athletes and; iv. it might prevent others from trying to engage in sport⁴. However, in spite of these issues all interviewees, including those who criticised the supercrip narratives, disagreed with the idea that the PG are counter-productive to the disability rights movement. Even the most critical said that it is better to have supercrip narratives than to maintain PWD's usual invisibility. Two of them actually made the point that the media is full of stereotypes related to gender, race, social class, beauty patterns, and PWD. As these misrepresentations appear in the media, they can generate critical debates:

But doesn't the media do that to everyone? So I think that the person with disability gains this visibility even within this wrong media pattern ..., and then, we can make the criticism! The process itself affects everyone and not just people with disabilities!
(Fernanda, ND)

What Fernanda appears to imply is that, as some scholars have remarked, the media coverage of the PG has a great potential to serve as a platform to debate disability issues (Blauwet & Willick, 2012; Brittain & Beacom, 2016; Maika & Danylchuk, 2016; Misener et al., 2019). This potential has actually already been explored. A study by McGillivray, O'Donnell, McPherson & Misener (2019) showed that there were some cases in the media coverage of the Rio 2016 PG in the UK where the news were politicised and “facilitated a conversation about non-sporting matters—something that could provide the basis for activists and disabled persons’ organisations to exploit in the future” (p. 26). In other words, the media

discourse in a few circumstances was repurposed in a way that helped with the disability rights cause.

While some critics claim that the PG promote a false view of PWD's reality, one that is too distant to that of most PWD, most of our interviewees said that it is quite important that the PG disseminate the information that some PWD can do things and live a life that most people— including other PWD – did not know were possible. This information, they said, can be used by them to promote changes for the better in the latter's lives so that everyone can be successful according to their own possibilities and demands.

People don't even know that there is this possibility ... We need to have greater encouragement in activities that disseminate this kind of information! Disclosure allows for awareness! We will only become aware that this possibility exists if someone informs us! ... There are those who can and cannot get there. What is the challenge? To make everyone who can and wants to get there to succeed in his/her own way!
(Elizabeth, ND)

As the interviewees talked about the influence of the PG to challenge negative perceptions of PWD (e.g. that they are pitiful, sick, useless, fragile), they confirmed what some scholars have said about the “disruptive power” of the PG. This power stems from a disruption between the low expectations that people have of PWD and what they can actually do while practicing elite sports (Silva & Howe, 2012). This kind of influence was – in certain ways – leveraged by the Brazilian Paralympic Committee (BPC) (Marques, 2017). The BPC promoted various campaigns reinforcing images of athletes with disabilities as competitive and efficient elite athletes. Amongst different initiatives to optimize the opportunity to show the Paralympians as elite athletes, there was also the production and

dissemination of a media guide (Pappous & Souza, 2016) for Brazilian journalists on how to cover the Rio 2016 PG. There is evidence that the quality of the coverage of the Rio 2016 PG in fact improved in at least one of the most important news-papers in Brazil: O Globo. In this last edition of the PG the focus of this newspaper changed from a focus on the athletes' impairments and supposedly tragic life stories to the athleticism of the Paralympians (Hilgemberg, 2019).

Answering the Critics: 'Give time to time!' The PG is a Part of the PWD's Larger, Complex and Slow Movement.

There is a scarcity of reliable research on the ability of the PG to change perceptions of PWD (Pappous & Brown, 2018). Amongst the literature that is available on the topic, two studies with a more robust methodological approach suggest that the PG in fact might positively impact people's attitudes towards PWD. The first (Misener et al., 2019) had as one of its goals to compare possible changes of perceptions of spectators at the Toronto 2015 Parapan American Games and the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games. It found that 30% of the spectators at Glasgow 2014 and 55% of the spectators at the Toronto Games claimed that watching the events changed their attitudes towards disability. The researchers assert that these numbers could possibly be even higher if it were not for the fact that many of the participants had already been previously exposed to policies related to PWD rights implemented in Canada and/or to the abilities of the Paralympic athletes through the London PG. The second study (Hodges et al., 2014) was based upon 140 in-depth unstructured interviews in the UK in the lead up to and immediately following the London 2012 PG. According to this research, "there is no doubt that the London 2012 Paralympics had impact both in terms of highlighting sporting success and positively influencing public perceptions

of disability” (Hodges et al., 2014; p. 183). However, while there is some evidence that the PG might in fact promote a change in perception, so far there is no consistent evidence that this kind of effect will last in the long run (Pappous & Brown, 2018).

While twenty three interviewees claimed that the PG promoted – or might have promoted - a change of perception, fourteen of them remarked that it will take time for this change to have a concrete impact on PWD.

The Games are not showing PWD in the role of the poor thing! [...] But this paradigm break is very slow. The PG plant a little seed They might not impact the person with a disability who is living at this time. But the new generations have this reference of the athlete from an early age (Fernanda, ND)

You go breaking paradigms step by step We see the acceptance of PWD as an integral participant in society as a slow movement (Bettina, PD)

When we asked the participants our second interview question, all of them disagreed that the PG might be counterproductive to the PWD’s rights movement. They see the Games as an ally of this large and complex movement in favor of PWD that has been slowly helping to change the latter’s reality.

The PG have been gradually projecting the person with disability serving as a showcase. Do you understand? They have been shaping the world culture in relation to the capacity, the abilities of the person with a disability! This, in parallel with other actions in other spheres, have been helping! [...]. People's behavior towards PWD has been changing(Mauro, PD)

The PG have been contributing [...]. Give time to time! Everything happens in its own time. Today the person with disability finds a receptivity that is quite different from what it was three years ago. (Vital, VD)

As an interviewee said, one of the positive characteristics of the PG is that they show PWD's abilities and/or potential through powerful images that "speak more than words".

The wheelchair rugby ... goes against everything you believe about PWD You don't have to say that PWD are not fragile. The sport shows A picture is worth a thousand words! So I don't need to do a lot of awareness work to tell that child that the person with a disability is a person with potential. The image says so! The image is very strong! (Fernanda, ND)

The messages about PWD's abilities and/or potential reach a lot of people, including important stakeholders that can make a significant difference in PWD's lives.

The visibility in the media reaches the corporate society ..., government entities, mayors, councilors, state and federal deputies, governors, , senators, president of the republic, the judiciary All of these entities receive this influence showing PWD as capable. So it [this message] permeates the whole society. It can make a difference! (Vital, VD)

As we have already discussed, there is a critical literature that claims that messages focused on the abilities of the Paralympians might promote ableism. Most of our participants,

however, believe that showing their abilities might in fact be beneficial to PWD for all the reasons mentioned above and also because they might help open new doors for them:

Society becomes aware that the disabled person may be more than a blind person, a cripple, a wheelchair and a beggar. People will start to realize that if he is able to do this in sports, he is able to do other things. So for me this is an enormous gain! With the disclosure of the efficiency of PWD in sports ..., he ceases to be disabled and becomes efficient, right? And if he is efficient in sport, he can be efficient in his professional life, he can be efficient in his day-to-day work, in education, in society.

(Vital, VD)

Considering our participants' and the critical literature's perspectives on the possible outcomes of messages that reinforce the athlete's abilities and/or "super-abilities", we come to the conclusion that these messages have two sides: Whilst they show PWD's potential and might open doors to many PWD, both in sport and outside the sport world, they might also promote ableism and the discrimination against those who do not have the same levels of ability as the Paralympians. According to our participants, the criticism that the PG might be detrimental for the PWD's rights movement does not apply to the Brazilian context, because the reality of PWD in Brazil is quite different from the reality of more developed countries.

There is a completely different reality in England People here [in Brazil] do not even know that the person with a disability can leave the house! ... I would not adopt this kind of idea for the Brazilian reality. Is it open to everyone? OK! Can everyone get there if they want? No. It depends on each one's condition But we have to lead the

person with a disability to understand that he or she can be more than he or she is!

(Vital, VD)

As pointed out elsewhere, “each Paralympic Games is a child of its time and location” (Brittain, 2018; p.113) Or, to put it another way, “each Games takes place within a particular cultural, political and economic context that influences its relationship with wider society” (Brittain & Beacom, 2016; p.504). As we consider the case of the London 2012 PG, for example, right before, during, and after the PG, there was a huge debate around the Government’s decision to cut some of the PWD’s benefits given the financial crisis that had impacted the UK. In this context the media showed contrasting images of PWD. On one hand, it showed welfare benefit claimants, who were depicted as “scroungers”. On the other, it displayed the athletes as super achievers (or superhumans, as some of the marketing campaigns have propagated). The images of PWD as very successful people, able to do incredible things, in the face of the “scroungers” depiction led to different outcomes: While the example of the athletes offered some positive ways to look at disability and the potential of PWD, they had negative impacts on those who do not meet expected standards and need State support to survive and thrive (Crow, 2014). These images might have generated a sense that if PWD really want, they can be as successful as the athletes, and that if they are not successful, it is because they did not make the necessary effort to do so.

In answering the second interview question, nineteen interviewees directly or indirectly suggested that it is not the Paralympic movement, the PG, or the example of the Paralympians’ success that frustrate those who are not able to achieve great deeds in sports or other areas. What frustrates them the most are factors such as prejudice and discrimination towards PWD and the lack of support from the State, families and society. Therefore, disability rights advocates and scholars should not be concentrating their efforts in criticizing the Paralympic

movement and/or the PG, which in contrast to other stakeholders or instances, are at least offering a number of opportunities to PWD. The advocates and scholars, a couple of interviewees remarked, should be criticising those who are not doing their part to contribute to PWD's rights and development. The following passage by one of the ex-Presidents of the BPC eloquently makes this point:

I think he may feel bad for another reason Not because another person with a disability is standing out. He can feel bad knowing that he lives in a country and in a society, and that he has a family, that is not able to give him the possibility to fight for that This is the responsibility of the family, of the city, of the State and of the country to give him this condition! It is not the sport that has this obligation! Sport cannot be criminalized for that! ... They [the critical scholars] shouldn't be working against this situation [against the Paralympic movement and the PG]! They should be working against the State The State has to offer PWD the conditions so that ... everyone can reach his or her goals! (Vital, VD).

For our interviewees then, the visibility that Paralympic sports and the PG give to PWD outweigh any possible negative impacts that this event might have had. A research conducted in Bermuda and Ghana (Forber-Pratt, 2015) is consistent with our findings. While this study was not looking specifically at the legacies of the PG, but of disability sports in general, it found that this kind of sport sparked the interest of policymakers and government officials in PWD's causes in different areas such as legislation, education and healthcare (Forber-Pratt, 2015). Paralympic sports in some contexts are still one of the rare arenas where PWD become visible, which might, in turn, help to promote discussions about their reality.

Conclusion

According to all our interviewees, regardless of whether they had a disability or not and were involved or not with sport, one of the most important legacies of the PG was that it gave visibility to PWD who were rarely seen in the media and in public spaces before the Games. This visibility helped to challenge negative stereotypes and stigmas usually associated with PWD. It might also have helped to open new doors and initiatives in their favour.

For our participants, the possible benefits of the PG by far outweighed potential negative outcomes, such as those related to the second interview question. According to them, we should not expect that the PG alone can change people's perceptions and PWD's status overnight. These Games are a part of a larger and complex set of actions that are slowly contributing to this process. For the interviewees, the PG are an asset - and not a disservice - to the PWD's rights movement. Calling them a disservice, some of them said, would be to devalue the PG, which are actually making a contribution to help to improve PWD's reality.

Our study challenges some of the assertions of the critical scholarly work developed in the Global North explored in our introduction. We conclude therefore, that it should not be automatically transferred to different cultural contexts. In places like Brazil, where PWD are virtually invisible, occasions such as the PG can be used as a platform to show their abilities, possibilities, needs and demands; to challenge PWD's misrepresentations and stigmas, and to debate disability issues. As has been pointed out in another study that looked at the influence of Paralympic sports in Ghana and Bermuda (Forber-Pratt, 2015), the power of Paralympic sports – and we ourselves would say, of the PG - might be stronger in contexts where PWD suffer more from social stigma and where there is little respect for PWD's rights. This power, we believe, can become even stronger to the extent that the media becomes more qualified and politically engaged to promote more debates related to disability issues.

We have developed an exploratory research considering the views of a limited number of disability activists and of people involved with Paralympic sports in a specific context. It would be interesting to interview more people with this same profile, and other profiles, to further explore and more thoroughly understand - different perspectives on the legacies of the PG for PWD in Brazil and other countries with similar realities outside of the European, Australian, and North American axis. The more we learn about possible legacies of the PG, the more we can use them as a stronger ally to help build a fairer and more equitable society for all PWD, regardless of the type or degree of their impairments.

Notes

¹ The data of this same study revealed that 6.7% of the Brazilian population stated that they have “a lot of difficulty” or “cannot in any way” see, hear, walk, climb stairs and/or that they have some kind of intellectual disability that impairs their involvement in activities such as to play, study or work (Botelho & Porciúncula, 2018).

² This is a popular sport programme, which is broadcast by the Globo group every Sunday morning in Brazil

³ Available at <https://globoesporte.globo.com/paralimpiadas/>

⁴ We will discuss this issue in a different paper

⁵ Social organization that aims to promote assistance to people with intellectual and multiple disabilities

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