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**“I Think I Became a Swimmer Rather than Just Someone with a Disability Swimming
Up and Down”: Paralympic Athletes Perceptions of Self and Identity Development**

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore the role of swimming on Paralympic athletes' perceptions of self and identity development. *Method:* A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was taken. During semi-structured interviews five Paralympic swimmers (aged 20-24 years) were asked questions about their swimming career, perceptions of self, integration, and impairment. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. *Results:* An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis¹ yielded three superordinate themes: a) 'One of the crowd'; none of the participants viewed themselves as disabled, nor as supercrips; these perceptions stemmed from family-, school-, and swimming- related experiences, b) 'Becoming me'; participation in swimming facilitated self- and social- acceptance, and identity development, and c) 'A badge of honour'; swimming presented opportunity to present and reinforce a positive identity. *Conclusions:* Swimming experiences enabled the participants to enhance personal and social identities, integrate through pro-social mechanisms, and to develop a career path following retirement from competition. *Key words:* Paralympic sport, lived experiences, congenital disability, qualitative research.

42 **“I Think I Became a Swimmer Rather than Just Someone with a Disability Swimming**
43 **Up and Down”**: Paralympic Athletes Perceptions of Self and Identity Development

44 Identity, typically considered as sets of meanings applied to the self in a social role or
45 situation², is said to represent an individual’s self-understanding, self-objectification, and/or
46 integration of information about the self.³ It has also been proposed that identity is the
47 organisational process that links how people act and behave to their social world.⁴ Identity as
48 a concept is also used in various ways (such as exploring the salience of particular identities)
49 to highlight different facets of human self-definition⁵⁻⁷, and as such, has also become a
50 prolific, and contested, topic of research.⁵

51 Within sport, researchers have generally adopted a dispositional approach to identity,
52 and have explored a range of affective, cognitive, behavioural, and personality correlates of
53 domain-specific self-identity.⁸ One particular type of domain-specific identity that has
54 increasing research interest is ‘athletic identity.’^{9,10} Athletic identity (i.e., a dispositional
55 perspective to identity)¹¹ has been considered as the extent to which individuals identify with
56 the role of an athlete. Athletic identity is considered to be both a cognitive structure (schema)
57 and a social role¹⁰, whereby it consist of a (a) a cognitive structure that affords clarification of
58 information, coping across different situations, and influences behaviour, and (b) individual’s
59 perceptions of others and of social roles¹² assigned to the identity. In other words, individuals
60 might make inferences regarding perceptions of their commitment to an activity, their ability
61 to engage in the activity,¹³ and a commitment to ideological and occupational options most
62 consistent with their needs, values, skills, and interests.¹⁴

63 Typically athletic identity is considered as being pervasive, and as creating positive
64 impressions regardless of sex, age, or activity level – and ‘able-bodiedness.’¹⁵⁻¹⁷ An
65 individual may describe oneself through multiple identities represented by specific self-
66 attributes (e.g., I am athletic) or specific social roles (e.g., I am a cyclist, I am a swimmer).¹⁸

67 These multiple possible identities are typically organized in a “salience hierarchy” whereby
68 the more important identities receive greater investment of time and effort in order to ensure
69 enactment¹⁸ of those identities. How athletic identity is constructed within population of
70 athletes with disabilities, is still relatively unknown. Equally, research investigating the
71 influence of sport on disabled athletes sense of self and identity development is limited.

72 What is known, is that sport as a domain has been identified as a venue that can
73 facilitate opportunity for favourable self-perceptions to develop among individuals with
74 disabilities.¹⁹⁻²¹ To date, research has demonstrated positive correlations between athletic
75 identity and positive perceptions of physical ability amongst children with visual
76 impairment,²² equally strong athletic identity between athletes with disability when compared
77 to those without a disability²³, and confirmed that athletes with disabilities strongly
78 considered themselves as athletes, and have many sport-related goals as well as a strong
79 desire to achieve these goals.²⁴

80 However, researchers have urged that more exploration be conducted with regard to
81 the more research to fully understand the social-psychological characteristics of athletes with
82 disability.²⁵ Indeed, disabled athletes have been under-represented in sport psychology
83 research, with a focus only appearing within the past 10 to 20 years.²⁶ Moreover, research
84 focusing specifically on athletes with congenital disability is rare. The authors were able to
85 trace only one paper²⁷ exclusively focused on athletes living with congenital disability,
86 highlighting a significant gap in the literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to
87 explore the role of swimming on Paralympic athletes’ with congenital disability sense of self
88 and identity development. Specifically, the exploratory research question was: How did
89 swimming influence identity development and maintenance?

90 **Method**

91 **Participants**

92 Following institutional ethical approval participants were purposively sampled.
93 Details of the study were made available, and subsequently five swimmers (male $n = 2$; age
94 20.5 ± 3.5 years; female $n = 3$; age 24.3 ± 6.7 years) consented to participate. All participants
95 lived with a congenital physical disability, and had been categorised into particular swim
96 events via the International Paralympic Committee Classification Code 2007, within groups
97 S1–S10 (swimmers with a functional physical disability e.g., amputees, cerebral palsy,
98 multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injury). All participants had represented Great Britain at the
99 London 2012 Paralympic Games. References to particular disability locations, and
100 competition class, were removed from the study to protect participants' anonymity.
101 Pseudonyms were allocated to further protect the anonymity of participants.

102 **Interpretative framework**

103 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis IPA¹ was used as the analytical framework
104 to facilitate understanding of personal accounts of particular events and topics; i.e., lived
105 experience.²⁸ IPA researchers assume a connection exists between individuals' accounts,
106 cognitions, and physical states that interpretation of accounts can yield.¹ IPA is founded
107 upon phenomenology and symbolic interactionism.¹ That is, IPA allows researchers to
108 explore how individuals experience, and thus make sense of, their personal and social worlds.
109 Thus, the aim of IPA is to understand lived experience, rather than the aim of producing
110 objective accounts of the topic under investigation.²⁹ IPA is also considered to be a co-
111 constitutive process²⁹ in that, whilst it aims to explore a participant's view of the world, it
112 also incorporates an 'insider's' perspective of the topic under investigation.³⁰ Therefore, the
113 researcher's own interpretation of meanings elicited within analyses is central to an IPA.³¹
114 Whilst participants are attempting to understand their world, the researcher is attempting to
115 understand the participant's world.²⁸ Therefore, whilst the intention is to get as close as
116 possible to the participant's life world, it is acknowledged that this cannot be achieved either

117 directly, or completely. Similarly for symbolic-interactionists, the meanings which
118 individuals ascribe to events are of central concern, but it is again acknowledged that those
119 meanings are only obtained through a process of social engagement, and a process of
120 interpretation.¹ Hence, to a large extent, interpretation is dependent upon a researcher's own
121 perceptions of a participant's life world.^{28,29,32}

122 **Procedure**

123 Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with participants being asked to
124 talk generally about: (a) their experiences of growing-up with a disability, and (b) the
125 personal and professional impact of swimming. A question schedule was developed in order
126 that what the research team thought/hoped might be discussed was reinforced.²⁹ To enhance
127 the process a structure based upon Patton³³ was developed whereby the background,
128 experience and behaviour, opinions and values, and emotions of participants were sought.
129 Flexibility in the questions was maintained to facilitate potential variety in participant
130 responses.³² Interviews were audio-recorded, and transcribed at the semantic level (e.g.,
131 spoken words, laughter, and significant pauses) as deemed appropriate for IPA.²⁹

132 **Analysis**

133 The focus of analysis was upon the meanings participants ascribed to topics,³⁴ and
134 therefore upon developing thick description³⁵ regarding how the participants thought about,
135 and dealt with, complex issues.¹ Each transcript was analysed following detailed
136 guidelines.^{1,36, 28,37} Transcripts were transferred to the middle of a three-column table, and
137 were read several times to increase familiarity. Notes were made in the right-hand column
138 regarding issues that seemed interesting or significant. Analysis guidelines²⁸ suggested
139 noting associations, repetitions, contradictions, connections between participants' speech, and
140 the use of language. Furthermore, the guidelines suggested making preliminary
141 interpretations, and noting initial theme titles that reflect the emerging essence of topics in the

142 left-hand column of the table. Emergent themes were then clustered according to apparent
143 connections, and related back to transcripts to check the fit with the participants' accounts.
144 This resulted in development of a set of super-ordinate and sub-themes. This process was
145 completed for each transcript to afford contextually interpretative analyses,²⁸ and resulted in a
146 master list of themes being produced for each transcript with each list then being compared to
147 others. New, and repeated, themes were thereby identified within each account that had an
148 alternative meaning for participants. These processes continued iteratively, and were
149 combined with the writing-up process¹ thereby enabling movement from a descriptive
150 thematic analysis to a contextually interpretative reading of each case.²⁸ The data from the
151 interviews offered particularly rich description; therefore in order to select quotes for
152 inclusion the notion of 'searching for gems'³⁸ was used. Smith³⁸ describes 'shining',
153 'suggestive', and 'secret' gems as being utterances which present significance
154 disproportionate to their size.

155 **Trustworthiness**

156 The trustworthiness of qualitative research might be judged by its credibility,
157 transferability, confirmability, and dependability.³⁹ For example, an audit trail was
158 maintained relating to the procedures and data analysis allowing the coherency,
159 confirmability, credibility and dependency of argument to be examined.³⁹ Adding further to
160 the credibility of the study was the saturation of data evident during analysis. Interpretation of
161 the data was conducted by all authors resulting in reinterpretation of the links between several
162 themes. Also, participants were sent drafts of these interpretations for comment with respect
163 to whether these fairly and accurately represented their perspectives and practices.

164 **Attending to the researcher's presence**

165 Reflexivity has become increasingly associated with qualitative research as a means
166 of accounting for the researcher's presence in qualitative research.⁴⁰ Personal, and

167 epistemological, reflexivity have been described as introspection whereby researchers explore
168 the impact of their own experience and understanding in interpreting the phenomena under
169 investigation.⁴¹ Accordingly, a process of self-dialogue and discovery was undertaken based
170 upon our reflections, thought processes, and intuitions via reflexive diaries and discussion.

171 **Results and Discussion**

172 This section presents, and discusses, the key elements of three related themes which
173 emerged from the data. These were: (a) one of the crowd, (b) becoming me, and (c) a badge
174 of honour. Each theme is illustrated by verbatim extracts from the interviews.

175 **One of the crowd**

176 Participants described experiences, linked to swimming, which seemed to depict
177 processes of normalisation whilst growing-up: “my mum was a swimmer, and my brother and
178 I started lessons, just like any other child” (Christy; living with Cerebral Palsy). There was
179 frequent comparison of their childhood to a stereotypical social reality, thereby positioning
180 swimming as an everyday component of growing-up. Swimming had been the expected thing
181 to do. This lends support to previous research⁴² which indicates that environmental and
182 family demographics are more significant determinants of participation than the
183 characteristics of disabled individuals themselves. Vince (living with Osteogenesis
184 Imperfecta) had “completed that bit” in order to please his parents, and also explained that
185 swimming had been a rational choice of activity: “The doctor said to keep fit this is a good
186 idea sort of thing, non-contact, didn’t break anything, that sort of thing” (Vince). Despite
187 such cautions Vince had never considered himself as disabled, and it seemed that his belief
188 stemmed from his parents having treated him as a child rather than as a ‘condition’. He
189 offered a positive self-appraisal that resisted social stereotypes of disability by positioning his
190 circumstance as innocuous:

191

192 I was never brought up being told I was disabled, like there was never an issue with
193 oh you can't do that because you've got this. Like for example, if I was messing
194 around and fell over and broke something, then it's like idiot child, what you doing?
195 You know you shouldn't be doing that instead of screaming at me you can't do that.
196 They let me learn, so I don't consider myself any different from other people. For us
197 having a disability is like someone having a certain type of hair, but if you had only
198 ever seen one colour of hair, you would be like what's that sort of thing. You just talk
199 about it, I mean, on the team we all take the mick out of each other all the time. No-
200 one's particularly fussed by it and we just get on with it. (Vince)

201
202 As reported by participants in previous research e.g.,⁵ impairment was not
203 considered important to Vince's sense of self, and conceiving of life without an impairment
204 seemed like a 'phenomenological impossibility'. However, in making sense of disability, and
205 restructuring normality⁵, the maintenance of self, and other, seemed important. For example,
206 making disability visible via humour contributed to a sense of mutual understanding,
207 acceptance, affiliation, empathy, and enhanced self-congruence within a select sub-culture.
208 Vince's ascription of disability to fundamental biological factors negated any alternative
209 explanations of difference, and seemed normalising and stoic. Yet, he offered a downward
210 comparison between himself and others in his environment:

211
212 There are people on the team that are missing both their arms, so they eat with just
213 their elbows and put the fork in their mouth that way really, and I don't understand,
214 like I don't understand how people with one arm can tie shoelaces, in my head it
215 doesn't work, yet every day I see it, and it's like, how are you doing that? So, it's just
216 normal. (Vince)

217

218 In contrast to some individuals with acquired disability,⁴³ Vince did not base his self-
219 concept upon a former self. Nor did he place an emphasis upon the body as tragedy, nor as
220 limiting future possible identities, as depicted within the medical model of disability. Instead,
221 Vince's conceptualisation of disability appeared to correspond to benchmarks of current and
222 future functionality ('bodily capital')⁴⁴ of the swimming-body as providing meaning within,
223 and beyond, swimming: "My whole self-perception is probably based around swimming, so,
224 because if I didn't have swimming I wouldn't know what to base if I'm doing well or not on"
225 (Vince). Thus, Vince's strong internalised identity standard⁴⁵ provided a holistic sense of
226 being 'fit for purpose'. Hence, competitive swimming provided an arena in which to
227 objectively gauge his-self. In contrast, Tony commented on others (non-swimmers) with the
228 same disability (as his own) who did not use their limbs, and consequently experienced
229 further disability and pain.

230 The participants described a watershed, during early teenage years, following which
231 they began to train and compete seriously. For Anne (living with a missing limb) this
232 watershed signalled the end of an existential quest and the emergence of a tangible sense of
233 belonging in, and contribution to, the world: "As I got into swimming more and more, I felt
234 like I had a place more and more" (Anne). Perceptions of integration often stemmed from
235 attendance at mainstream schools where experiences had generally seemed positive.
236 However, owing to a lack of specialist facilities integration had been the only option. Tony's
237 reflexive account highlighted 'enforced' integration/denial of opportunity in swimming:
238 "Even now I'm just doing public swimming, and it's a case of because I know what I'm
239 doing with swimming, I just get in and everyone's just like well yeah, I can swim kind of
240 thing *thank you*" (Tony).

241 Tony' circumstances however seemed beneficial in that focus was largely upon his
242 swimming behaviour, as opposed to embodied experiences, ensuring that his athletic identity
243 and biography remained intact.⁴⁶ Self-identity might rest upon what people are actually able
244 to do,⁵ and not how they do it. As such, "identity is disembodied".⁵ Certainly, Tony was keen
245 to prove potential stereotypical judgements as unwarranted, and (as with Vince) to reject
246 notions of difference on the basis of functional capability and not physical difference:

247

248 You got to know the regulars, or they got to know me to the point where they would
249 always sort of say hello and stuff, and that was really positive, so I was known as the
250 swimmer and not that kid with the disability. I'd always be conscious like if I went
251 swimming that people would stare because even if it was just family fun time, people
252 always do stare, but then, I know now, if I get into the pool and people stare, I could
253 swim up and down and people wouldn't stare anymore because they would realise
254 that I can do it just as well. As soon as I get into the water I'm no different to anybody
255 else. Once you're in the water, then you're in the water and just swimming. (Tony)

256

257 Disabled individuals have been described as being disqualified from full social
258 acceptance.⁴⁷ This disqualification is perhaps evident in the lack of participation in sport
259 wherein disabled bodies perhaps do not meet expectations of an ideal sporting body/identity;
260 and therefore warrant lack of participation. Many individuals with disability also experience
261 low performance expectations.⁴² However, a more positive impression of disability is
262 generated when individuals are physically active, perhaps via a judgement of utility that adds
263 to a sense of normalisation.^{48,49} Tony's pro-social approach to dealing with perceived
264 negative reactions was supportive of this notion, and his (autonomous swimming)
265 performance re-presented his body (to the public) as a possibility not a problem.⁵⁰ He did not

266 require, nor seek assistance, and so considered that he did not present an anomaly nor a
267 burden. Thus, once immersed in the water he countered a poolside ‘disablist socio-spatial
268 environment’⁵¹, and transcended his conspicuousness and self-consciousness. Whilst
269 swimming Tony’s disability was masked by the water thereby shifting focus from disability
270 to competency, such distraction processes are especially powerful when people are not
271 expected to perform well in certain activities.⁵² Thus, Tony’s body had ‘something to teach’;
272 his body was communicative⁵⁰ in conveying possibility. Therefore, swimming provided a
273 means of demonstrating competence and efficiency; both of which are ‘self-profitable’ traits
274 linked to perceived ability.⁴⁹ The need to be self-sufficient was apparent in Michaela’s
275 account of ‘policing’⁵³ other swimmers:

276

277 I think I proved that most people with disability can fit in somewhere as long as
278 they’re willing to work as well as everyone else is. I know we had a few people and
279 on the way, they were like I’ve got a disability, you owe me something, and it was
280 like no, kind of go away, you’re here to work, you’re here as a swimmer. (Michaela)

281

282 Disabled athletes consider that their commitment to sport is what defines them as an
283 athlete, regardless of disability status.⁴⁶ However, despite proving her competency in the pool
284 Christy spoke of challenges she experienced on joining a new club. When asked for
285 clarification by the interviewer (“you had to persuade the coach to let you in”?) Christy
286 replied: “Yeah because he was a little bit worried that I’d be in the way, like taking up room
287 for his other swimmers who were much faster than me”. Stereotypes position disability in
288 such a way that behaviours different to those ascribed by a stereotype are considered unusual.
289 Therefore, an athletic identity is hard to attain when those with a disability do not fit the
290 model of a ‘normal person’ or that of a ‘normal athlete’.^{54,55} Whilst Michaela described

291 striving to achieve her best as a swimmer, this did not appear to be a compensatory strategy.
292 Nor, as reported by Berger⁵⁶ with regard to wheelchair basketball players, did she wish to be
293 viewed as a ‘supercrip’⁵⁷: “At the end of the day, we’re still doing the same things and we
294 still all just want the same things” (Michaela).

295 In summary, the participants’ accounts highlighted the importance of swimming with
296 regard to facilitating social and self-acceptance, and a sense of identity. Similar to previous
297 research⁵ their life-course was depicted as being no different to that of other people, as having
298 extended far beyond medical model notions of disability, and as having led to an ongoing
299 enhancement of quality of life.

300 **Becoming me**

301 The notion that living with congenital disability is easier as opposed to living with
302 acquired disability is a myth.⁵⁸ Certainly most of the participants described existential
303 challenges akin to those described by individuals with acquired disability. For example,
304 Michaela spoke of difficult on-going self-rationalisation in order to find an acceptable
305 explanation for her circumstance:

306
307 In childhood and early teenage years, I struggled to realise what disability meant,
308 partly because I didn’t want to accept it and didn’t want to be different to my brother
309 and sister and friends, but actually, it got to a point where I couldn’t keep up with
310 them any longer, and thought hang on a minute, who am I? I was quite fortunate, I
311 had a couple of really good physios and a really good consultant that said if you don’t
312 accept it now, you’re not going to be able to do anything later on, that’s part of the
313 reason I use a wheelchair, because if I don’t preserve the mobility I’ve got now, I’m
314 not going to have anything when I’m older. (Michaela)

315

316 Michaela was aware of unavoidable progressive physical decline and restriction, and
317 her difference precipitated an existential search for her-self. Her account of early life
318 experiences seemed to epitomise a future ‘feared self’⁵⁹, and a discernible causality for her
319 disability was unavailable which highlighted an inability to make sense of circumstances.
320 However, despite the daunting prospect of using a wheelchair doing so had afforded greater
321 predictability⁶⁰ and independence, facilitated opportunities for “learning who I am myself”,
322 and thus offered greater self-congruence through comparison of past, present, and possible
323 future selves. Far from presenting a pessimistic, and disabling, prognosis of future
324 functionality her on-going use of the chair appeared to offer an optimistic alternative. As
325 reported in other research, Michaela had become ‘en-wheeled’ and subsequently ‘newly
326 abled.’⁶¹

327 Anne (living with a missing limb) also described early difficulties in understanding
328 her disability, and her account resonated with rejection and disassociation:

329

330 There wasn’t any reason for it, doctors didn’t know. When I was younger, I was
331 embarrassed and I didn’t like to be different. I felt people watch me and kids would
332 be like ah mum look she’s got one arm. I’ve had an operation, I thought I looked
333 cuter, but that is the only disability I have, like it didn’t affect any other areas. (Anne)

334

335 Although still uncertain as to why ‘it’ had happened to her and despite her early pre-
336 occupation with, and dislike of, her appearance Anne had felt able to exert some level of
337 influence. Manipulation via surgery had facilitated a sense of adjustment, and presented
338 opportunity for compromise in terms of achieving a more acceptable appearance and sense of
339 self. Yet, an element of incongruence, sensitivity, and vulnerability still remained:

340

341 When I first went to boarding school, only the swimmers for the first six weeks
342 realised I was missing an arm because I'd wear my prosthetic so often that no-one
343 knew, and then when the rumour went round, people were like she's missing an arm,
344 oh my god, I had a bit of an issue with the maths teacher once who was asking me
345 why I wasn't using my arm, I was like I don't have one, and I took my arm off.

346 (Anne)

347

348 Anne's attempts to remain inconspicuous (and pass as 'normal') had failed through no
349 fault of her own, and being 'discovered' had seemed uncomfortable. In contrast to other
350 participants, Anne's sense of self appeared to be dominated largely by the perceptions she
351 believed others (outside of swimming) had of her at that time. In contrast to the other
352 participants, Anne had attempted to comply with what she believed others considered as
353 normal; and account for something that was 'missing'. However, the prosthetic had not
354 functioned in the manner she had hoped, and instead had become a troublesome encumbrance
355 upon which much of her self-concept had been based. This 'enforced' ineptitude adds to
356 previous research wherein participants report physical changes as leading to a sense of
357 ineptitude.⁴⁶ Attempting to 'beat' or 'fight' disability might lead to an inability to re-embody
358 the self. However, for Anne, the abandonment of the prosthetic, and her involvement in
359 swimming, had facilitated a positive change in her self-perception:

360

361 I'd always worn a prosthetic unless I swam or slept, so going to swimming at first was
362 a bit of a challenge because people were just so open about their disability, and like
363 obviously when you swim you can't hide it, so that was a bit of an eye opener for me.
364 I kind of learnt to like my disability and that people didn't care, especially when
365 you're in a disability environment. (Anne)

366

367 This unaccustomed norm of visible disability appeared to have offered comfort,
368 opportunity for adjustment, and an improved body-self relationship. In contrast to ‘dys-
369 appearance’ of the body⁶² due to over-emphasis upon an impairment, Anne’s body had ‘re-
370 appeared’. Abandonment of the prosthetic had seemed an empowering release, and had
371 afforded repair and reintegration of the self. Through swimming, and positive reinforcement
372 from significant others, Anne seemed to have resisted a debilitating sense of difference and
373 instead had achieved a desired validation. Vince also described swimming as pivotal in the
374 understanding and acceptance of his current self: “It (*swimming*) gave me the confidence to
375 recognise that I’ve got a disability, embrace it rather than saying I don’t want to do that
376 because I’m disabled. Now I understand it” (Vince). Disabled individuals often have a
377 limited range of identities to choose from because of societal labels and ascriptions, and
378 whilst identity exists at personal and societal levels it impacts most when it is self-defined as
379 an individual experience.⁶³ Understanding disability therefore appeared to relate not only to
380 their physical nature but also to the establishment of an acceptable and worthwhile place in
381 the world. Swimming appeared to have presented opportunity for definition, and in some
382 cases repair and redefinition, of the self. It appeared that the participants had been able to
383 reclaim their body from the rights of public scrutiny and judgement.⁶⁴ Swimming had
384 provided a benchmark which had facilitated development of a holistic self-concept and
385 transcendence of negative stereotypical beliefs (including their own) regarding disability.

386 The participants’ self-acceptance had also involved self-presentational concerns in a
387 positive manner: “I kind of quite like having big shoulders because it shows that I’ve worked
388 hard at my sport and like, this is what I’ve got to show for it” (Christy). Tony’s account
389 illustrated a transformative process, and gradual ownership of an identity that involved him
390 mutually in physical, psychological, and social terms:

391

392 I think I became a swimmer rather than just someone with a disability swimming up
393 and down. So I'd say someone that could achieve something, because I was doing
394 sort of the same training and I had the same mentality as some of the able-bodied
395 swimmers, you know you put the hours in, I was a swimmer. It wasn't because I was
396 disabled that I was achieving, it was because I was a swimmer and I had put that work
397 in. (Tony)

398

399 Individuals who have accepted and integrated an acquired disability are said to focus
400 predominantly on present behaviour and goals, competition, and performance as opposed to
401 dwelling on a loss of self.⁴⁶ This focus was also evident amongst the current participants, and
402 appeared to facilitate the development and maintenance of an athletic identity. Michaela's
403 emotional account served to illustrate change in her self-worth through swimming, and to
404 depict the disavowal of an unassuming self that appeared to offer little hope:

405

406 I was a very shy and quiet little girl who was just, I don't know, I was sort of
407 participating in swimming, I'd try and pass everything at school and was involved
408 with stuff. But I wouldn't say I was actually achieving in anything particularly, sort
409 of the average student, I was always tired trying to keep up with all my friends so it
410 was that little bit harder to do everything so, I think when I started achieving stuff,
411 that changed and I changed, I became a lot more confident, I could speak for myself.

412 (Michaela)

413

414 As a child Michaela had considered herself as having been "alright; if anyone asked".
415 From being unassuming and not wanting, or feeling worthy of, attention Michaela described

416 how her confidence had blossomed. Similarly to participants in previous research⁵⁴ sport had
417 enabled Michaela to ‘come out of her shell’. Whilst only able to speculate on a life without
418 swimming there was consensus amongst the participants regarding the debt owed: “I don’t
419 know what I would have achieved without it, because having that positive self-perception of
420 myself meant that I’ve realised I can do other things” (Christy).

421 In summary, a disabled body and impairment were not defining features in an
422 emergent sense of self. The participants appeared to have experienced an on-going discovery
423 and maintenance of the self, as opposed to a singular moment of ‘rebirth’ or ‘remaking’ the
424 self.⁶⁵ Thus, the current self was not limited by a desire to resurrect a previous self.

425 **A badge of honour**

426 The participants described a noticeable change in public attitude towards disability
427 following media coverage of the London 2012 Paralympic Games which they perceived as
428 having showcased disability sport. For Tony, disability appeared to have since become a
429 badge of honour:

430

431 It almost makes having one arm an amazing thing. It’s got a use in a way, it provides
432 me with a career, it’s not just like oh missing a limb, that’s it. Someone told me the
433 other day that they had a little one who was just walking down the street and saw
434 another disabled person in the street, and I think their prosthetic leg was on show, and
435 they said look Mum it’s a Paralympian, so they instantly made that connection that
436 actually, it’s not a disabled person but it’s a Paralympian, that they can do something
437 great, so that’s a really good shift I think, as long as the parents respond to that and
438 don’t keep telling the child don’t look at them or whatever. (Tony)

439

440 It has been argued that disability might represent a badge of pride⁶⁶, and unanimity.
441 This appeared to be the case for the participants and, far from distancing themselves from a
442 disability identity, they appeared to gravitate toward an athletic identity and its associated
443 characteristics (whilst not wanting to be viewed as ‘super-crips’). Thus, in contrast to previous
444 research,⁵ the participants indirectly ‘subscribed’ to disability in a manner that they found
445 empowering. Tony’s comment supports previous research that an athletic stereotype might
446 reverse prevailing negative perceptions of disabled individuals⁶⁷ as the apparent admiration
447 perhaps indicates the presence of positive competency-based perceptions.^{49,67} Tony continued
448 to describe how being part of a select sub-culture helped to normalise his appearance, and
449 increase his sense of pride:

450

451 Your disability is pretty visual in swimming, but I kind of learnt to be proud of it, and
452 when there’s a whole eight of you that have got the same disability standing behind
453 the block, people aren’t just watching you. If I was in town, people notice, but when
454 there’s eight of you, they don’t notice, they see you as a whole group, so when I race,
455 I’m kind of part of a group not an individual. (Tony)

456

457 Thus, benefits appeared to arise from both a demarcation of the individual and the
458 group. Being exposed within such an environment with similar others is something that has
459 been proposed as an intervention for “normalisation”¹⁵ wherein a group-identity is formulated
460 which leads to the establishment of a sense of belonging. Despite the multifaceted nature of
461 disability⁶⁸ many disabled individuals still feel a sense of commonality with each other which
462 produces what is commonly called “disability culture”.⁶⁹ This protective culture, borne out of
463 common experience⁷⁰, assumes a common voice to address societal barriers.⁷¹

464 Anne took pride in considering that her participation in the Paralympics had
465 contributed to changes in media and public perception, and a possible shift from viewing the
466 participants as legitimate athletes and (as with Tony) not as ‘supercrips’.⁷²

467
468 I think that was one thing the Paralympics achieved this time round in London was
469 that people realised it wasn’t a Paralympic games, it was just athletes doing things a
470 different way. Swimming has given me the opportunity to represent my country on
471 numerous times. I mean, to walk out in front of 17,000 people at this last games, all
472 shouting for you, that just pretty much says it all. (Anne)

473
474 Success in swimming had led to an increasing visibility for the participants which
475 afforded interaction with the “normal world” .⁴⁷ Instead of hiding their disability the
476 swimmers appeared able to present favourable holistic images of themselves which provided
477 a catalyst for empowerment in other contexts.⁷³ For example, Anne described how her
478 performance in swimming, her corresponding growth in confidence, and a strong sense of
479 athletic identity and accomplishment had led to a career beyond competitive swimming:

480
481 Because I’ve achieved in swimming, that opened other doors, because I was known as
482 a swimmer and not someone that needed lots of adaptations because of my disability.
483 So, then because I’ve been able to do that, I’d had a better perception of myself
484 because it’s been able to open other doors, so it’s been a sort of self-perpetuating
485 thing. (Anne)

486
487 Similarly, in a study using a life history narrative approach, a Paralympic wheelchair
488 tennis player described how an acquired spinal cord injury had presented a dilemma. The

489 athlete appeared to conclude that their achievements gained from playing wheelchair tennis
490 outweighed the disadvantages of disability.⁷⁴ The current participants also seemed to believe
491 that significant changes regarding what is required for competitive success had materialised
492 during their swimming careers. Ironically, Vince believed that such changes had further
493 rendered invisible particular population groups. However, he was clear in his assessment of
494 what is required to become an elite athlete, and in his acceptance of himself as a Paralympian.

495

496 I would say certainly pre-96, there was kind of you're doing disability sport, you can
497 be a Paralympian, whereas now it's blimmin hard work and the majority of
498 Paralympians are doing it as a full time job, they're on lottery funding. There's
499 certainly swimmers and cyclists that are doing the training of an able-bodied
500 swimmer, so they're not just doing a couple of hours a week and turning up and
501 winning, it used to be, in the very early days, and you could do multi-sport and all the
502 rest of it. I'd say '96 until now, it's completely changed, it's more professionalised,
503 it's very much like the Olympics, it's very elite. (Vince)

504

505 In summary, the participants had described perceptions of personal and societal
506 transformation that defied tenets of a medical model of disability. Far from representing a
507 substantial and long-term negative impact on their ability to undertake normal daily activities
508 disability had instead facilitated a sense of ability, competence and pride.

509

Conclusion

510 The purpose of this study was to explore the role of swimming on Paralympic
511 athletes' sense of self and identity. Overall, the accounts indicated that the participants did
512 not view themselves as having lost some-thing, as being disabled, nor as supercrips.⁷² Yet,
513 difference, was not, and could not be denied both whilst growing-up, and later in the

514 possibility of a hierarchy relating to ability and work ethic within Paralympic swimming.
515 Similarly, the participants believed that public focus had shifted from disability to proficiency
516 in an activity within which they had not been expected to excel. Therefore, their swimming
517 careers have directly supported proposals within progressive models of disability (e.g. the
518 Affirmation Model of Disability)⁷⁵, and further eroded medical discourse, by indicating that
519 participation in swimming facilitated overall quality of life by enhancing movement
520 capability, and instilling and maintaining an identity which provided a sense of acceptance,
521 purpose, and pride. As a career choice swimming had also facilitated independence, the
522 development of social networks and, for some, the establishment of a career upon retirement
523 from competition.

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