

INTEGRATING ABLE-BODIED ATHLETES IN DISABILITY SPORT: ATHLETIC IDENTITY AND COMPETITIVE/ELITE WOMEN WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL PLAYERS

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Introduction

The integration of able-bodied participants in disability sport is becoming more commonplace in Canada. A functional classification system in which athletes are assigned a point value based on limitations in functional skills, allows athletes with and without a disability to compete together in wheelchair basketball. At the Paralympic level however, only athletes with a disability are eligible to compete. This type of reverse integration has been supported based on the premise that it promotes a better understanding of the actual abilities of people with a disability and creates an equitable platform for socialization and competition (Brasile, 1990). Furthermore, including athletes without a disability has facilitated the growth of wheelchair basketball by creating more teams and opportunities to take part at different levels (Brasile, 1992). This concept of reverse integration has not been wholly embraced. It has been heavily criticized as furthering a view that wheelchair sports require able-bodied athletes to legitimize them and that it ultimately limits competitive opportunities for athletes with a disability (Thiboutot, Smith & Labanowich, 1992). Lacking in the debate are the perspectives of the athletes themselves, and in particular female athletes with a disability.

Objective

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives of female wheelchair

basketball players with a disability about the integration of able-bodied athletes. Specifically, this study examined the relationship between able-bodied participation and athletic identity from this perspective. Athletic identity is an individual's identification with the role of athlete and is positively associated with developing a salient sense of self, improvements in sport performance and increased motivation to engage in sports. It is negatively associated with exclusivity of identity (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993). Understanding if and how the integration of able-bodied participants in wheelchair basketball influences the athletic identity of female athletes with a disability, may provide direction for reverse integration that is congruent with the perspectives, needs and wants of these athletes.

Design

Open-ended semi-structured interviews.

Setting

Canada

Subjects

Nine women with classifiable physical disabilities taking part in competitive and or elite wheelchair basketball in Canada aged 23 to 55, volunteered to participate in this study. Classifiable was defined as eligible to compete in Paralympic wheelchair basketball based on limitations in function as determined through a classification system. Competitive

and elite were defined as sustained involvement in tournament competition and national team play respectively. Approval for the study was granted by a University research ethics board.

Intervention/Main Outcome Measures

Semi-structured interviews were developed based on the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer et al., 1993). Previously used with athletes with a disability, this scale contains 9 items with 4 subscales that assess self-identity, social identity, exclusivity and negative affectivity (Martin, Mushett & Ecklund, 1994). Participants indicated level of agreement with questionnaire statements using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree and were questioned about their responses in the context of able-bodied integration. Data were prepared in the form of transcripts. A deductive content analysis was performed using the 4 subscales as primary categories.

Main Results

In general, study participants perceived themselves as athletes (self-identity) however, if and how this was influenced by able-bodied participation differed for individuals. Participants indicated they thought others who knew them also perceived them as athletes (social-identity) and that able-bodied participation could have positive, negative or no impact on this perception. Athletes also indicated that wheelchair basketball was a significant part of their lives, but not the only important aspect (exclusivity) and its value had little, if anything to do with reverse integration. Finally, negative affectivity was revealed as salient for most participants and in

the majority of cases this was not tied to the integration of able-bodied athletes.

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that the relationship between the key components of athletic identity in the context of reverse integration in wheelchair basketball differ between and across individuals. In general, able-bodied integration appeared to have either an affirming influence on the positive aspects of athletic identity or very little influence at all. Athletes supported the inclusion of able-bodied participation in wheelchair basketball in Canada, as long as the functional classification system remained.

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Commentary

As a whole, there is a scarcity of research in the area of disability sport from the perspectives of athletes with a disability. The integration of able-bodied participants in disability sport is a contentious issue and may have major implications for these athletes. Consistent with the empowerment and inclusion of individuals with a disability in all arenas of society, the voices of these athletes must be at the heart of the debate.