

Challenging “normalcy”

Challenging “normalcy”: possibilities and pitfalls of Paralympic bodies

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Abstract

The Paralympic Games is celebrated in the mainstream media in line with the vision of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) ‘To enable Paralympic athletes to achieve sporting excellence and inspire and excite the world.’ In this paper we explore the degree to which the flagship of parasport has acted as a catalyst for an enhanced social and cultural understanding of disabled embodiments. Drawing upon a Foucauldian conceptualisation of biopower in connection with Harraway’s articulation of the cyborg, we highlight how hybrid bodies inevitably fail to promote embodied difference because they constitute, in and of themselves, a product of “normalizing” technology. In light of critiques such as that of the sporting supercrip, we argue that the heroic glorification of Paralympic cyborgs further amplifies the inadequacy of non- cyborg disabled bodies, whose impairments cannot be “compensated for” by movement technologies. Ultimately, this paper is a call to reflect upon how parasport culture can enhance its ability to deliver the empowerment ideal encapsulated within its vision.

Key words:

Foucault, Paralympic, sporting bodies, supercrip, cyborg technology

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In this paper, we adopt the Foucauldian concept of biopower as a lens to argue that the disciplining of bodies within the context of sport and physical activity more generally (Markula and Pringle, 2006) limits the potential of sporting contexts to promote a wider social acceptance of diverse bodies. In particular, we illuminate how the increased prevalence and stardom granted to cyborg bodies (Howe, 2011; Silva and Howe, 2012) may be seen as a result of processes of biopower at play within disability sport culture.

To start we open with a section that discusses the diversity and significance of Paralympic bodies and their relation to societal norms. This will be followed by a discussion of Foucauldian concept of biopower, which contextualised many of the processes designed to discipline and control “different” bodies, for which the Paralympic Games is an exemplar. Specifically, we will then highlight the cyborg bodies are a good translation of biopower outcomes before embarking upon a discussion and summative thoughts.

Paralympic Bodies: divergent from the norm

It is human nature to compare phenomena whether they are physical, social or emotional relative to a norm, to what is well-known and accepted. As Stiker asserts “we desire similarity, and even more, we desire identicalness” (2009:9). The moving performances of impaired bodies are no exception to this. The value of impaired athletes is continually judged against the standards of play and performance of the able-bodied ‘norm’. In the world of sport and physical activity, the heightened visibility of the body due to the presence of impairment may act as a hindrance or impediment to participation of those stigmatised as abnormal (Goffman, 1963). In relation to sport, DePauw (1997) nicely articulates this dilemma:

It is through the study of the body in the context of, and in relation to, sport that we can understand sport as one of the sites for the reproduction of social inequality in its promotion of the traditional view of athletic performance, masculinity, and physicality, including gendered images of the ideal physique and body beautiful (DePauw 1997:420)

Sport constitutes an embodied practice which glorifies excellence and as such many people who possess less than normal bodies may shy away from the masculine physicality associated with this practice. For sportsmen and women with impaired bodies, their embodiment often marks them

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out for ‘special’ treatment in society as their impairment highlight them as ‘imperfect’ and therefore inadequate. In these terms, disability sport can be seen to constitute a paradox (Howe, 2008, Purdue and Howe, 2012).

The complexity of elite disability sport is apparent when considering the dual role that Paralympian’s fulfil. Firstly, the desired reception of an impaired athlete’s performance, by an able-bodied audience, arguably focuses on valuing sporting achievement and performance, aside from disability. Deciphering the sporting performances of individuals with impairment in this way, may begin to breakdown the stigma of ‘otherness’ (Hughes, 1999) which some able-bodied people may perceive as inherent when viewing and/or interacting with a person with a disability. (Purdue and Howe, 2012:7)

This otherness associated with a disabled body is often understood as abnormal since a lack of a physical, sensory or mental impairment is seen as normal.

Before we get ahead of ourselves let us unpack this further. In the context of Paralympic sport there are two broad types of bodies that exist - those with either congenital or acquired impairments. Both types of bodies will have travelled different roads before they became involved in parasport¹. Individuals with congenital impairments may have until recently traditionally attended what in the west are commonly referred to as ‘special’ schools. Early congenitally impaired Paralympians would have perhaps got their first exposure to sport through adapted physical activity classes at their school. These early experiences will have been instrumental in shaping the sporting experiences of these individuals. Today in many cases congenitally impaired individuals are schooled in inclusive environments but depending on the nature of the impairment they may or may not engage in a segregated physical education environment. Regardless of the type of access they have had to organised sport, the socialisation of these young people will be quite distinct from those who went to special schools.

Those who get involved to Paralympic sport as a result of a traumatic accident, such as a car crash, are often socialised differently than congenitally impaired individuals. If a traumatic injury occurred in their youth these individuals may also have attended a special school or had adapted physical activity classes as their introduction to sport, like those individuals who are congenitally

¹ Parasport is a subfield of disability sport in which if a person is eligible to compete and exhibits enough physical capital they may end up competing in the Paralympic Games.

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impaired. But if the traumatic injury happened after the school age, there is bound to be a period of transition to the new bodily circumstances. These individuals, regardless of age, undergo a process of re-habilitation, in a literal sense, which requires a heightened awareness of their selves as both “having” and “being bodies”. They will have to “remake their bodies” in a more conscious manner, in that they will have to renegotiate the ways in which even the most basic tasks such as the management of daily hygiene regimes are performed. Following Seymour, there is a process of ‘re-embodiment’ in play and although initially the bodily changes may be seen as tragic “their bodies are still resources with which they may explore new possibilities and opportunities of re-embodiment...the catastrophe may be the catalyst for new ways of using and thinking about the body (1998:178). Sport and physical activity constitute viable contexts in which this ‘re-embodiment’ develops, providing the stimuli to learn some of what their ‘new’ body can do with the potential to create new possibilities. This process is obviously couched in internalised social expectations on dimensions such as gender and athleticism. These are, in sum, individuals whose socialisation into sport and physical activity may be very distinctive from their non-impaired counterparts, as well as their motivations for engagement in sporting cultures.

Despite such distinctiveness, the Paralympic movement adopts the same sport paradigm as the Olympic movement and therefore the core value translates ultimately in the physical superiority of one body over another. In other words, in an environment where the body is understood and managed as a performance ‘machine’ such as sport, even the slightest imperfection becomes evident. DePauw (1997) has examined how sport marginalises those who possess impaired or imperfect bodies, arguing for a re-examination of the relationship between sport and the body as it relates to disability:

Ability is at the centre of sport and physical activity. Ability, as currently socially constructed, means “able” and implies a finely tuned “able” body. On the other hand, disability, also a social construction, is often viewed in relation to ability and is, then, most often defined as "less than" ability, as not able. To be able to “see” individuals with disabilities as athletes (regardless of the impairment) requires us to redefine athleticism and our view of the body, especially the sporting body (DePauw, 1997:423).

This shift in the social-cultural meaning of bodies associated with athleticism to the extent that impairment becomes irrelevant in our appreciation of sport is a laudable goal which to date has not

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been achieved. By adopting a Foucauldian lens, we will be able to illuminate some of the obstacles as well as possibilities in reaching the lofty goal articulated by DePauw two decades ago.

Exploring disability using this Foucauldian lens is not distinctive (see Tremain, 2005) but it is a relatively novel approach to examining parasport (see Howe, 2008). The field of disability studies has been essential in providing ideological grounds for the reconceptualization of disability as a universal phenomenon. It questions ideologies and practices of normalization, giving space for personal accounts of disability experiences, continuously discussing the foundational concepts of disability and difference, humanness, impairments, and rights (see Shakespeare, 2006). There are now, after over three decades of activism and research concerning the mechanisms of disability oppression, sufficient information to allow a deeper understanding of what is implied in the experiences of impairment: understanding that is not compatible with restrictive theoretical models of disability (e.g. the social model). In this regard we would advocate following in the footsteps of Mitchell and Snyder who suggest:

‘Collectively, scholars of disability [should] seek to understand the various motivations, pleasures, and professional [self] interests that are at stake in the historical construction of disability’ (1997:19).

Disciplining Paralympic Bodies from within

Foucault's conceptualisation of discipline as seen in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) is instrumental in understanding the body as a political entity. This conceptualisation of the socially disciplined body has also been in one form or other, and perhaps unwittingly, a reference for good coaches' training procedures for generations (Howe, 2004). Early work explicitly surrounding the body as a locus of power imposition and negotiation found both sport and physical activity a productive research landscape.

In the 1980s Featherstone commented that physical activity is often undertaken for the simple pleasures that it brings to those who enjoy it and not the utilitarian values that are often associated with it.

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The notion of running for running's sake, purposiveness without a purpose, a sensuous experience in harmony with embodied physical nature, is completely submerged amidst the welter of benefits called up by the markets and health experts (Featherstone, 1991 [1982]:185-6).

While participation in leisure activities may initially be purposely motivated by the quest for a pleasurable experience, in the process of adhering to specific physical cultures, individuals unconsciously personify social values deemed as appropriate to such activities and thus become the caretakers of their socially disciplined body. Foucault referred to these pervasive and insidious social processes as technologies of power (Markula and Pringle, 2006). This focus on the body as a controllable political object has been influential in sport studies research focusing on body and embodiment (Hargreaves, 1987; Rail and Harvey, 1995) as well as the production of distinctive sporting bodies (Markula and Pringle, 2006).

According to Foucault (1977), power is focused upon the body, which as a result may be seen as a formation or product of hegemonic interactions. In this sense, the citizens' body is essentially conceived as a political object, transformed through power relationships, in which knowledge and discourse are key subordination tools. These tools are skilfully mastered by “experts”:

Foucault regards medical science as the crucial link at the level of knowledge between the discipline of individual bodies by professional groups (of psychiatrists, dietitians, social workers and others) and the regulation of populations by panopticism (in the form of asylums, factories, schools and hospitals). (Turner, 1996:63)

In sporting contexts, the body can be disciplined through the creation of training regimes that routinely replicate the skills, socially accepted as essential to become successful. Enhancing sporting performance entails a:

system of expansive discipline and surveillance [that] produces normal persons by making each individual as visible as possible to each other, and by meticulous work on person's bodies at the instigation of subjects themselves (Hargreaves, 1987: 151).

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These are therefore systems which promote a docile conformity to the traditional expressions of embodiment in each sporting culture. Its efficacy is the more successful as the degree of the individuals’ internalisation of these norms as adequate and necessary. The best example of this can be an athlete in the process of re-embodiment and coming to grips with the techniques required to effectively use a prosthetic limb or wheelchair efficiently. Gaining the ability to make the usable body work in harmony with a mobility apparatus (effectively a machine) takes time, patience and resilience. For the aspiring Paralympian, the need to be completely and efficiently internalise, the actions of their body is essential for sporting success. The painstaking nature of this re-embodiment can be understood as a form of surveillance in terms of the management, manipulation and docilization of impaired bodies that may be further articulated through Foucault’s conceptualisation of biopower.

The Power of Biological Normality as “truth”

Foucault’s notion of biopower represents an important theorization of power as this relates to life.

By this I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is what I have called biopower. (Foucault, 2007: 1).

In this section we will draw upon Foucauldian biopower to unpack the cultural context of the field of parasport. It is the regulation and control of life that concerned Foucault who used the general term biopower to describe forms of power focused upon the vital characteristics and capacities of human bodies linked with the conduct of individuals and collectivities (Rabinow and Rose, 2003). For Foucault, biopower is centred “on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimisation of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls...” (1990: 139). Within biopower, Foucault distinguished between two forms of ‘biopolitics’. The first, ‘anatomopolitics’, refers to “the disciplinary techniques that sought to maximize the body’s forces and integrate it into

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efficient systems, such as through proper training, or through rationally organizing workplaces, armies and domestic economies” (Braun, 2007:9).

Biopolitics describes the second form of biopower. It refers to specific political mechanisms, strategies and technologies that take as their object “the biological existence of the nation...understood as a ‘population’ imbued with the mechanisms of life and knowable in statistical norms” (Braun, 2007:9). ‘Population’ is the key word here since this notion had a very different meaning prior to the eighteenth century. From the eighteenth century, however, population becomes “the ultimate aim of government” (Foucault, 1977). For Foucault, therefore, the emergence of biopower was historically contingent and closely tied up with nation states as these emerged in post-Renaissance Europe. Biopower came to overlay, but not completely replace, the previously dominant mode of ‘sovereign power’, the power to “curtail life in periodic, spectacular manner” (Marks, 2006:333). In contrast, biopower represented a more “dispersed form of disciplinary or ‘pastoral’ power ... [the] power to make live or let die” (Braun, 2007:8-9).

Foucault envisaged the human sciences, together with a set of administrative institutions associated with the nation state, as central to the production and operation of biopower during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Policy interventions in the birth rate and morbidity, and measures to coordinate medical care were the primary focus of biopower. In spite of its social and historical contextualisation, the notion of biopower clearly possess resonates with and has analytical potential in understanding the operation and distribution of power in contemporary sporting practices. Indeed, Marks (2006) claims that biopolitical processes are part of the fabric of everyday reality in advanced capitalist economies.

In an attempt to provide further conceptual clarity, Rabinow and Rose suggest that the concept of biopower must, at a minimum, include three elements. The first is “one or more truth discourses about the ‘vital’ character of living human beings, and an array of authorities considered competent to speak that truth” (Rabinow and Rose, 2003:2). Truth discourses can have their origins in a number of disciplines, including the biological and the sociological. The second component is the deployment of strategies for intervention upon collective existence in the name of life and health. These strategies are often directed at populations, although not necessarily, identified at the scale of the nation state, and “emergent biosocial collectivities” (Rabinow and Rose, 2003:3) such as those based on physical, sensory or mental impairment. The third element is

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‘modes of subjectification’, which refers to the means by which individuals come to regulate themselves and their own sense of self and body in conformity to truth discourses.

In any particular instance of biopower, it is important to understand that it is not that one or other of the three elements is dominant, causing or producing the others. Instead, truth discourses, strategies for intervention and subjectivities are co-constitutive and co-emergent within relations of biopower. The three elements of biopower and the way in which these are co-constituted in diverse ways require further “detailed, empirically grounded enquiry”, according to Rabinow and Rose (2003:23). As such we feel that the Paralympic movement is a suitable context for a robust analysis since truth discourses can be seen to legitimise particular forms of intervention.

Foucault reminds us that it is important to be mindful of the historical context in which the Paralympic movement developed. Paraspport is both ‘anatomopolitical’, that is it tries to integrate various bodies into already structures established for non-impaired bodies and biopolitical, as it created a distinctive and controllable population. Disability scholars (see Mitchell and Snyder, 2004; Tremain, 2005) have shown us the usefulness of Foucault’s work to expose how some knowledge fields (especially the medical sciences) have been instrumental in the creation and perpetuation of distortions, stereotypes, ideologies that might work against the best interest of their beneficiaries.

‘The disability movement’s critique of the medical model has also argued that the complete medicalization of people with disabilities has advanced the agenda of professional interest groups. People with disability have served as a source of profit, power and status.’ (Longmore, 2003:215)

For the past two centuries, supported by the development of human sciences the “disabled body” has been disciplined and socially controlled through an extensive apparatus of “normalizing technologies that facilitate the systematic objectivization of subjects” (Tremain, 2005:8). The possibilities of conduct are guided in a surreptitious way by limiting life choices and supported by the diffusion of disciplinary discourses and regimes constructed and accepted as natural (Foucault, 1973, 1977, 1980).

Foucault clearly draws our attention to historical record and statistics and his work devoted to prisons and medical clinics are a testament to societies attempting to reinforce the norm, practices

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of disciplining of bodies (1973, 1977). Because the norm started to be socially accepted *as the way things ought to be*, disciplines that proposed to hide, correct, rehabilitate or cure those “errors” were able to garnish increased social power (Foucault, 1980). The development of both, prisons and medical systems for controlling and discipline the body – normalises this action– much in the same manner as the genesis of sport and physical opportunities for the disabled can be seen to fulfilled a similar function (Shogan, 1998).

If the development of science and technology were determinant in the social construction of normality (Shogan, 1998), using both anatomopolitical and biopolitical processes of biopower (Mills, 2003; Foucault, 2007); on the other hand the individuals touched by “difference” began to internalize these views, legitimizing those discourses. To be an “outcast” started to signify not only difference, but also “inferiority”. Physical difference could mean not only a lack of ability to be productive and efficient, but it often coincided with inferior moral worth (Davis, 1995). In other words, people outside the norm were socially compelled to wish for a cure. The development of parasport is a product of the ‘invisible’ control over the norm and much of its history can be seen as an attempt to hide the differences in impaired sporting bodies.

The phenomena of social stigmatization, marginalization, and social inequality are still familiar realities to many of those who stand out from “normalized” views of humanity. This can lead many that fail to be normalised to believe in their human “inferiority”, internalizing the images projected by the social environment. People who see themselves as “different” search for ways of getting closer to normal standards, and search for help approaching the ones that were and in many ways still are responsible for some of the factors that conduced to their oppression and sense of inferiority.

Due to historical, cultural and social reasons, impairment and disability is still (but not confined to) at the core of parasport developments. Partly, this is a result of the field’s boundaries having been deeply associated with traditional views and understandings of disability issues (Howe, 2008). Because parasport has the potential to act either by reinforcing or contesting factors of oppression, individuals and institutions in the field must be aware of the factors and circumstances involved in the secular social oppression of persons labelled as disabled (Shakespeare 2006, Sieber, 2008). If not, those within parasport may unwittingly be working against the ideal goals of the Paralympic Movement (Purdue and Howe, 2012).

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In other words, it is imperative that we are aware of the cultural contexts and the factors operating when in which any given difference/ impairment may be transformed into a disability, always contesting the knowledge presented as “natural” and “legitimate” through institutionalized discourses. Difference/ impairment and disability are not only originated in bodily differences but provide essentially from constructed social norms, reinforced by mechanisms of bio-power. Paraspport itself can intentionally or unintentionally be a diffuser of normalised views of humanity and an agent of both anatomopolitic and bio-politics re-structuring. One of the many ways this is manifest is through the production of cyborg bodies.

Cyborg as a product of Biopower

Haraway (1991) defines the cyborg as is a hybrid body resulting from fusion of a live organism and man-made technology: “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (1991:28). As such, the use of movement-enhancing technology such as prosthetic limbs and high tech sporting wheelchairs by Paralympic athletes ascribes them a cyborg like qualities. Cyborg Paralympic bodies are the most celebrated, by the general public in relation to sport. The rise (and fall) of celebrity of South African Oscar Pistorius is a case in point (Howe, 2008, 2011; Hunt-Grubbe, 2007; Morrissey, 2008; Swartz and Watermeyer, 2008).

In the context of Paralympic sport, the most successful cyborg athletes may be seen as ‘supercrips’. Following Berger, supercrips “are those individuals whose inspirational stories of courage, dedication, and hard work prove that it can be done, that one can defy the odds and accomplish the impossible.” (2008: 648). It also has been argued that the label of supercrip can be negatively bestowed upon impaired individuals who simply manage to live ‘an ordinary’ life (Kama, 2004). Specifically, in the context of Paralympic sport and for the purpose of this paper, the supercrip is the athlete who wins trophies as well as a relatively high profile media exposure. Those athletes who win but do not receive recognition in mainstream media are not supercrip in the context of the Paralympics as they are often marginalised by the degree or nature of their impairment (or both). This marginalisation is in part determined how far from the norm their body is situated.

The process of making a cyborg, articulated as cyborgification (Howe, 2011) is useful to understand that in the contemporary world all our bodies use technology in some form or other.

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Yet ‘the mobility technology used in sport for the disabled is unnatural in the context of high performance sport, but in light of the ‘super human’ results achieved through the use of either state-of-the-art wheelchairs or prosthetic limbs, it has become an accepted currency over the last decade (Howe, 2008:135). Impaired sport bodies, or any body for that matter, can be placed along a continuum from those that require very little technological aid to those whose lives benefit a great deal from technological advancement. Still, Paralympian wheelchair racers and prosthetic wearing athletes are the most explicit examples of cyborgification in sport today.

Bodies that are the product of cyborgification are the vanguard of the parasport and as such they are celebrated far more than those competitors who do not use mobility technologies. The structures and institutions that are hallmark of biopower lead to the bodies of Paralympians who are part machine, part human, to be seen as increasingly the visual representation of Paralympic athletes. These hybrid bodies are considered closer to the norm than those who do not engage specifically with movement technologies. Wheelchair users are celebrated in part because this technology is the default semiotic reference for disability and in that sense, the disability element is easily recognisable. It is easy to see what is “wrong”. For amputees who wear prosthesis, particularly lower limb, the use of space-age technology in life and sport – facilitate an embodiment that approaches, if not replicate the acceptance of walking and running as the “natural” ways of moving. In this way, these athletes are highest on the acceptability spectrum.

A successful products of biopower, high performance athletes who use these movement technologies are therefore more appreciated for their abilities. It is ‘easier’ to see ability in a fast sprinter on Blades like Pistorius, or a long jumper like Markus Rehm or a wheelchair racer that can ‘run’ a mile faster than the current able-bodied world record. On the contrary, many Paralympians who are highly trained and motivated athletes but do not require these technologies therefore can never live up to these ideals, which appear imperative in the commercialised world of the twenty first century Paralympic Games.

Work by Berger highlights the role model capacity of the supercrip and clearly indicates that celebrated athletes are more than a media construction and can act as ‘real’ mentors (Berger, 2008). While this is a useful point Berger’s research is conducted within the context of wheelchair basketball, a sport where high performance technology is also clearly evident (Berger, 2004, 2008). His conclusions would likely have been different if he had researched the ambulant cerebral palsy or visually impaired athletes who do not require mobility technologies and generally

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received very little media coverage. Hence their role model capacity is diminished. The same tension Berger mentions between athletes and non-athletes in his study could be made between athletes that are accepted (technology users) as supercrips and those who are not (Berger, 2008).

To understand why these hybrid bodies are the most celebrated in parasport, it is essential to stress again how Paralympic cultures developed in close observance to the Olympic cultures, replicating the sporting habitus and the competitive model of the Olympic culture. Referring back to the DePauw's (1997) argument, the access of people with disabilities to sport has not yet challenged the way in which moving bodies, athleticism and sporting cultures are understood. A case in point is the fact that all non-Olympic sports such as goalball and boccia, as well as version of mainstream sports such as sitting volleyball do not seem to be media friendly. They are just too different from mainstream or normal sports and sporting performances that the public can appreciate. In other words, there is only space for the innovation presented by hybrid bodies as long as they comply with existing socially accepted and celebrated forms of moving and views of athleticism. This resistance to redefining athleticism is illustrated by the strong opposition to the inclusion within the Paralympic movement of *power* wheelchair football. In this sport, the players bodies are so technological enhanced (athletes are electric wheelchair users) that it is extremely difficult to recognise the athleticism.

Discussion

This status of cyborgs and their position within the Paralympic movement as supercrips is predicated on a Foucauldian interpretation of biopower. At the outset of this paper we postulated that the further a body is away from the norm the more marginal it will be in society. With an increase in use and celebration of normalising technologies within parasport the technocratic ideology (Charles, 1998) that surrounds this sporting practice will be hard to transform.

The athletes who use wheelchairs and prosthesis are at the centre of the Paralympic movement and will be better consumers simply because they have specialist materials to purchase if they wish to compete at the highest level. The body policing on what is acceptably human and what is not (Cole, 1993, 1998) in mainstream high performance sport has been paradoxically reversed in the Paralympic world. It appears that in parasport the closer a body is to a cyborg the more capital it holds which is the opposite to the world articulated by Harraway (1991) in relation to the boundaries between humans and non-humans. Wheelchair users and amputees who use prostheses are tied explicitly to sport technologies and therefore blur the lines between ‘natural’ and

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‘artificial’ and are perhaps the best example of the cyborg in contemporary society. Of course, they are still marginal in relation to mainstream sporting cultures. However, these are the bodies to celebrate in reference to other impaired ones. There is clearly a bodily hierarchy in place within parasport cultures.

Butryn see the nexus between the natural and legal and the artificial and illegal as hegemonic humanness (2003:28). In a sense, parasport celebrates ‘transgressing the taboo boundary between blood, sweat, and tears, and blood, sweat and gears’ (Butryn, 2003:28). Here the cyborg wheelchair user and the prosthetic limb wearer are the role models and supercrips of the parasport movement triumphs. This is largely because the Paralympics Games was designed to celebrate difference that is distinct from the able-bodied norm. Yet, today it appears that Paralympic difference must increasingly take on a cyborg form. Mechanisms of biopower ensure that the type and degree of difference displayed within parasport is confined to acceptable limits, that is, the limits dictated by the preferences of a consumerist public, who rely on their mainstream sport knowledge to appreciate Paralympic performances

Where does this leave parasport participants who still fall outside the norm? They certainly have a part to play in the Paralympic movement. Yet, our analysis suggest that the more marginal the physicality of the body, the further away it is from the potential of cyborgification and the more likely a tragic rather than a heroic allegory will follow them. This analysis tells us a great deal about the politics of disablement in physical cultures. While it is considered an infringement for the able to become too cyborg, for the impaired this hybridization is highly advantageous. Technology can normalise their ‘inferior’ bodies to the point where in the case of elite wheelchair racers they can produce super-human results. Of course there is a tension here. MacIntyre (1999) tells us that vulnerability and affliction and the related facts of dependence are central to the human condition. The susceptibility to injury and misery, distress and pain is likely to befall us all at some point in our existence. We all will be reliant on others from time to time. It begs the question why impaired bodies are so harshly disabled by society and, at least in the context of Paralympic sport, only those that are cyborgs are celebrated at length. Of these cyborgs the winners are held up on a pedestal as supercrips as they offer tangible hope of seemingly easy and quick bodily restitution, in case of bodily breakdowns. Cyborg bodies appease human anxieties regarding our perceived vulnerability and frailty. They can be understood as legitimate and accessible ways in which to “remake our bodies”, if needed.

Conclusion

While the development of mobility technology that enhances sport performance is understandably beneficial for the impairment groups concerned (at least for those that can afford them), it marginalises further those athletes that do not use technologies directly in their competitive performance. Because the high-end wheelchair athlete is able to perform at the same level or better than an able-bodied athlete, to the public the abilities of these athletes are obvious. On the other hand, the athleticism of impaired bodies that have no use for mobility technologies is a hard sell to a public that still shuns individual who are too abnormal.

The possibility of a re-embodiment for certain athletes with impairments is provided through acquiring expensive sporting technologies. Paralympic success, therefore, for much of the world's population of potential Paralympian's is exclusionary. In elite parasport, there are increasing numbers of athletes with mechanical, artificially designed bodies, creating new sporting potential. The technology they use has the capacity to 'normalise' their bodies, and in so doing produces 'sporting cyborgs'. Unlike in mainstream sport these athletes are celebrated both inside and increasingly outside the Paralympic movement. A technocentric ideology has led to a cyborgification that is celebrated by the public at large and is harnesses within the Paralympic movement has made celebrities of the athletes who are successful in using the state of the art movement technologies to achieve super performances (Howe, 2011). Such elevated status of handpicked cyborgs can be problematic for the communities of impaired individuals who can never achieve such a position. As Kama argues:

(w)ell-known, successful disabled people are put on a pedestal for their demonstrated ability to triumph. This triumph is used to validate the disabled individual and to alter societal perceptions. Consequently, the wish to see disabled who 'have done it' is particularly intense while the pitiful disabled trigger antipathy because they reproduce and reinforce disabled people's inferior positionality and exclusion (2004:447).

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The celebration of the hybrid bodies of the best wheelchair and prosthetic wearing athletes, is positive for the individuals placed on the pedestal but may lead to the (dis)empowerment of other athletes with impairments who cannot take advantage of the explicit use of technology, such as athletes with neuro-muscular impairments. Ultimately the Paralympics risk becoming simply a show of technological enhanced bodies, leaving behind both those from the developing world without performance-enhancing technology at their disposal, and those from the west whose bodies are inappropriate for its use.

Technological advancement in relation to Paralympic sport is not dissimilar to other changes in society; it is clearly a mixed blessing. Technology empowers some while leaving the status of others at best unaltered and at worst increasing their liminality. In this view parasport is an agent of social change. Whether this is good or bad remains to be seen. For now, parasport’s potential to challenge normalized views of the athletic body seem to be curtailed by the technologies of biopower which continue to produce heroes whose hybrid bodies are different enough to fulfil the moral responsibility of inclusion for the disabled; while remaining similar enough to perceptions of body integrity, athleticism and sporting habitus so that its social, cultural and economic capital is maintained.

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