

# Using Disability Studies to Ground High-Quality Paralympic Research

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## Abstract

This paper explores the need for a robust grounding in disability studies as the cornerstone for high quality research into the cultural significance of Paralympic sport. All too often scholars working in the broad field of Olympic studies who exploring issues related to the Paralympics have paid only lip service to the fact that disability activism and its related academic field of disability studies have something to offer. Much of the work in disability studies is grounded in substantive disciplines such as anthropology, history, politics and sociology. In this paper we will address a number of key texts in the field and highlight how grounding Paralympic research in these and similarly robust outputs, which in spite of changing fashion in nomenclature, are still of great value today. We will conclude with a call to all scholars in the field of parasport studies to pay more than a passing reference to disability studies literature in hopes that it will encourage them to be more vigorous in their critique of this distinctive sporting culture.

## Keywords

Disability studies, Paralympic studies, parasport research.

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## Introduction

This paper explores the need for a robust grounding in disability studies as the cornerstone for high quality research into the cultural significance of Paralympic sport. All too often scholars working in the broad field of Olympic studies who exploring issues related to the Paralympics have paid only lip service to the fact that disability activism and its related academic field of disability studies have something to offer. Much of the work in disability studies is grounded in substantive disciplines such as anthropology, history, politics and sociology. The field of disability studies has a history of providing critical insight in the lives of people with (dis)ability from a variety of ontological positions (Diedrich, 2001; Gleeson, 1997; Snyder and Mitchell, 2001; Goodley, 2017). Insights from this field of study are plentiful and have facilitated lively debate both within the disability community and the continuing development of the related academic field (Campbell and Oliver, 1996; Albrecht et al, 2001; Shakespeare, 2006). Within the field of Paralympic studies, there have been numerous scholars who have adopted a high-quality disability studies lens (e.g. DePauw, 1997; Peers, 2012; Swartz and Watermayer, 2008; Wolbring, 2008, 2012) which should be celebrated.

The purpose of this paper is not to chronical the development of either Disability or Paralympic Studies but rather to illuminate how high-quality work in the latter is dependent on the former. To do this we explore how three texts, which we feel are foundational to disability studies, that display different epistemological and ontological approach toward disability can be combined to give researchers a solid foundation upon which to explore the culture of the Paralympic Games and parasport more broadly.

Here we present (and critique) three seminal texts of disability studies: Michael Oliver's (1990) *The Politics of Disablement*, Erving Goffman's (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* and Robert Murphy's (1987) *The Body Silent*. Each text presents a different epistemological and ontological approach to disability. Oliver (1990) provides a historical materialist approach to disability linking the development of capitalist society with 'ideologies' that underpin the social oppression of disability. Next, Goffman (1963) offers an important and assimilated understanding of disability in relation to other 'spoiled identities'. In the third, Murphy (1987) draws upon his position as a professor emeritus of anthropology to provide an autobiographical and, to a certain

extent, phenomenological account of his bodily experience of a regressive spinal tumour, the harbinger of his journey into ‘the society of the disabled’.

Taken collectively the three texts present a crude spectrum of approaches to disability, from the ‘ideological’ to the phenomenological. This triumvirate, we hope, will offer a rounded argument and appreciation for the grounding of Paralympic research in the academic discipline of disability studies, which it must be acknowledged goes far beyond the texts presented in this paper. In what follows we explore the three texts in turn, highlighting their usefulness in the field of Paralympic studies and then in the summary we argue for their use in harmony as one way to engage in a critique of parasport.

## **The Politics of Disablement**

“Why is disability individualised and medicalised within capitalist society?” (Oliver, 1990, pp. xi). It is through his scrutiny of this question that Oliver (1990), as a self-described disabled sociologist, sought to mount a sociological challenge to medical sociology and anthropological studies of health and illness which he saw as reifying the individualisation and medicalisation of disability; and their inability to demarcate between impairment and disability. In other words, Oliver (1990) attempted to provide a social oppression theory of disability as an alternative and as a challenge to the predominant personal tragedy theory.

An initial theme considered by Oliver (1990) was the importance of the politics of meaning in relation to defining disability. For Oliver (1990) it was the causality of disability that was at stake in defining disability, notably criticising ‘official’ definitions for not recognising the social causation of disability in society. Wittgenstein (1969) reveals the hollowness of definitions in noting, “We are unable clearly to circumscribe the concepts we use; not because we don’t know their real definition, but because there is no real ‘definition’ to them” (p. 25). Nonetheless the defining and meaning of disability was and continues to be a fundamental struggle of the disability movement, for emancipation and self-determination, because, as Oliver (1990: 2) describes, “human beings give meanings to objects in the social world and subsequently orientate their behaviour towards these objects in terms of the meanings given to them”. The struggle against disablist language, either

offensive or depersonalising (Oliver 1990), is a struggle against the historically denigrated position of disability and the language that communicated this. It is a struggle that persists in the Paralympics as evidenced by the necessity of the British Paralympic Association to produce a 'Guide to Reporting on Paralympic Sport'<sup>1</sup>. Shakespeare's (2006) statement that arguing over terminology "is a diversion from making common cause to promote the inclusion and rights of disabled people" (pp. 33), highlights the internal linguistic struggle of the disability movement, alongside the more important external linguistic struggle with the disablist society.

The inculcation of the social model in Oliver's (1990) work was pivotal in bolstering the politicisation of disability in the UK and in doing so helped shape the global struggle. As described by Oliver (1990) the social model, is nothing more than a tool to identify the disabling mores of society. Advancing the propositions of Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), as enshrined in the *Fundamental Principles of Disability* (1976a, b), Oliver was able to refine the social model and its arguments. The central tenet of the social model was to enshrine UPIAS' redefining of impairment and disability. Hereon impairment was considered to be a biological/physical manifestation, while the causality of disability was redirected from the individual to society and its organisation (Oliver, 1990). Accordingly, Oliver (1990) argues that policies should tackle the social oppression at the heart of disability rather than disability being perceived to be an individual's problem.

In *The Politics of Disablement* (1990) Oliver seeks to establish the foundations for an adequate social theory of disability. To this end Oliver (1990, pp. 22) argues, "disability as a category can only be understood within a framework which suggests that it is culturally produced and socially structured". Thus the historical relativism of disability was an idea that particularly appealed to Oliver, and he begins this socio-historical analysis in his discussion of 'Disability and the Rise of Capitalism'. Oliver adopts a historical materialist approach to highlight the inextricable connection between the modes of production and the centripetal orientation of society around values and ideologies that engender disability. In regards to the British welfare system, state policy was concluded to be based on a theory of *personal tragedy*, that is, disabled people are incapable of employment thus forever dependent and subject to the vicissitudes of the economy and state redistribution policies (Oliver, 1990). This point raises one of the major resolutions of the

1. Available from: [http://www.sisport.com/sisport/files/Guide\\_to\\_reporting\\_on\\_Paralympic\\_sport1.pdf](http://www.sisport.com/sisport/files/Guide_to_reporting_on_Paralympic_sport1.pdf)

disability movement, that is, employment for people with disability. It is generally accepted that employment status is perpetually much graver for this group. Returning to the ideological construction of disability, Oliver introduces the Gramscian concept of hegemony to link social structuration and ideology engendering disability in society.

The product of Oliver's theorizing was inculcated in the social model which stands in opposition to the disabling society and its disabling ideologies. Oliver states that the social model "is about nothing more complicated than a clear focus on the economic, environmental and cultural barriers encountered by people who are viewed by others as having some form of impairment" (Oliver, 2009, pp. 47). The social model is a simple and effective tool that identifies the social injustices of society. This justifies Oliver's (1990) support for political activism, the emancipation of people with a disability, and the control of disability organisation by people with disabilities, which echo the founding principles of the UPIAS.

There are some criticisms of *The Politics of Disablement* (1990) to consider. Many disability scholars take issue with the social model, particularly its omission of impairment (Shakespeare, 2006), or its leading to the disappearance of the body (Hughes & Paterson, 2006). Such is the problem with constructionism as Turner (2001, pp. 256) contends, "it is either unable or unwilling to give an account of the experience of the condition, which is socially constructed, and the subjective consequences of disabling labels". This criticism of constructionism is a classical problem of sociology (Bourdieu, 1977) in that it creates false dichotomies, such as between disability and impairment, which results in inaccurate research and omission of the 'in-between' (Corker, 1999). Feminist theorists argue that their approach can address these problems of the social model (Morris, 1991). On the other hand, quasi-phenomenological accounts of disability, such as Robert Murphy's (1987) *The Body Silent*, although unable to resolve the problems of constructionism, may go some way to balancing our understanding of disability by filling the 'in-between'.

The remainder of this discussion of Oliver's seminal text will consider its relevance to some contemporary issues in the Paralympics, such as the medicalization and scientification of the Paralympics, the IOC-IPC relationship and, lastly, the remit of the IPC. Within Oliver's social theory of disability the medical institution is criticised for its production and perpetuation of

disability. Medicine in the Paralympic context has, broadly, a twofold function. Firstly, medicine and science are deployed to maximise the performance of athletes with impairments. Thus Paralympic sport is open to the same scrutiny that John Hoberman (1992) documented a quarter century ago. Hoberman (1992) explains the role of science in sport is to test and evaluate the limits of human performance at the expense of the athlete's body. The second role of medicine is the classification of Paralympic athletes. This medical classification of athletes is difficult for disability studies academics that adopt a social model approach (Howe, 2008) to reconcile, and they consequently ignore Paralympic sport. In both functions, medicine has a disempowering effect which is at odds with both the disability movement and the Paralympic movement. Consequently, the empowering ability of sport exalted by the Paralympic movement needs to be aware of the potential of the medical institution to disempower.

The relationship between the IPC and the IOC is one of the most analysed social aspects of the Paralympics, and this trend is set to continue given that the most recent IOC-IPC agreement cements the joint-bid policy until 2020 (IPC, 2012). The debate of this relationship swings between the loss of autonomy but increased financial security of the Paralympic Games and the effects of this relationship that percolate throughout the Paralympic movement. In one way the IOC-IPC agreements can be seen as a replication of the welfare state, propagating and perpetuating the disempowering dependency of people with disability on others (see Howe and Silva, 2016). The closer ties between the IOC and IPC also mean that issues afflicting the Olympics will permeate the Paralympic movement. For example, MacAloon (2008) highlights the reduction of the Olympics to 'brand' discourse, something that is readily observable in the IPC's strategy: "Goal Three - Paralympic Brand. Build greater understanding and use of the Paralympic brand" (IPC, 2010). This managerial organisation of elite parasport is in tension with the social emancipation mission at the heart of the Paralympic movement. While Peers (2012) draws attention to the historical embeddedness of disability and its reproduction within Paralympic discourse. All of this can be related to the broader sociological and ideological debates on the organisation of society, at a local to international level, with the predominance of neo-liberalism. From here we turn our attention to the seminal work *Stigma* by Erving Goffmann.

## **Stigma: the management of *Paralympic* identities**

“Stigma management should be seen as a general feature of society, a process occurring wherever there are identity norms” (Goffman, 1963, pp. 155).

Adopting a symbolic interactionist<sup>2</sup> approach Goffman theorises the complexities of socially disparaged identities through the concept of stigma. Goffman (1963) introduces the term by tracing its etymology from Greek and Christian times through to today’s usage, summarising, “Today the term is... applied more to the disgrace itself than to the bodily evidence of it” (pp. 11). This emphasis on the disgrace and not solely the body is in part the reason Goffman is able to study socially ostracized identities, ranging from prostitutes, homosexuals, prisoners and many others. For people with a disability it is the misappropriation of ‘disgrace’ in relation to impairment that produces stigma. The importance of the body is central to understanding disability and the Paralympics. Pertinently Goffman (1963, pp. 59) affirms, “information, as well as the sign through which it is conveyed, is reflexive and embodied”.

Social identity is at the heart of the approach, and is adopted instead of social status to enable the inclusion of non-structural attributes (Goffman, 1963). To advance this, an understanding of signs and symbols in a sociological sense is required to truly grasp the approach. In sociology anything may be considered a sign or symbol, so long as it conveys meaning to others. A sign must first be recognised, only then can interpretation and meaning production occur through perceptual schemata. To organise his analyses of symbols Goffman created the dichotomy between ‘prestige’ symbols and stigma symbols. Stigma symbols “are especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy, breaking up what would otherwise be a coherent overall picture, with a consequent reduction in our valuations of the individual” (Goffman, 1963, pp. 59). In contrast prestige symbols, self-evidently, are those that are interpreted positively and bring honour. A third type of sign are ‘disidentifiers’, which actors can employ to have a positive effect thereby hopefully casting doubt on preconceptions of their social identity.

Bringing the discussion into context, Goffman (1963) asserts that the encounters between normals and abnormal, or more pertinent to the Paralympics, between the disabled and non-

2. See Goffman (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* for a dramaturgical analysis of daily life.

disabled, are “one of the primal scenes of sociology” (pp. 24). This distinction between normal and abnormal, once more, is self-evidently dependent upon a particular stigma. An aberration from the norm produces a deviant, and it is deviation that “bridges the study of stigma to the rest of the social world” (Goffman, 1963, pp. 151). Goffman goes on to explain how mixed encounters present discreditable and discredited contexts for the stigmatised; discreditable contexts are those where the person’s stigma is not immediately perceptible but can become so at any point in the interaction, while in discredited contexts the stigmatised assumes that their stigma is readily perceptible or already known about. This distinction relates to the opening quote stating the ubiquity of social identity norms for all actors. Theorizing the norm, Goffman identified two related processes, normalization and normification. *Normalization*, Goffman states, (1963, pp. 44) is “how far normals could go in treating the stigmatized person as if he didn’t have a stigma”, while *normification* is the habitual and ordinary processes everyone adopts in their daily life to be perceived as normal. Thus normification is an important and ordinary process for everyone but it is especially pertinent for the stigmatized, and inherently, the disabled. Drawing upon Oliver’s arguments, it is the process of normalization that needs to take place, rather than the normification strategies deployed by the disabled.

Hitherto the discussion has overlooked an important element of sociology in history. Here a distinction is made between the history of the stigmatized group and a stigma category. The Paralympic movement is more of a community bringing together disability sport groups. While specific impairments may be better described as categories which enable the formation of groups like the Paralympics. Biography and the socialisation of the stigmatized are also deliberated by Goffman (1963), elaborating two phases of socialisation. In the first phase the person internalises the wider social identity norms, while in the second phase the person recognises their possession of a stigma with this recognition reflected in their social identity (Goffman, 1963).

There are some criticisms of Goffman’s (1963) *Stigma* to be aware of. Frank (1988) highlighted the now historical nature of Goffman’s work, a point worth reiterating given that over 20 years have elapsed since Frank made this criticism. Thus Goffman (1963) can be retrospectively criticised for his use of what is now considered disabling discourse, such as the phrase “confined to a

wheelchair” (pp. 21), and the gendered nature of the text. Both criticisms can be understood as products of Goffman’s time. Oliver (1990) adds that the gathering of Goffman’s data in one country and in a specific time period limits the validity of his work. Other broader theoretical criticisms of Goffman include his omission of intra-group norms, and of intimate and longer-term relationships between the stigmatised (Frank, 1988). There is also the omission of self-acceptance, which for Oliver (1990) occurred for many disabled people through the inversion of the disability paradox. Furthermore, Oliver (1990) argues that Goffman “is unable to explain why this stigmatisation occurs or to incorporate collective rather than personal responses to stigma” (pp. 66). As such Watson (2003) suggests that prejudice is a more appropriate concept than Goffman’s stigma, affirming that no fault should be imputed on the individual which should rather fall wholly on the ‘normals’.

What will follow is a brief discussion of the implications of Goffman’s (1963) *Stigma* for Paralympic research. The first implication to consider is the Paralympics as a symbol. What something symbolises, Goffman (1963) argues, should be understood through a language of relations of the signs. As a symbol, the contemporary Paralympics are a conflation of the institutionalised signs, disability and ‘elite’ sport. At an institutional level, the Paralympics share a relation with the Olympics, however this was already assayed in the Oliver section. Other institutional relations, for example with the Special Olympics, could be drawn into this analysis. At the social level, Paralympians share relations with Olympians and other Paralympians. The arbitrariness of this distinction is observed when athletes with an impairment compete in the Olympics, for example Oscar Pistorius, or when we consider the frailty and susceptibility of some so-called able-bodied to injury (Howe, 2004). However, for the majority of Paralympians, the Paralympics dominates their social identity, making it worthwhile to consider the implications of Goffman specific to the Paralympian. For example, we may question, what is the social identity of the Paralympian beyond the attributes of disability and elite sport? How does their impairment category and sports group affect their Paralympic and, more broadly, social identity? When is the Paralympic identity considered to be a symbol of stigma or, contrastingly, prestige? What does the Paralympic Games symbolise to the broader disability community? Does the organisation of disability sport by the Paralympic system curtail the establishment and development of groups in the community at a recreational level of sport?

These questions are already being discussed within the Paralympic discipline, for example through ethnographic investigations of specific sports, and through topics like Oscar Pistorius and the supercrip (Swartz and Watermayer, 2008; Howe, 2008, 2011).

With specific consideration of Goffman's concepts an examination of the normification acts employed by Paralympians could address Oliver's concern that Goffman's approach failed to understand the cause of stigmatisation. This could be furthered to specific impairment groups and sports, to understand discrediting and discreditable contexts for the Paralympian. Take for example, Evan O'Hanlon, an Australian triple jumper with cerebral palsy (in the T38 category), who recently described how he has been able to train himself to blend into society without his disability being perceptible (O'Hanlon, 2012). This act of normification is interesting but lacks longitudinal and comparative research.

These few questions have been raised without consideration of the many other social relations and encounters Paralympians experience. Answering these questions will better our understanding of how Paralympians manage their social, rather than 'spoiled', identities. One must go beneath the veneer of congruency promoted by the disability and Paralympic movements and observe the social encounters between the different disability groups to observe the stigmatised stigmatising the stigmatised. This relates to Goffman's (1963) deliberation that the simultaneous treatment of a stigma, or disability in this instance, as a category and a group as a conceptual nicety. Similar to the politics between International Sport Federations, there are deep politics between disability categories, not only at an institutional level but also at an interactional level (Howe, 2008). A nuanced understanding of disability and the Paralympics must acknowledge the existence of inter- and intra-disability differences. In the criticisms the use of stigma was deemed to go against the principles of the disability movement and Oliver's social model. Thus a similar inversion can be completed by inserting prejudice in favour of stigma, resulting in disability being considered a symbol of prejudice rather than of stigma. However, the persistence of the marginalisation of disability in society maintains the utility of considering the Paralympics as a stigmatised and 'deviant community'. From here we turn our attention to the final text *The Body Silent* (Murphy, 1987).

## The Body Silent

*The Body Silent* (Murphy, 1987) the final text of this paper may be considered ethnographical, phenomenological, biographical or so forth, but relative to the other texts it offers a subjective and existential account of the experience of a regressive condition. The text documents a growing spinal tumour that afflicted Murphy's body. Appositely, Diedrich (2001) argues that phenomenological accounts of disability "reveal not only something about what it means to be disabled but also something about what it means, simply, to be" (pp. 228). The interpretation of Murphy's account aims to act as a juxtaposition to Oliver's social constructionist approach. For much like the consideration of what was at stake for Oliver in the definition of disability, it is the 'moral experience' (Kleinman & Seeman, 2001) that is at stake in focusing solely on the social construction of disability. This is not to deny Murphy's awareness of the social dynamics of disability, as he wrote:

Whatever the physically impaired person may think of himself, he is attributed a negative identity by society, and much of his social life is a struggle against this imposed image. It is for this reason that we can say that stigmatization is less a by-product of disability than its substance (Murphy, 1987, pp. 113).

As noted earlier, Murphy was a Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, thus although his text is not conceptually and theoretically fixated, it nonetheless incorporates a wide range of academic disciplines into his personal exploration of the world of disability.

*Signs and Symptoms* is the title of the first chapter of *The Body Silent* and it is relatable to the signs and symbols of Goffman's approach. The difference being that the signs in Murphy's context are internal, his mind interpreting the somatic signs of his body. Somatic signs and symptoms are part of everyday taken-for-granted life. Whenever illness or impairment afflicts the body, the "body no longer can be taken for granted, implicit and axiomatic, for it has become a problem. It no longer is the subject of unconscious assumption, but the object of conscious thought" (Murphy, 1987, pp. 12). Medical prognosis made Murphy aware of the regressive degradation his body would undergo. The account Murphy provides is an intimate description of this process, and its interaction with the social world. Yet, to descriptively reduce it to stages of paraplegia, quadriplegia and finally 'inertia' would be a gross injustice of what *The Body Silent* has to offer.

It is Murphy's description of the minutiae of his experience that is most poignant. For example, Murphy (1987) describes his inability one day to raise his foot to a footstool, ultimately acting as a harbinger of his further dependency upon others and a wheelchair. The location of the spinal tumour meant Murphy would eventually be a quadriplegic. Murphy (1987) aptly described this sojourn into a 'damaged' body as 'taking the road to entropy'. Entropy resonates on so many levels with disability. For instance, disability represents a disorder to the broader social system, while entropy also fittingly describes Murphy's diminution of energy and metamorphosis into paralysis. As a last point, there is often a preoccupation with the physicality of impairment as emphasised in the rehabilitation of patients. The inseparable nature of Murphy's mind and body in *The Body Silent* counters this preoccupation, and corresponds to their unity acknowledged in phenomenology.

'Taking the road to entropy' corresponded with a change in Murphy's social role, a change he related to Talcott Parsons' 'sick role'<sup>3</sup>. Like any social role there are rules and etiquette to be followed. The assumed rules of the disabled sick role included, that "he must make every effort to get well again" (Murphy, 1987, pp. 19), while remembering, "Don't complain!" (pp. 21). Here Murphy (1987) aptly applies the anthropological concepts of 'liminality' and 'rites of passage' to describe his changing status, the internalisation of the medical institution and the broader process of disability. The liminality of his status is defined by passivity, acceptance of the 'sick role' and erosion of prior social roles (Murphy, 1987). This discussion of liminality and the parallels between the 'liminal' states of impairment, illness, injury and essentially the frailty of all human life (Zola, 1989) will be described later. The permanency of Murphy's condition cements his new social status, his permanent liminality and relinquishes his 'rite of passage'. However, this change of status is not solely the result of the imputation of society but also Murphy's own internalisation of it. For example, Murphy (1987) draws attention to the double-edged sword of personal and social isolation, in that he was social excluded from social encounters but he also excluded himself from encounters. In so doing Murphy (1987) forces us to reiterate and redress fundamental questions of disability. For example, who is disabled, and what is disability and the fundamental question that Murphy (1987) was continually grappling with: "would one really be better off dead?" (pp. 6). It is worth citing at length his rejoinder:

3. The 'sick role' was developed by Talcott Parsons but here we highlight Murphy's relation to this new social role.

No, it is not, for this choice would deny the only meaning that we can attach to all life, whatever its limitations. The notion that one is better off dead than disabled is nothing less than the ultimate aspersion against the physically impaired, for it questions the value of their lives and their very right to exist. But exist we will, for if all other meanings and values are arbitrary and culturally relative, then the only transcendent value is life itself. (Murphy, 1987, pp. 230).

With the importance of fundamental questions asserted, we can now consider the implications for Paralympic research. Murphy (1987) discussed taking the body for granted until it becomes a problem, which often creates an anxiety of one's body. The importance of the body to the athlete with or without impairment is no different. All bodies, impaired or not, considered 'disabled' or not, can become injured, ill or impaired. The difference between injury and impairment is temporal but the illusion of 'complete recovery', chronic injury and age complicate this assumption. Thus the parallels between the experience of impairment, congenital or acquired, and injury and illness are manifold. The aforementioned anxiety towards one's body is common and evident among all athletes. These parallels can be advanced by considering the 'sick role' in relation to the injured athlete, who must follow similar social rules to make every effort to return their body to 'peak' performance (Howe, 2004). The assumption that this means training harder is contradicted by considering conditions such as overtraining and eating disorders. Thus the relativity and corresponding 'liminality' of impairment, illness, injury and essentially the frailty of all human life (Zola, 1989) in the Paralympic context are revealed. A better understanding of these liminal states and the internalisation of medicine in the Paralympics could be achieved with more ethnographical research.

Murphy's experience of rehabilitation also offers considerations for the Paralympics. The actual physical acts of rehabilitation are very similar to those labelled as 'training' within a sporting context. The 'entourage' of an athlete is similar to that of the patient, except the struggle for life is contrasted to a medal or a performance. The latter struggle is arguably a feature of the former. Pertinently, Murphy briefly discusses the 'supercrip', the antithesis of most people with impairment. Murphy (1987) stated, "Many disabled men, and women, try to compensate for their deficiencies by becoming involved in athletics. Paraplegics

play wheelchair basketball, engage in racing, enter marathons... This is how he shows the world that he is like everybody else, only better” (pp. 95). However, the discussion of the ‘supercrip’ has been advanced beyond what can be supplied here (Berger, 2008; Howe 2011).

This examination of Murphy (1987) aimed to present an existential account of impairment and to complicate the generalisations and assumptions made about disability.

## Summary

The broad aim of this paper is to argue for the relevance of disability studies literature for future of Paralympic studies highlighted by drawing attention to three seminal texts. While a relatively simple task this is needed if the critique of the Paralympic movement and parasport in general is going to be as robust as research in critical Olympic studies. In this regard Oliver (1990) offered a political economy and social constructionist understanding of disability’s marginalised position in society. This is important to illustrate the broader context of disability. The implications of Oliver (1990) for Paralympic research are related at an institutional level between the IOC and IPC but can be related to the broader organisation of society. The second text considered, Goffman’s (1963) *Stigma*, presented a symbolic interactionist approach to disability. The ability of Goffman’s approach to assimilate a diverse range of stigmatised identities is pertinent to Paralympic research which considers a diverse range of impairments. This also answered Goffman’s (1963) call to use *Stigma* to explore the intricacies of individual stigmas in social encounters. The key question being, how do athletes with impairment manage their Paralympic identity? *The Body Silent* (1987) by Robert Murphy was the final text discussed. Although the parallels between Goffman’s and Murphy’s text are manifold, attempts were made to confine the discussion to the more existential and phenomenological elements.

The second more implicit aim of this paper was to produce a methodological platform for Paralympic researchers. This triad of perspectives we believe allows ‘able-bodied’ and people with impairment researchers alike to align their research and methodologies, and with a grounding in disability studies. The ‘able-bodied’ coming from a contextual (Oliver, 1990) perspective, and the person with impairment coming from an existential

(Murphy, 1987) perspective meet in interaction (Goffman, 1963). These three approaches provide a rounded understanding of disability for parasport scholars to appreciate but importantly may also link to the other methodological and theoretical positions that others might consider potentially adopting.

This paper would have been different if we had engaged in highlighting the utility of non-western or feminist disability studies texts but it would not have been any more or less valid. To conclude, the negative imputation and stereotype of disability in society is like Goffman's (1963, pp. 161) assertion that "the wider social world have set themselves up to be fooled". If Paralympic Studies wishes to avoid this 'fool's trap' an awareness and understanding of disability activism, disability studies and the disability movement is of paramount importance. In the relatively youthful field of Paralympic Studies we want to encourage scholarship that questions the utility of parasport to challenge the issues of individualisation, medicalisation and 'dependency' of disability in society. Describing the distinctive culture of parasport is no longer enough, if the field of Paralympic Studies is to harness the activism of disability studies that we hope will ultimately contribute to the emancipation of individuals with impairment in sport and society more broadly.

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