

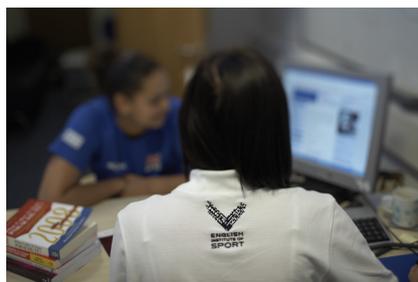
DECLASSIFIED: Disability Identities and the Paralympic Classification System

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Background

The IPC and other para-sport stakeholders have spent considerable resources developing a classification system that is evidence-based, fairly applied and intended to ensure that the success of an athlete at the Paralympic Games is based on training and preparation rather than impairment effects¹. However, little attention has been paid to the psycho-social effects that classification may have on individual athletes and specifically the potential consequences of labeling an athlete 'unclassifiable' or 'declassified'. This research addresses that gap by examining how classification impacts upon individuals' disability identities.



Performance Lifestyle Advisors at the English Institute of Sport provide support to elite para-athletes transitioning into, through and out of sport.

Project Design

The findings presented here are drawn from a project entitled Para-Athlete Retirement: Insights, Support and Management (PRISM)². It included an online survey and semi-structured interviews exploring the retirement experiences of elite para-athletes. The issue of (de)classification was identified during the analysis of reasons para-athletes transitioned out of sport.

INCLUSION CRITERIA: Para-athletes who had competed for Great Britain at a Paralympic Games or another international event or who had received elite-level funding from UK Sport.

SURVEY: An online survey was distributed to already retired para-athletes. It included 22 questions and 55 sub-questions pertaining to their sport careers, the context and conditions of their leaving sport, and their educational and employment history.

INTERVIEWS: Using maximum case sampling³, follow-up qualitative interviews were conducted with 13 survey respondents.

SAMPLE: Sixty athletes completed the survey including 48 Paralympians (21 Paralympic medalists). The sample included 21 female athletes and 39 male athletes from 24 para-sports. They were diverse in terms of age, type of impairment, education, and employment.

Theme 1:

Forming disability identities

Six of the 13 participants interviewed stated that they had not identified as having a disability (or being disabled) prior to their involvement in para-sport or that participating in para-sport helped them to become comfortable identifying as a person with a disability or disabled person.

Participant quote: "I always liked sport as a kid and when it came to swimming lessons and I was going to have to wait 18 months for regular swimming lessons but the woman at the sports centre said that if I wanted to join the disability class then I could join right away. My mum wasn't sure but she gave me the option and I said rather than wait I would just start..."

Participant quote: "Going to the Paralympics really helped a disillusioned teenager come to terms with having a disability."

Theme 2:

Declassification as challenge to disability identities

Three of the 60 participants surveyed had been forced to end their competitive careers because they were declassified (n=2) or found unclassifiable (n=1). All reported that leaving sport was traumatic and made more difficult because of challenges to their identities as disabled persons.

Participant quote: "They were accusing me of making things up in the classification. I started to question 'is it in my head?' and then I would struggle to get up the stairs..."

Participant quote: "This [impairment] isn't a life choice, I'm stuck with it and I tried to make the best of it and I don't understand why they've come to that decision. So yeah, I was a little bit messed up when I came out of sport."

Discussion

There is an existing body of critical disability research on classification and the process of being classified contributing to the formation of disability identities^{4,5,6,7}. A small number of empirical studies have also explored the retirement of elite para-athletes^{8,9,10,11}. Yet this is the first study to address the issue of classification as it pertains to how and when an athlete transitions out of sport. Our findings indicate that declassification leads to forced and undesired retirements. While earlier research has reported that individuals may experience traumatic retirements because leaving sport challenges their athletic identities¹², our participants spoke of the additional stress that came with being declassified as it challenged their sense of self as a person with a disability or disabled person.

Additionally, because retirements due to classification issues are relatively rare compared to other reasons for leaving sport (3 out of 60 para-athletes in this sample), participants reported that members of their sports network (coaches, advisors, etc.) were unprepared to support them when it happened. Further research is needed to explore what can be done to support the wellbeing of para-athletes who are declassified or found to be unclassifiable.

Implications

In addition to ongoing research on the methods used to classify and the relationships between impairment and sport performance, we need to engage with the psycho-social aspects of classification. This includes understanding the political and personal implications of labeling athletes as classifiable, unclassifiable and declassified.



A singular focus on winning within the high performance sport sector has been associated with the formation of strong athletic identities, often at the expense of developing other aspects of the individual's identity resulting in more difficult transitions out of sport.

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