The Impact of Disability and the Supercrip Image on Perceptions of Inspiration in Sport: A qualitative Focus Group Study

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The ‘supercrip’ image was developed by medical professionals in part as a response to the negative stereotypes accompanying disability, including the general perception that such individuals are less capable. Hardin and Hardin (2004) characterized the supercrip image as that which results when a person with a disability accomplishes something in excess of the generally low expectations other people have of him or her. While Janiki (1970) observed that the purpose of the supercrip image was to raise the social status of persons with disabilities, other researchers (e.g., England-Kennedy, 2008; Hargreaves & Hardin, 2009) instead have offered that this perception of athletes with disabilities is both paternalistic and limiting.

A related perception is the idea that athletes with disabilities are automatically inspirational (Clogston, 1994). Inspiration, as defined by Thrash and Elliot (2003), is an external experience that influences an observer to the extent that he or she begins to act in a different way. Cottingham, Gearity, and Byon, (2013) noted that what practitioners are calling inspiration more accurately falls under the supercrip trope, i.e., these athletes with disabilities are performing beyond the limited expectations others generally have for them. Some practitioners of disability sport promotion have rejected these concerns, pointing out that athletes with or without disabilities may be inspirational (Cottingham et al.).

To our knowledge, no prior research has examined the question of whether athletes with disabilities are considered inspirational based on Thrash and Elliot’s (2003) definition or if they are instead recognized solely based on the low expectations underlying the supercrip image. The purpose of this study was to explore this question by providing focus groups with video vignettes representing a variety of scenarios that reflect variation in disability and other circumstances.

Prior research (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990) suggests that a focus group research design is an appropriate way to elicit information from participants about a common experience, such as responses to a film or video. Focus groups also offer advantages over individual interviews because participant interactions provide data beyond that available in a one-on-one interview (Barbour, 2007; Roulston, 2010).

Participants in the focus groups were students enrolled in a general education course at a public university in the southern United States. Students who participated received extra credit for their time. The moderator was also a student; the use of a peer moderator can contribute to the comfort level of the group and enhance the depth of information provided (Patton, 2002; Makosky Daley et al., 2010). None of the student participants or the moderator had any visible disability. Each group contained either four or five members.

The researchers developed an interview guide based on a review of prior literature about inspiration, disability, and the supercrip image. Prior to the focus group meetings, the moderator prepared by conducting practice interviews with one of the other authors who has training and experience in qualitative interviewing.

Data collection is partially completed; it is anticipated that each of seven groups will view a unique video. Two versions, one depicting an athlete with a disability and the other featuring an athlete without a disability, were created for each of the following scenarios: an elite athlete with a family history of athletics, an elite athlete who had overcome a difficult life situation, and an elite athlete who had succeeded as a result of hard work rather than natural ability. One additional video depicted an elite athlete with a disability and the story focused on his accident and overcoming his injury. This is the only video that mentions the term disability. Each of these videos can be viewed at:
http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtDjMXgFlk-TrdvAIOPu63_NDkoMWnK-
Group responses were audio recorded and transcribed by one of the authors using Dressing, Pehl, and Schmieder’s (2010) “simple transcription” (p. 26). The authors coded the data used using Chenail’s (2012) “meaningful qualitative elements” (p. 266) as units of analysis and followed Saldaña’s processes of first cycle coding, second cycle coding and theming the data.

Findings from preliminary analysis support prior research (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997) that suggested that participants were more likely to report inspiration in the context of circumstances that they most closely identified or empathized with such as difficult life situations or the need to work hard to achieve proficiency. Most participants viewed disability as an additional challenge but suggested that others with disabilities would find the athlete with a disability inspirational, both in sport and non-sport contexts. Some participant responses suggested a distinction between the traditional Thrash and Elliot (2003) definition of inspiration and the supercrip image.