Sport Participation and Life-Course Narratives: An Analysis of Elite Wheelchair Athletes

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The population of individuals with disabilities is one that is rapidly growing. According to the World Health Organization, more than 15% of the world’s current population has a classifiable physical or cognitive impairment (World Health Organization, 2017), a number which is expected to continue rising due to medical advances that are increasing the life expectancies of people with disabilities and the global climate of war and conflict. Each disability presents differently and with a variety of different acute and long-term effects. For some, the presence of a strong support system, financial security, and access to medical care greatly impacts the transition in a positive way. For others where these supports are not as strong, the experience can be drastically different and even very negative. In either case, the point of injury is one that often occurs as an interaction between the individual, the family, and the community (Falik, 1995) and often is a significant life transition, regardless of the point in time.

Additional research is needed examining the potential role of sport in life transitions, as sport has been shown to have the capacity to provide a variety of positive benefits. Sport has been shown to have numerous physical, social, and cognitive benefits (Bailey, 2006), which are all potential points of concern in managing the life-course. For individuals with disabilities, sport is often used as a means of rehabilitation, establishing a support system of shared experience, and regaining a sense of ‘normalcy’ after an injury (Darcy & Dowse, 2012; Huang & Brittain, 2006). In this manner, sport can serve as a means of coping with a disability.

The relationship of sport on life transitions, though possibly the most easily discerned, is not a uni-directional relationship. In sport, transitions between various levels of play and competition are pivotal to the development of an athletes and sport systems (Green, 2008). As an individual moves through a sport system, tensions may arise at points of transition, the effects of which can be substantial. As the level of competition changes, individuals may be required to relocate, adjust to new environments and routines, and find different systems of support.

This study seeks to explore the symbiotic nature of transitions that occur in life and sport for individuals with disabilities. By understanding the interplay of managing life milestones as well as the effective transition of athletes through a sports system, and their relationship to one another, sport providers will be better equipped to effectively recruit and retain athletes, design successful programs, and provide the necessary supports to reach desired outcomes.

Schlossberg’s (1981) model of transition and adaptation looks at the events (planned and unplanned) and non-events that occur within an individuals life that result in an adaptation (change). These can include a change in relationships, roles and expectations, or status. The constructs in Schlossberg’s (1981) model that impact how transitions are experienced are the situation, the self, the support, and the strategies. In addition to the context of career retirement, points of transition and adaptation have also been looked at by sport scholars investigating the effect of coping on transition both within a sport system as well out (Swann, 1991; Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2007; Roncaglia, 2010; Henderson, 2013).

Method
This study employed life-history mapping (cf. Hagemaster, 1992; Reissman, 2007) to capture individual experiences over a period of time. By using a life-history method, individuals were able to tell their own story over a period of time and gave the researcher the opportunity to understand how past experiences were influential in the present state of a person’s life (Haglund, 2003; Sandelowski, 1991). The study used purposive sampling to examine the lives of elite wheelchair athletes of various ages, ethnicities, genders, and disability classifications in order to provide a wide range of background and experience. First, individuals completed their own sport transition timelines (Harrison, Angel, & Mann, 2008) in order to provide a context for the trajectory of sport-participation over the life-span. They were then asked to include major life transitions that were unrelated to sport. Following, semi-structured
interviews were conducted, where questions were used to situate details from their stories of sport participation within their broader life-course. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were open-coded (Charmaz, 2006) using NVivo software and like categories were then grouped together based on emergent themes. Schlossberg’s (1981) model was used as a reference for interpretation. In order to ensure reliability within the study, the data were audited by an additional researcher to ensure similar lines of thought and conclusions were reached (cf. Porter 1989; Sandelowski, 1986).

Initial Results & ImplicationsResearch shows that sport participation is found to yield benefits in peoples lives such as increased confidence, self-esteem, trust, or socialization (Sherry, Schulenkorf, & Phillips, 2016). If not addressed, these issues can have lifelong impacts. These benefits are not specific to individuals without disabilities. Preliminary data analysis in this study shows that for individuals with disabilities, participation in sport served as a catalyst for an acceptance of disability in ones own life. A struggle, for those with both congenital and acquired injuries, is the feeling of difference and struggling to find social support from a community of those experiencing something similar. For many, participation in sport provided role models and facilitated the desire to progress to the next levels of competition whereas they had previously not had exposure. Individuals described the strong influence that meeting other athletes that had gone to play wheelchair basketball in college or competed at a Paralympic Games had on their own goal setting and encouraged them to see the potential they had both athletically and in other areas of their lives. Implications for easing transitions will be discussed.