



Sport and physical activity in the life of a man with cerebral palsy: Compensation for disability with psychosocial benefits and costs

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 August 2008

Received in revised form

10 December 2009

Accepted 10 December 2009

Available online 23 December 2009

Keywords:

Psychodynamic

Life history

Disability

Social isolation

Developmental stages

Identity

ABSTRACT

Objectives: We explored the meanings and experiences of sport and physical activity in the life of a 30-year-old man with cerebral palsy (Ben).

Design: Life history.

Method: We interviewed Ben about his life, with a particular emphasis on understanding the meanings and experiences of sport and physical activity in his life. We interpreted his stories using Erikson's (1985) model of psychosocial development.

Findings: Ben had a strong sense of inferiority, which seemed to have stemmed from social isolation during his early school years. Through participation in sport and physical activity as an adult, Ben was partially able to address these feelings of inferiority. Ben strongly identified with Olympians and Paralympians, in whom he saw achievement and social connectedness personified. Although Ben became physically fitter, more socially connected, and less stressed through engaging in sport and physical activity, these achievements did not compensate for his feelings of inferiority, and he characteristically set tougher goals for himself after the elation of meeting previous goals had passed. Through devoting substantial time to sport and physical activity, Ben seemed to be avoiding or bypassing some of the psychosocial challenges of young adulthood (e.g., forming strong friendships and romantic relationships).

Conclusion: The life history of Ben illustrates the benefits and costs of trying to compensate for disabilities through sport and physical activity. In Ben's life, sport and physical activity both promoted and impeded Ben's psychosocial development.

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During the last three decades, the maturation of the disability movement has enabled more sporting opportunities to be provided for people with disabilities and a parallel increase in their sporting achievements (DePauw & Gavron, 2005). Organisations, such as the Cerebral Palsy International Sports and Recreation Association, have been active in the support and promotion of sport for people with disabilities, from grass roots levels to the world stage. With greater numbers of people with cerebral palsy performing at elite levels, there is likely to be increasing demands for the services of sport and exercise psychologists. Although reviews of research on people with disabilities (e.g., Hanrahan, 2004; Martin, 2005), along with practical advice on consulting (e.g., Hanrahan, 2007), appear in the sport and exercise psychology literature, there is a dearth of information on the experiences of sports people with cerebral palsy. Studies that focus on the meanings and experiences of sport

and physical activity in the lives of people with cerebral palsy would sensitise many sport and exercise psychologists to the issues that athletes with cerebral palsy may raise during counselling or therapy.

In the few studies in which the meanings and experiences of sport and physical activity of people with disabilities have been investigated, researchers have tended to focus on the broad, somewhat superficial, themes in their data. From the quotations provided in the papers, however, several deeper intra- and inter-personal issues of social oppression seem to be present, such as: compliance with advice from medical practitioners (Henderson & Bedini, 1995), internalized ableism (the incorporation of prejudices against people who are not able-bodied), identification with people who do not have disabilities (Hutzler, Fliess, Chacham, & Van den Auweele, 2002), poor self-image (Peganoff, 1984), and sexual/romantic concerns (Guthrie, 1999; Guthrie & Castelnovo, 2001). Insights into these issues, and how they manifest in the context of sport and physical activity, may be gained through studying the lives of people with disabilities.

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The use of psychological approaches in the study of people with cerebral palsy could be criticised for positioning them as social deviates in need of treatment from the medical profession (Thomas, 2007). Such approaches can be at odds with the social oppression paradigm that many disability writers have advanced in various forms (e.g., Corker & Shakespeare, 2002; Hughes & Paterson, 1997; Oliver, 1983). Contemporary disability writers have argued, however, that psychology may have much to offer in advancing emancipatory disability studies (e.g., Goodley & Lawthorn, 2006; Marks, 1999; Reeve, 2006; Thomas, 1999). Introducing the concept of *psycho-emotional disability* to the disability literature, Thomas (1999) recognised that not only do social barriers place limits on what people with disabilities can do, the imposition of such restrictions shapes their “inner worlds.”

Although cerebral palsy is primarily a physical condition, living with such a disability can have a profound influence on an individual's psychosocial development (Reeve, 2006; Thomas, 1999). Some issues that have emerged during psychotherapy sessions with clients who have cerebral palsy (and their parents) are: anger at themselves, at their cerebral palsy, or at the judgmental and unaccommodating world around them (Blotzer, 1995); depression stemming from their attempts to achieve alongside able-bodied people (Feuerstein, 1995; Lantican, Birdwell, & Harrell, 1994); independence versus dependence, coming from the need to rely on others to perform tasks for them (Blotzer, 1995; Olkin, 1995); parental non-acceptance of disability (Acquarone, 1995; Donovan, 1995); social barriers to sexual intimacy (Joseph, 1991); and suicidal ideations (Olkin, 1995) and attempts (Jureidini, 1988). In these cases of psychotherapy, it was common for people with cerebral palsy to present with one or more of these issues. Because sport and physical activity do not sit apart from a person's life, at least some of these issues may be expected to be present in the study of the meanings and experiences of sport and physical activity for adults with cerebral palsy.

To gain a deeper understanding of the meanings and experiences of sport and physical activity for people with cerebral palsy, as well as the possible relationship between sport, physical activity, and other aspects of their lives, it may be useful to consider unconscious intra- and interpersonal processes. Marks (1999) proposed that psychodynamic theory could contribute to disability studies through facilitating the exploration of the relationships between identity, social location, interpersonal dynamics, and bodily and psychic experiences. People with cerebral palsy face many difficulties and delays in accomplishing developmental tasks (e.g., demonstrating autonomy, identity formation, social and romantic connection), and the most developmentally comprehensive psychodynamically-oriented theory comes from Erikson (1985). His in-depth life-long developmental formulation of psychodynamic theory, with its emphasis on unconscious processes, family dynamics, and the wider social context across time, may be a suitable lens through which sport and physical activity in the lives of people with cerebral palsy may be examined. Because many of the psychosocial stages outlined in Erikson's model have substantial physical components (e.g., displaying competence at physical tasks, such as walking), meeting the challenges inherent in these stages may be more difficult for people with cerebral palsy than for the general population. Engaging in physical activity, thereby preserving or enhancing physical function, may positively influence their capacity to meet Erikson's psychosocial challenges.

Regardless of social factors that may influence physical activity participation, the motor impairments of people with cerebral palsy limit the types of activities they can perform and the extent to which they may be involved in those activities. Although disability researchers working within a social oppression paradigm have

typically left impairment unproblematised, some writers have strongly argued that impairment needs to be considered in fully understanding the experience of disability (Crow, 1996; Thomas, 2007). People with disabilities have their own meanings and experiences of impairment, which are not always positive, neutral, or irrelevant (Crow, 1996). Recognition of the importance of people's experiences of impairment is demonstrated through the inclusion of research that focuses on both the experience of impairment and sociocultural issues in the disability studies literature (e.g., Smith & Sparkes, 2004; Zitzelsberger, 2005).

To appreciate why some people with cerebral palsy engage in sport and physical activity, it may be useful to consider their past patterns of involvement. Adopting a life history approach (e.g., Denzin, 1989a) would be useful in revealing such patterns and for highlighting the influence of sport and physical activity on psychosocial development. Although the life history approach was conceived in sociology, we have chosen a psychological perspective for our work, which makes our study similar to the case study research found in counselling psychology and more frequently being used in sport and exercise psychology (e.g., Andersen & Fawkner, 2005). The life history approach and Erikson's (1985) formulation of psychodynamic theory are complementary and promote the construction of rich insights into the meanings and experiences of sport and physical activity in the lives of people with cerebral palsy.

This paper represents one study in a broader program of research in which we investigated physical activity in the lives of people with cerebral palsy. Another life history from this research program, more centered on exercise than competitive sport, has recently been published (Gaskin, Andersen, & Morris, 2009). In the present study, we explored the life history of an adult with cerebral palsy who was extensively involved in sport and physical activity in Australia. The aim of the study was to understand the meanings and experiences of sport and physical activity in his life.

Method

Participant

The participant (Ben, not his real name) was a 30-year-old Caucasian man with mild cerebral palsy. Ben was competing in swimming at state and national levels at the time we interviewed him for this research. His typical cerebral palsy gait when he walked was the only noticeable sign that he had the condition. Ben's father and mother were 20 and 18 years old, respectively, when he was born. He has one elder brother (by 18 months). His father was a mechanic, and his mother's time was spent raising her two sons as they were growing up.

Design

We used Denzin's (1989a, 1989b) approach to conducting life history research to guide the present study. The focus of the study was on Ben's experiences of engaging in, or attempting to engage in, sport and physical activity, as well as his perceptions of other people and events in his life that may have contributed to how he handled and interpreted those experiences.

The interviewer

The first author, who interviewed Ben, has cerebral palsy, which is noticeable in his fine motor control, gait, and speech patterns. At the time that we conducted this research, the first author was completing a doctorate under the supervision of the second and

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