

# **'I'm Not An Activist': An Exploratory Investigation Into Retired British Paralympic Athlete's Views on the Relationship Between the Paralympic Games and Disability Equality in the UK.**

## **Abstract**

One claim of the UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport is that the London 2012 Paralympic Games, 'improved attitudes to disability and provided new opportunities for disabled people to participate in society'. In addition the International Paralympic Committee's strategic plan suggests the Paralympic Games is a vehicle for achieving, 'a more equitable society'. The aim of this study was to examine the reflections of a group of retired British Paralympic athletes on the relationship between the Paralympic Games and disability equality in the United Kingdom. Narrative interviews were conducted with five male retired British Paralympians and one female retired British Paralympian who had participated in a total of 22 Summer Paralympic Games events. I will argue that some Paralympic athletes who are not obvious 'activists' can still contribute to equality for disabled people.

**Keywords:** Paralympic athletes; disabled activists; disabled people's movement; Paralympic Games.

## **Points of interest**

- This research is important because some retired Paralympic athletes can be seen as contributing to disability equality in the United Kingdom.
- The views of retired Paralympic athletes provide a unique insight into disability equality in the United Kingdom that has thus far been generally excluded from disability studies.
- Some retired Paralympic athletes are unaware of the contribution that the Disabled People's Movement has made to equality in the United Kingdom.
- The high profile of the Paralympic Games impacts wider society's views of disabled people.

## **Introduction**

The genesis of the Paralympic Games is attributed to the medical doctor Sir Ludwig Guttmann (British Paralympic Association [PBA] 2016a; Brittain 2014; Howe 2008; Thomas 2003; Thomas and Smith 2009). A primary focus of Guttmann's work was to rehabilitate injured military personnel from World War II using physical activity and sport specifically. Regardless of the contribution of Guttmann's work, there is limited mention in the existing literature of the contribution that the ex-military personnel themselves may have made to the genesis of the Paralympic Games (for a seminal study of the anonymity of disabled athletes, see Peers 2012). Disabled sports people have remained largely anonymous, and authors working to scrutinise the history of disabled people in sport have made limited progress in addressing this fact. An area where Paralympic athletes appear to have been omitted entirely is in their specific views on how the Paralympic Games directly contributes to equality in the United

Kingdom. In addition, their understanding of disabled activists' contribution to equality is also in need of investigation. It may seem understandable, but I argue not entirely accurate, that Guttmann is given almost total credit for the beginning of disabled sports in Britain and sowed the seed that birthed the Paralympics. The 'deity' attributed to Guttmann denied disabled sports people the opportunity to be seen as active in their own emancipation, and this perspective remains today. For example, in Thomas and Smith's (2009) book on disabled people in sport, each of the chapters concludes with a small list of revision questions; one of the questions for chapter two states:

Discuss the contribution made by Sir Ludwig Guttmann and other organizations who played a central role in the emergence and development of disability sport. (Thomas and Smith 2009, 46)

This reinforces the notion that disabled people are passive and dependent upon non-disabled people. None of the 30 plus questions in the book refer to disabled people in a particularly positive way, they are rendered passive, with some of the questions worded, 'What would you do if you worked for...' followed by the names of various organisations *for* disabled people in sport. It is still non-disabled professionals who make decisions *for* the good of disabled people in sport. The BPA's own website provides a clear example of how Guttmann's contribution overshadows the first disabled athletes (BPA 2016a). Guttmann received several honours, including a Knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II in 1966, whilst the disabled people he 'helped' were continually denied an active role in emerging sports structures for disabled people (see Peers 2009). Over the following decades these structures transitioned from providing largely segregated sports opportunities to an advisory role for mainstream sports providers, such as the then English Sports Council, national governing bodies of sport, local authorities and schools. This process excluded disabled people with the 'experts' being non-disabled people with sports related degrees and/or coaching qualifications (Braye 2014).

Disability has been interpreted broadly into two categories of the medical and social models of disability. Oliver and Barnes (2012, 6) state that "disability' is a social creation. Whilst impairment may be a human constant, disability is not and need not be.' Therefore, the removable barriers imposed on disabled people by society are socially constructed; this is the social model of disability where solutions are found by identifying and removing those barriers. The medical, or individual, model of disability views all of the problems for disabled people remaining unchangeably within their bodies. To view people from the medical model is only to see solutions in a cure. The reality may be that because society's perception of disability is historically grounded in medical terms, the Paralympics is unable to escape this fact (Brittain 2004). As such, regardless of the increasingly high profile of the Summer Paralympic Games, it may not necessarily be viewed entirely from a sports perspective. The Paralympics as a commodity is marketed as a sports event, but is also associated with disability which connects it with a long-held societal value of giving to charity, because disabled people are perceived as being 'passive, dependent, "charity cases" (Barnes and Mercer 2011, 143). Consequently, any value of the Paralympic athlete as a sports person may be significantly overshadowed by the philanthropic value judgement of society that disabled people are those for whom we should care (Barnes and Mercer 2011). The exceptional achievements of disabled athletes are negated by this view, making emancipation problematic. This dichotomy of the Paralympic product and the social construction of disability means that this relationship meets at a point where sport sells and disability collects. The Paralympic athlete as autonomous and heroic contrasts a

medicalised person in need of care (Peers 2009). UK-based television programmes such as the British Broadcasting Corporation's 'Children in Need' reinforce the fact that many disabled people sit outside Government funded support and are largely dependent upon charities. Furthermore, the British Olympic Association and the BPA websites differ in that the BPA site provides a service whereby people can donate online (British Olympic Association 2016; BPA 2016b). The media struggles to make sense of the oxymoron of disabled people as athletes and hence people may donate financially to the Paralympics out of pity for disabled people, not admiration for athletes. An agreeable value from which to make sense of disability sport would possibly help, but as disabled people are not a homogeneous group – and neither are sports fans – how Paralympic sport is presented will probably always be in some form of tension. As such, how retired British Paralympic athletes (RPAs) make sense of these and other disability issues is in need of exploration.

The generally positive rhetoric of the International Paralympic Committee surrounding the London 2012 Games implies that disability equality has been achieved in the United Kingdom (Braye, Dixon and Gibbons 2015; Braye, Gibbons and Dixon 2013). In an attempt to broaden the understanding of what it is like to be a disabled person in the UK, previous research began to explore disabled activists' views of the Paralympic games (Braye, Dixon and Gibbons 2013). Their preliminary investigation returned a sample of 32 participants affiliated to the United Kingdom Disabled People's Council. The findings suggested that among this group, at least, some disabled people regard the Paralympic Games, and its athletes, as having a negative impact on disability equality in the United Kingdom. Disabled activists who participated in the Braye Dixon and Gibbons (2013) study were particularly negative about the suggestion that Paralympic athletes are role models and influence society positively about disability issues, as the following two examples demonstrate:

I am a disabled woman interested in sport and I do not know of one disabled athlete who has made a difference in the lives of the people who are disabled in my circle of friends [Esther]. (Braye Dixon and Gibbons 2013, 990)

Rubbish, for me they are not role models. They are very blessed to have been given an opportunity in life to use the ability they have. However most disabled people do not have opportunities and their human rights are violated daily [Jenny]. (Braye Dixon and Gibbons 2013, 990)

To expand upon opinions of the Paralympics from the perspective of disabled people it seemed logical to explore the views of disabled people who had now retired from Paralympic sports participation, bearing in mind disabled activists' views. Campbell and Oliver's (1996) assertion that disabled people are not a homogeneous group necessitates that divergent groups of disabled people are questioned to further understand a persistent social issue of inequality for disabled people. The current study examines the life experiences of disabled people who have competed in at least two Paralympic Games and have since retired from competitive sport. The narratives of RPAs will be analysed to augment the views of disabled activists on the impact of the Paralympic Games on equality in the United Kingdom. As pointed out by Braye, Dixon and Gibbons (2015), current disability studies take limited account of sport and the Paralympics (see Barnes & Mercer 2011; Cameron 2014a; Goodley 2011; Smith and Papathomas 2014). Although Grue (2016) contextualises Paralympic athlete media coverage as 'Inspiration Porn', whilst Ellis (2015, 118) presents a critically engaging chapter analysing the Paralympics and 'the construction of ability', it is

anticipated that the lived experiences of RPAs will contribute to critical disability studies. The extent to which their experiences have resonance with disabled activists in the United Kingdom will also be explored. Research by Smith, Bundon and Best (2016, 139) identified that some current and retired Paralympic athletes do have a 'political activist identity', which resonates with one of the participants in this study. Their participants included eight athletes who retired during their research; however, the aim of the current study was to interview people who had been retired for many years. Smith, Bundon and Best (2016, 140) were explicit in terms of questioning Paralympic athletes about the nature of their involvement in activism and particularly their 'activist identities'. In the current study, the intention was not to ask about their possible political activism so directly. UK based disabled writers such as Michael Oliver, Colin Barnes Sally French and Tom Shakespeare, whilst contributing to the emancipation of disabled people over several decades, have largely ignored the Paralympic phenomenon. The Paralympic Games are now a recognised global sporting extravaganza, with 4269 athletes from 164 countries having competed at London 2012 (Burn-Murdoch 2012).

## **Methodology**

Great Britain's RPAs are a unique group of disabled people whose views have been omitted from disability studies in the United Kingdom. This study is based on the views of six RPAs (five men and one woman). Participants interviewed were aged from 39 to 50, with a total of 22 Paralympic appearances and 27 medals (nine Gold, 10 Silver and eight Bronze). They have 247 years of personal experience of disability; four were born with an impairment and two acquired impairments as adults. Two of them have been awarded a Member of the British Empire (MBE) medal in the UK's honours system for their contribution to sport, and all are in full-time employment. Their academic qualifications ranged from a Higher National Diploma to a PhD. Three had been retired for 24 years, one for 20 years, one for 15 years and one for six years.

Two interviews took place face to face at the University and four via Skype. Narratives are used as a valid method for gathering data for academic research and have contributed to the field of health, illness and disability (notably Smith 2013a, 2013b; Smith and Sparkes, 2008; Sparkes and Smith 2002). Narratives ordinarily comprise an entire life story, or centre around a specific event; for the purposes of this study, participants discussed their journey through the Paralympic experience. Elliott (2005, 9) suggests that 'the very telling of a narrative represents an evaluative act.' It is true that a narrative account does not tell exactly how life was lived, such as field notes taken at the time might, but rather a reflection on what took place. Such reflection is on factual events and from that perspective provides valid and meaningful data (Elliott 2005).

Each interview lasted approximately one hour, providing an average of 6095 words from each participant and a total of 36,570 words. The key themes were generated from the thematic analysis of the data by applying a qualitative coding technique. Codes emerged from a semi-inductive approach rather than using pre-determined categories (Miles and Huberman 1994). The codes were valid in that they related directly to the research topic, they were not merged and all data were placed into relevant codes (Gratton and Jones 2010). With this amount of empirical data to process, and lengthy lists of codes emerging, it was necessary to sift repeatedly through the data in order to reduce the codes into meaningful and comprehensive

categories (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Richards 2005; Silverman 2000). As a consequence, the three final themes were as follows: Paralympic athletes as disabled activists; Understanding of disability issues beyond sport; and Media portrayal of disabled people. In the following discussion, each of these three distinct areas will be analysed in detail.

## **Discussion of findings**

### ***Paralympic athletes as disabled activists***

A criticism of the disabled people's movement (DPM) suggested by Thomas and Smith (2009) is that disabled people's organisations (DPOs) lack interest in disability sport; however, it is also true that some RPAs have no knowledge of DPOs, with five of them never mentioning any DPOs in their interviews. The Paralympic participants in Smith, Bundon and Best's (2016) study also never mentioned any DPOs. Wendy, however, identified herself as a disabled activist and member of the United Kingdom Disabled People's Council; she was involved in the protests against Paralympic sponsor Atos at the London 2012 Paralympics, which were organised by Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC). She said:

I am involved with DPAC in London and there was a lot of stuff around that. The opportunity to protest at London 2012 was Atos, and whilst coming out of one event, I completely laid into a group of Atos people, 'How dare you be here! etc.' and what I really hoped for was some kind of protest from the Paralympic athletes that were going to be at the opening ceremony, an anti-Atos protest. (Wendy, aged 49, born with her impairment and competed in three Paralympic Games, the last being Barcelona 1992)

Wendy is adding clear political activist practice to her beliefs, in contrast to the other five participants who did not identify themselves in this way. They do not appear to articulate an explicit grasp of the definitions of disability as a social construction, or indeed the medical or individual model of disability; however, they do have personal experience of impairment. The richness of these experiences will now be used to construct my assertion that activism comes in many forms. For instance, Frank said:

I feel as though I try to be a positive advocate for disability sport and disability generally, I just spent two days working with psychiatrists, from around the country trying to improve the life expectancy of people with schizophrenia. I could, with some credibility, stand up and confront these people about trying to make sure people receive the right kind of care. Now I feel privileged to be in that kind of position and I wouldn't be in that position if it wasn't for what had happened in my life. (Frank, aged 46, acquired his impairment aged 18 and competed in five Paralympic Games, the last being Athens 2004)

Frank does some media commentary and also works as a motivational speaker in a capacity that is beyond the confines of sport. He may be perpetuating 'triumph over tragedy', and other stereotypes that emerge from the Paralympics and general media structures (Cameron 2014a, 2014b; Oliver and Barnes 2012; Rieser and Peasley 2002, 27)). However, if this method brings about some benefits it ought not to be ignored completely, although reinforcing negative stereotypes does negate the overall aim of disabled activists. Harry works as an accountant and also does some television commentary:

I got into doing commentary because I have the experience but I do get other jobs now but not because I was a Paralympic athlete but because I have been able to do the job. But I suppose it has helped Channel 4 tick the box saying, 'Oh yes, we have got another disabled person'. But I'm not sure if they were even aware that I was a former Paralympic athlete because I was the lead commentator not the expert for Channel 4. (Harry, Aged 50, born with his impairment and competed in five Paralympic Games, the last being Sydney 2000)

This may be naïve of Harry, to think that his commentary for the British Broadcasting Corporation on the Paralympics is coincidental. However, the necessity for disabled people to access a broad range of influential employment areas is essential to pave the way for others to follow. Barnes and Mercer (2011, 189) refer to 'the under-employment of disabled people in broadcasting'; Harry is reversing that trend despite saying 'I'm not an activist as you might have gathered.' Ellis (2015, 125) refers to 'broadcasters criticising the functional classification system for being too complicated'; Harry and Frank's work challenges this aspect of media representation, although neither of them refer to any experiences of discrimination. Colin, however, was aware of discrimination and the need to challenge it:

In the long run what is a quiet life? You kind of let one thing go and it gets pushed to the next thing and in the end you have no power to actually do anything about it. People might say I'm a negative person. Maybe I'm looking for ways in which to improve, this is my positive aspect on this, I'm constantly looking for improvement opportunities, but in order to find those opportunities you need to find out what is wrong. (Colin, aged 52, acquired his impairment aged 20 and competed in two Paralympic Games, the last being Atlanta 1996)

Colin recognises here that the choice to speak out is not easy, and can be an uncomfortable lifestyle choice, the life of an activist. Brian preferred the term 'athletes with disabilities', because it highlighted, for him, that Paralympians should be seen as athletes first and disabled second. Disabled activists would see this as a medical term (Shakespeare 2006). However, when referring to some sports events, he contradicted himself:

I was in Glasgow on Saturday at a grand prix event where they had Paralympic events on, an amputee race, amputee long jump and wheelchair races both for cerebral palsy athletes and spinal injury. (Brian, aged 38, born with his impairment and competed in four Paralympic Games, the last being Beijing 2008)

While having an, 'athlete first disabled second' stance, Brian's contradiction is indicative of how some participants used terminology throughout their interviews. However, within Brian's employment as a sports science technician, he is able to demonstrate to students that disabled people can work in professional occupations unassociated with disability:

In my day to day work here, it doesn't matter that I was a Paralympic athlete or not. It is not something that gets called upon at any point. (Brian)

This may be a low key form of activism, but nonetheless he has positively tackled the ongoing barriers that disabled people face in gaining meaningful paid employment (Roulstone 2014). Alan's job is specifically related to creating more opportunities for disabled people in sport, which has been problematic:

I remember spending an hour talking to one sailing club and for every solution I provided they provided a hurdle. I persevered until I put my hand up and said, 'OK they clearly don't want to concentrate on my efforts to do that.' I would try other clubs that were willing, for about eight or nine years it was a struggle. But because of the fact that I had trained hard I put that resilience into my work and my everyday life as well. (Alan, aged 50, born with his impairment and competed in three Paralympic Games, the last being Barcelona 1992)

In this extract Alan is referring to a 'struggle' that ought not to exist and appears to accept that this is normal. It is possible to be ignorant of wider political issues for disabled people, like Alan, and still make a difference within a smaller sphere. The opportunities for disabled people need to be improved across every strata of society, including sport, and whilst Alan may not have a particularly developed understanding of disability activism broadly, his occupational practice assists in the creation of opportunities.

Collectively the participants in this study see themselves as active in trying to break down barriers, change attitudes and create opportunities. Wendy is clearly a disabled political activist with an understanding of disability as a social construction and is affiliated to DPOs. The other participants are not, however; rather than seeing disability activism as something that one is either 'in' or 'out' of, perhaps a continuum perspective may be a better solution with low key 'activism' by Alan at one end and high profile activism by Wendy at the other. The real point of contention here is when the Paralympic overcoming adversity ideal works against all forms of activism recognised by DPOs.

### ***Understanding of disability issues beyond sport***

From the information provided during the interviews it was clear that participants' breadth of understanding of disability issues varied considerably. As athletes, the participants were once part of the same British Paralympic team; now retired, they have become ordinary disabled people, and their views do not necessarily fit with an International Paralympic Committee image of a cohesive Paralympic movement. It would appear, from this small exploratory sample, at least, that some disabled people from the Paralympic movement have limited knowledge and understanding of a political DPM within the United Kingdom. Brian was supportive of people's right to protest generally, although he spoke about the issues as if they had nothing to do with him:

I imagine some things about transport and logistics may have been improved since 2012, things to help people that are maybe wheelchair users or infirm or can't walk. I don't have any personal experience of that and I don't think the protestors would have had a profile at all if it wasn't for the Paralympics. So they had to use whatever they could to raise the profile of what was going on, to make people more aware of the effect this will have on people's lives. (Brian)

Brian knew that protests had taken place, although he did not elaborate beyond that and his knowledge of the potential impact of the Paralympics on disabled people outside sport was limited. He described himself as having 'a minimal impairment', so when referring to accessibility by saying 'I don't have any personal experience of that' he reinforces the medical model view of disability which focuses on people's

impairments rather than disabling environments (Campbell and Oliver 1996; Shakespeare 2006). Some participants were aware that there were other disabled people who had negative views about the Paralympics, expressing his thoughts on this, Frank said:

I totally get it, if you are not interested in sport then you are getting pigeon-holed into a world that you don't want to be in, so I totally get why the opinion is negative. I think disabled people have just as much right to be rubbish at sport and as horrible and disgusting as anybody else. Telling them that they have to be some fantastic human being or super human, they must hate the superhuman thing, they must really hate that and I totally get it. If I wasn't getting a piece of the action I would hate it too. (Frank)

Whilst taking what would be commonly held as a view supported by the DPM – that disabled people have the right not to be sports people – Frank values the Paralympic Games to such an extent that he believes disabled activists feel as if they are missing out in some way. However, he possibly overlooks the fact that many disabled people are prevented from participating through the social construction of disability (Barnes and Mercer 2011). This may be a moot point; nevertheless, disabled activists have traditionally sought publicity for the DPM rather than themselves (Barnes 1991; Campbell and Oliver 1996; French 1994a). Both Brian and Frank earlier made no reference to the fact that the advances of the DPM may have a direct positive impact on their own lives. The participants were generally agreed that the positive aspects of the Paralympics do not necessarily transfer into society in a particularly significant way, as Harry states here:

I know that, I'm thinking about the UK here, when people did talk before about Beijing and more awareness being made of people with disabilities in China. If you talk about the UK to be honest I can't think of anything specific, disability certainly has a bigger profile than it has ever had, whether that has led to anything concrete in wider society I can't think of any examples of that. (Harry)

Harry could not think of one specific example of how the London 2012 Games had contributed to equality for disabled people in the United Kingdom. He is also aware of these discussions relating to previous Paralympic Games. Kim (2011) discusses disabled activists in South Korea 1988 and China 2008 resisting the notion that the Paralympic Games contributed to equality in those nations. When discussing the extent to which Paralympic athletes highlight the issues disabled people face in wider society, Alan kept his narrative firmly within a sports context:

There is a lot of negativity attached to the word disability and the Paralympics or Paralympic athletes have a more positive view and you don't get to hear too much of the negatives about their private lives. Nowadays Paralympic athletes have their own personal coach and are members of a mainstream club. I don't think they highlight the negative things they face much at all. But there is more access to funding, facilities are far more accessible than we faced. Now there is legislation and awareness, there is a lot more access. Don't get me wrong they have still got a long way to go, but I don't see too much evidence of it anymore. (Alan)

Whilst Alan's view was similar to other participants, Colin suggested there was a problem with how people born with an impairment and those who acquired their impairment as adults differed. He said: 'They [people born with impairments] have been conditioned over a period of time to believe they have no rights and that people



should be making decisions for them.’ This demonstrated a lack of awareness of the genesis of the DPM and its pioneers as well as the lifelong work of disabled people such as Paul Hunt (1937-1979) and Vic Finkelstein (1938-2011) (Barnes and Mercer 2011; Cameron 2014c; Goodley 2011; Shakespeare 2006; Swain et al. 2014). Speaking within the Paralympic framework, Colin held that disabled athletes have a responsibility to challenge the status quo:

Disabled people who say that, ‘everything will be OK in the long run so let’s not bother complaining’, are wrong. If a person has just discriminated against you they will be discriminating against me later because by saying nothing you are reinforcing their behavior. So I would rather you didn’t allow that to happen to you because that impacts on me. But I don’t think enough disabled people realise that they are being discriminated against. (Colin)

Although Colin did not refer to any DPOs in his interview or talk directly about wider disability politics or activists, some of his views are congruent with the DPM. His narrative is predominantly within a Paralympic sport paradigm where he places some blame on other disabled athletes. Wendy was aware that some activists have a negative view of the Paralympics and its athletes, stating: ‘The whole system of the Paralympic set up makes it difficult for disability rights activists to support.’ She suggested that activists tend to focus on disabled athletes as the problem rather than the system that has created a ‘triumph over tragedy’ philosophy (Reiser and Peasley 2002, 27). Whilst identifying as a disability rights activist she was not critical of elite sport:

I am not against elite sport because I would be a hypocrite if I was, and I am not a recovered Paralympian, but there was a period of time when I stopped competing and got into activism and I just turned my back on sport. And then I thought, this is an absolute load of rubbish, and I think activists are getting it wrong in terms of who the enemy is here, when it is the way the Paralympics and the IPC [International Paralympic Committee] and the BPA and what was BSAD [British Sports Association for the Disabled], now the EFDS [English Federation of Disability Sport], are organized; they are run by non-disabled people or ‘Uncle Tom’<sup>1</sup> disabled people to force us, as disabled people, into categories that allow the media to be able to describe us. (Wendy)

Wendy aside, it is evident that the participants are still viewing the world through a Paralympic lens but tend to agree that the Games have limited impact on disability equality beyond sport. Their understanding of wider disability issues and the contribution of the DPM as a whole towards equality in the United Kingdom is not coherently formed.

### ***Media portrayal of disabled people***

The media portrayal of disabled people including Paralympic athletes is seen in both positive and negative terms by the participants. When referring to how the public view disabled people Brian said:

I still think the media portray disabled people the same as they did prior to the Paralympics, there’s still the attitude that we are demonized within the public, that we’re

on benefits. There's always the press going on about people getting benefits that don't deserve them. (Brian)

Brian picks up on two issues, the coverage of the Paralympics and the general portrayal of disabled people by the media. The latter of these has been analysed by academics over many years; from Barnes (1991, 197-200) who discussed the misrepresentation of disabled people on television and the disablist language in the British press; to Quarmby's (2013, 68) content analysis of newspaper articles in relation to disability hate crime, and the euphemisms used to describe these events. Alan remains within the context of Paralympic sport:

Well if I make a comparison to when I was competing, at the Seoul Games I think there was a one-and-a-half-hour programme that went out about a month after the event and subsequent Paralympics have been different, and in London I think it has definitely increased and Channel 4 did a good job promoting the games. One of my favourite adverts was that billboard which said, 'Thanks for the warm up' [in reference to the Olympics] it was really powerful for the public to see the Paralympics from their car. (Alan)

Alan does not mention impairment or disability in this part of his interview. This element of focusing solely on sport rather than impairment has been explored with disabled participants by Purdue and Howe (2012). However, Grue (2016, 841) states that the way Paralympic athletes are objectified in the media is 'inspiration porn'; it is 'pure fantasy' for ordinary disabled people to achieve these feats in real life. In addition, the expectation is that all disabled people ought to be able to compete. Colin's view on the effects of the media portrayal of the Paralympics is more critical than Alan's - the 'inspiration porn' impact is evident as he mimics a conversation he had with a non-disabled person:

I am not aware of a vast change in equality since the television coverage of London 2012. Someone said, 'Right what sport do you do, well you are disabled aren't you, so therefore you must be doing sport, you are going to the next Paralympics aren't you?' 'No I am not good enough to go to the Paralympics.' 'Oh aren't you, I though everyone went to the Paralympics!' So some of it has actually devalued what the Paralympics is because you wouldn't go up to anybody at the local running track and say, 'Are you going to Rio?' (Colin)

Commentating on swimming events at the Paralympics for the media, Harry stated that he always likes to see the positive side of sport and life, as such he has a more positive view:

I think as a Paralympic athlete that the media portrayal has generally improved and it is has been a positive thing from a sporting point of view. There have been spin offs into society as well, maybe more of an awareness of the Paralympic Games, it has certainly helped with that and certain people's disability. It has showcased a lot of things like people with visual impairments and people that are in wheelchairs. (Harry)

Wendy had many views related to the media coverage ranging from describing the London 2012 games as 'extraordinary compared to when I was competing', to:

The television explanations of impairment, particularly in swimming, for me verges on offensive, entirely medical model and I don't think people need it. Among people at the

poolside, no-one was looking at each other saying, 'Oh what's wrong with that person?' They are just interested in sport. (Wendy)

In 1994 Sally French stated that the defining of disabled people in medical terms by 'medical and health and welfare professions are dominant and powerful agents in defining disability' (1994b, 3). This dominant view has remained in place and has unsurprisingly found its way into explanations of disabled athletes; it seems that some media can only make sense of Paralympic sport in medical terms. Wendy identifies an additional medical model shift in the Paralympics; 'athletes with my level of impairment just don't exist in swimming now'. This is congruent with findings by Purdue and Howe (2013), and Wendy relates this directly to the media influence:

There is no doubt that there is a rampant discrimination against those of us with more significant levels of impairment and that is a disgrace, when you think what the Paralympic movement is supposed to be about. I would say that that has happened as a result of the media interest going up, but the inclusivity of those with more significant impairments has gone in the opposite direction. Is there a correlation with that? I think there probably is. (Wendy)

Howe (2008, 140), a UK-based Canadian RPA, has criticized discrepancies in relation to how 'more severely impaired competitors are being marginalised within the Paralympic programme'. In contrast to Wendy's view, Frank, like Harry, in his commentary for the media tries to focus on the positive aspects of sport; whilst he uses medical terminology in his definitions, he sees this as crucial to understanding Paralympic sport:

If you have a swimmer who is hemiplegic who has both arms and legs but has some motor control challenges down one side of his body, racing against a guy with no arms. When that swimmer touches with both hands and the other guy is waiting to hit it with his head, everybody goes, 'Well that can't be fair!' But if you have a commentator who can explain that you have to look at the race as a whole, like the guy dived with two legs and pushed off well, look at the whole picture; that has to be done. I think that is a healthy element in terms of how we view people with disabilities. (Frank)

It is evident from the participants' views even among this small group that there are diverse and strongly held opinions on the Paralympic spectacle, and disabled people more widely, as presented by the media. In relation to London 2012 there was a significant increase in print media, internet and television coverage compared with previous games and these participants were, at least, agreed on that. These issues are not confined to the United Kingdom, with Peers (2009; 2012), another Canadian RPA, questioning the positive rhetoric of the media when portraying Paralympic sport. The tension lies in the fact that, in the United Kingdom at least, the most publicised disabled people are Paralympic athletes.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to draw upon the narratives of RPAs and analyse to what extent they felt that equality for disabled people had been achieved in the United Kingdom, and the contribution, if any, that the Paralympic Games has made. Whilst the sample size was small, this exploratory study provided 36,570 words of rich

personal experience of disability and Paralympic sport. The findings suggest that, apart from Wendy, there was a limited understanding of the contribution of the DPM to equality in the United Kingdom over recent decades. Their understanding of equality was generally embedded within a sport and/or Paralympic framework. Even without a structured understanding of disability issues, some were very passionate about the issues that they felt were important and believed that they were contributing to wider equality for disabled people. Sport is not outside the disability equality framework, and in that sense the contribution of these RPAs can be accepted, because some of them are on an activism continuum whilst not necessarily being overtly political activists. Their understanding and knowledge of equality within a sports context is vast, unique and – notwithstanding their lack of knowledge about the DPM – at times complimentary to wider equality issues beyond sport. They were relatively unclear, or doubtful, about the contribution that the Paralympics makes to disability equality in the United Kingdom and in that sense their views resonate to a certain extent with disability activists' more negative views (Braye, Dixon and Gibbons 2013). Whilst much of the terminology within the narratives has a medical bias, the views, sporting efforts and employment practices of these RPAs may be viewed as a form of low-key activism by some activists. It may be unrefined at times, but nonetheless effective for broadening the opportunities for disabled people to take part in physical activity, sport and Paralympic Games in the future. In spite of this lack of understanding among some of the participants, perhaps disabled people in the DPM will begin to see some of these RPAs at least, contributing in some way to a wider solution to disability equality within the United Kingdom. It is evident that further in-depth empirical research is needed to explore more widely the views of other RPAs within a broad equality remit. Further studies will include the views of parents of disabled children in sport and disabled sports people who resist Paralympic participation. Finally, I hope there are RPAs worldwide who have made it into academia; if so it would be helpful to see how they view some of the issues raised in this study.

## Notes

1. 'Uncle Tom' is a derogatory term used in this context to describe a disabled person who thinks like a non-disabled person.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the RPA participants for agreeing to, and enduring, the lengthy interviews as well as their willingness and generosity in answering the follow-up emails for clarification on certain points. The author is also grateful to the reviewers for their criticism and suggestions.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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