

COVID-19's Effects on Paralympians

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INTRODUCTION

Athletic Identity (AI)/ Disability AI & its effects:

- AI refers to the degree with which an individual identifies with the athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993)
- Live a more athletic lifestyle (Martin, 2013)
- Focus on winning and neglect of other parts of lives to fulfill the athletic role (Cornelius, 1995; Murphy et al., 1996)

Sport Disruption:

- Analog of Sport Disruption: Injury, Retirement, & Parenthood
- Retirement and injury result in "Nowhere Land", athletes feel lost and without direction (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000)
- Motherhood has contrasting effects: enlightenment (Appleby, 2009; Tekvac, 2020)

Tokyo 2020 Paralympics & the COVID-19 Pandemic:

- Premier stage of elite disability sport
- A primary source of income for most Paralympians
- Tokyo 2020 Paralympics postponed to 2021

PURPOSE

- To investigate COVID-19's physical and mental impacts on Paralympic athletes' lives.

METHODS

Participants:

- 29 Paralympians and Paralympic hopefuls
- 11 sports represented (Cycling, Sitting Volleyball, etc.)

Data Collection:

- Semi-structured interviews conducted through virtual video calls
- 20mins - 1 hour 20mins in length

Data Analysis:

- Thematic analysis (Merriam, 2002) & constant comparative method

RESULTS cont.

2. Challenged Mental Health

- Experiencing uncertainty, depression, and other negative feelings
- Developing a positive mindset, and appreciation

"Like I think that's what's so cool about the Paralympics. It's that us Paralympians like we are so adaptable to our bodies like not being the most reliable in times like that. Like, oh okay another year if that's what the world needs, we will do it"-Stephanie

3. Change of Lifestyle

- Activities: lack of interaction/communication, but accommodated for
- Career/life plan change: Negative impact due to future timeline interruption

"Yeah, like your plan you had your life planned to like a tee, like how you're going to do when you were going to do it what you're going to do afterward and so the extra year kind of just throws off any plans that were had."-Allie

RESULTS

1. Less Structured Training and Adjustment

- Reduced Intensity/ Less Structured Training/ Limited Facility Access/ No Competition
- Physical Training Innovation / Increased Mental Training

"We had spent the last four years working up to this point and we have a chart that tells us of, okay, when are we supposed to increase our training and just so that we can peak at the right moment and then it like came to a halt. So the volleyball aspect I cut way down on how much volleyball I've been doing."-Lily

DISCUSSION & PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

- To account for reduced training, NGBs (National Governing Bodies) could provide minimal equipment packages
- To accommodate for athlete's mental health challenges, athlete-individualized psychological resources could be provided
- NGB funding for the regular season could be reallocated to support these implications