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The Rio 2016 Paralympic Games: inspiration as a possible legacy for disabled Brazilians.

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Abstract

This work is part of a larger qualitative and exploratory study that investigated the legacies of the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games (PG) in Brazil. We conducted in-depth open interviews with 24 disability rights activists and people in Paralympic sport managerial positions. The goal of this paper is to explore one of the main perceived legacies: inspiration. For the participants, the PG were inspiring for disabled people (DP) because they showed the capabilities of DP, revealed new possibilities for their lives, and motivated them to engage in or remain engaged in sports. They were also inspiring for non-disabled people (NDP) because the examples of athletes ‘overcoming’ their impairments and related environmental and social barriers, motivated people to reconsider their own reality. While some participants criticized hero/super-hero narratives, most argued that these narratives are also common regarding NDP and that DP should not be treated differently. For them, these narratives still have some positive potential.

Keywords: Paralympic Games; disabled people; legacies; inspiration; Rio 2016

The Rio 2016 Paralympic Games (PG) involved 159 national teams, were broadcast to 154 countries, attracted 2.15 million spectators and had a significant engagement from the public via digital platforms (International Paralympic Committee (IPC) 2016). Considering the magnitude of this event and the claims by the IPC that it promotes positive legacies for disabled people (DP) (International Paralympic Committee 2019; Rio 2016 Bid Committee 2009), we developed a research project to explore the following research question: What are the main perceived legacies of the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games in Brazil, from the perspective of Brazilians who are either disability rights activists or who are involved in managerial positions in Paralympic sport institutions or sport programs? One of the three key themes to arise from the findings, from the perspective of our interviewees, was that the Games provided an ‘inspiration’ to DP in Brazil and this will be the focus of this article.

Inspiration is actually one of the four Paralympic values promoted by the IPC in their vision statement (Courage, Determination, Inspiration, Equality) where inspiration is defined as para-athletes acting as role models who ‘maximise their abilities, empowering and exciting others to be active and participate in sport’ (IPC, 2019; 7). However, how this “inspiration” actually occurs in practice is not clear and it is important to note that this term has different connotations. For example, for Thrash and Elliot (2003), who address inspiration from a psychological standpoint, it involves transcendence, evocation and motivation. According to these authors, transcendence refers to the fact that inspiration orients one toward something that is better or more important than one’s usual concerns. Evocation refers to the fact that inspiration is evoked and unwilled; one does not feel directly responsible for becoming inspired. Finally, inspiration involves motivation to express or make manifest that which is newly apprehended; given the positive valence of this aim, inspiration is conceptualized as an appetitive motivational state.

According to Thrash and Elliot (2003), as well as Cottingham (2015) (who discusses inspiration specifically in the context of disability sport), something is truly inspirational only when it involves behavioral change. For this paper, however, we will adopt the meaning of inspiration as it emerged from our participants' responses: as a deep sense of admiration and/or elevation that caused a change in the way people felt or thought about something and/or as a desire to do something new or different. For them, inspiration does not necessarily involve a behavioral modification, as the above mentioned authors suggest.

Some scholars have problematized the idea of inspiration associated with the PG. A central point to this criticism is what has been called "supercrip" narratives. The supercrip narrative is "the presentation of a person, affected by a disability or illness (often in the prime of life), as 'overcoming' to succeed as a meaningful member of society and to live a 'normal' life" (Hardin and Hardin 2004, 2). In the context of Paralympic sports, more specifically, supercrip narratives describe athletes as heroes for supposedly "rising above" their disabilities, performing feats normally considered not possible for DP (Hardin and Hardin 2004). The supercrip narrative has been widely criticized for different reasons: 1) It is based on low expectations of DP's abilities. As a consequence, they are praised for anything they do as if their feats were extraordinary e.g. going out shopping on their own (Silva and Howe 2012); (2) It reinforces the belief that disability is an individual problem that needs to be solved. This, in turn, generates in DP a sense of inadequacy and frustration (Silva and Howe 2012); (3) It feeds the expectation that anything is possible for DP, as long as they try hard enough, as if there were no social barriers (Misener et al. 2019) or other factors (e.g., type of impairment, health conditions and chronic pain) that could affect their success (Brittain and Beacom 2016; Silva and Howe 2012); (4) It generates distance between the athletes and other DP who are commonly perceived - and sometimes perceive themselves - as weak and fragile (Silva and Howe 2012); (5) It reinforces an ableist perspective and the belief that the more you can do to

achieve non-disabled norms, the better (Kearney, Brittain, and Kipnis 2019; Purdue and Howe 2012; Wendell 1989).

Ableism favors some abilities over others and uses this preference to judge, to promote and to justify discrimination against those whose abilities diverge from accepted social norms for bodily performance. It is also used to justify the lower status of those who do not fit into the favored ability norms (Campbell 2009; Wolbring 2008). Another problem of ableism is that it can be internalized. People may start believing that their personal characteristics are a problem. Thus, they might try to hide them and/or fix them, so that they can better fit non-disabled norms. However, as in many cases this may be difficult or even impossible, this process can be both frustrating and painful (Campbell 2009; Wolbring 2012).

The presentation of athletes as heroes or as supercrips reinforces ableism because it disseminates a subliminal message that the more DP – within or outside the sport world – overcome their limitations (perceived to be caused by whatever impairment they have), the better, which may lead to hierarchies within the disability community (c.f. Deal, 2003). Those who cannot develop a certain level of able-bodiedness are therefore, placed in a lower hierarchical position (Brittain and Beacom 2016; Howe and Silva 2016; Kearney et al 2019).

Considering the arguments presented above, amongst others, such as that the Games may cause frustration in DP because they tend to perceive that their own lived reality is too far from that of the Paralympians (Hodges et al. 2014), some scholars also claim that the PG, and more specifically, the examples of Paralympians underpinned by the supercrip narrative, contribute to DP' oppression (Silva and Howe 2018; Wendell 1989) and actually do a disservice to the DP's rights movement (Braye, Dixon, and Gibbons 2013). However, whilst there are many criticisms against the supercrip narrative, there is some evidence that it may actually inspire disabled athletes (Berger 2008; Cottingham 2015; Purdue and Howe 2012). It may also inspire disabled adolescents (Coates and Vickerman 2016) and spectators

(Cottingham et al. 2014; Cottingham 2015). In addition, the PG may also be beneficial in the sense of offering a counterbalance to existing negative narratives and stereotypes (Cottingham 2015; Silva and Howe 2012).

Considering the above, we asked the interviewees what they perceived the main legacies, positive or negative, of the Rio 2016 PG to be? In the second part of the interview we presented them with a selection of the above criticisms of the PG and asked for their opinions. Although we are aware that this could be conceived of as ‘leading the witness’, we also believe that the majority of the criticisms rarely get aired outside of academia or they are criticisms that have originated from disabled activists in Australia, European or North American countries. We wanted to explore different viewpoints on these criticisms and see if Brazilian advocates would agree with them. Like Braye et al (2013), we decided to interview activists on the legacies of the PG, because the latter tend to have a more political perspective on DP’s needs.

A deeper understanding of the PG’s legacies – and in this case, its potential to inspire people in positive or negative ways - can help to inform Paralympic sports stakeholders and other interested parties (e.g., politicians, disability rights activists, sport professionals, educators) in their practices in ways that can potentially maximize the legacies of the PG. This may help not only the PG host nations, but also people in other countries with similar realities, considering that the Games have been gaining greater media coverage. This research also helps to fill a gap in the literature on the legacies of the PG in developing countries such as Brazil.

Methodology

We developed a qualitative and exploratory study in order to explore our main research question - what are the main perceived legacies of the Rio 2016 PG? We interviewed 24 people (14 male and 10 female). Fourteen of the interviewees self-identified as having a disability. The other ten were non-disabled people (NDP). We used both purposive and snowball

sampling to reach our target audience. We first identified some people connected with disability rights activism and Paralympic sport promotion in Curitiba, capital of the state of Paraná, Brazil. We chose Curitiba because the Brazilian authorities had set the expectation that the Games would generate positive legacies for DP not only in Rio, but in the country as a whole (Rio 2016 Bid Committee 2009). We picked Curitiba, which is 870 KM south from Rio, because it would allow us to explore such legacies beyond the host city. At the end of our initial interviews, we asked the participants for suggestions of names of other people who could contribute to this study. Based upon their suggestions, we selected other participants following the maximum variation sampling approach (Patton 2015). In other words, we chose people with and without disabilities, involved and not involved with sports, and who worked in different types of institutions, so that we could explore a diversity of perspectives on the PG legacies.

The participants either worked with DP or were involved as representatives of DP in city, state or federal level offices, and/or were Presidents or Vice-Presidents of DP's associations. Fourteen of them had some involvement with sports in one or more of these functions: sport organisation managers, coordinators of sport programs, professors of adapted sports in physical education courses, coaches and athletes. One of them was an ex-President and another an ex-Vice-President of the Brazilian Paralympic Committee, and four were retired Paralympians who were or are in managerial positions in institutions that promote sports. Seventeen participants were actively involved in proposing and/or advocating for public policies in favor of DP. Details of the participants can be seen in table I.

Table 1. Profile of the research participants

Name	Gender	Type of disability	Activist	Sport involvement	Background
ADRIANA	F	ND	N	Y	Coordinator of adapted sport programs; adapted sports professor.
ANDREA	F	ND	Y	N	Board member of the “Reviver” Down Syndrome Association
BETINA	F	PD	Y	N	Vice-president of the Paraná Association for People with Physical Disability (ADFP); councillor of the Municipal Advisory Office on the Rights of PWD (CMDPcD)
BRUNE	F	MD	Y	N	CMDPcD Councillor.
CARLOS	M	PD	N	Y	Coordinator of Paralympic sport program; coach.
DARLAN	M	ND	N	Y	Coordinator of Paralympic sport program; coach
DÉCIO	M	ND	N	Y	Coordinator of Paralympic sport program; adapted sport professor; coach
DENISE	F	ND	Y	N	Director of the Municipal Advisory Office on the Rights of PWD
ELIZABETH	F	ND	Y	N	Representative and ex-attorney of the APAES ² Federation; advisor of public policies for PWD for a Brazilian senator
ÊNIO	M	VD	Y	N	President of the Paraná Association of the Blind; councillor of the State Council of the PWD's rights (COEDE)
FERNANDA	F	ND	Y	N	CMDPcD director assistant
FLÁVIA	F	VD	Y	N	Social inclusion coordinator of the PWD Public Policies Department of Paraná; COEDE counsellor
IRAJÁ	M	PD	Y	Y	Ex-vice-president of the Brazilian Paralympic Committee and Head of the Research Centre of the Paraná Rehabilitation Association; retired Paralympian
JESSANI	F	ND	Y	N	Director of the Secretariat of the Specialized Educational Services for Inclusion of the Municipal Department of Education
JORGE	M	ND	Y	Y	Director of the Paraná PWD Special Secretariat
JUNIOR	M	PD	Y	Y	President of the Paraná Association for People with Physical Disability, ex-athlete
FERNANDO	M	PD	Y	N	CMDPcD councillor
MÁRIO SÉRGIO	M	VD	Y	Y	Coordinator of para-sports of the Paraná Sport and Tourism Secretariat; COEDE counsellor; retired Paralympian
MAURO	M	PD	Y	Y	Ex-president and current vice-president of the ADFP; COEDE councillor
MOISÉS	M	PD	Y	Y	Public policies advisor for the Coordination of Para-Sports at the Paraná Sport and Tourism Secretariat; retired Paralympian
RUTH	F	ND	N	Y	Ex-coordinator of adapted sport programs; professor of adapted sports; ex-athlete
TANHOFFER	M	PD	N	Y	Coordinator of Paralympic sport program; Paralympic sports coach.
VILARINHO	M	PD	Y	Y	President of the Institute for the Defence of the Rights of PWD; counsellor in the COED; board member of the Free University for Human Efficiency; ex-athlete
VITAL	M	VD	N	Y	Ex-president of the Brazilian Paralympic Committee; retired Paralympian

NOTE. M = male; F = female; PD = physical disability; VD = visual disability; MD = multiple disabilities; ND = no disability; Y = yes; N = no

The first author conducted face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2015) with all of the participants between March and June of 2019. The interviews lasted between 1.5 to 2.5 hours and had two parts, each with only one leading open question that was asked to all participants irrespective of their background. In the first part they were asked to

freely talk about what they thought were some possible positive and/or negative legacies of the Rio 2016 PG for DP in Brazil. They were not asked to focus on any specific aspect of legacies.

In the second part, in order to elicit some reflections on some possible negative outcomes of the PG, they were informed of some of the criticisms outlined in the introduction. They were told that there is a group of international authors that have been questioning whether the PG actually promote positive legacies for DP beyond sport. They were also told that these scholars believe that the presentation of athletes as heroes or superheroes might create an expectation that all DP can achieve similar success if they work hard enough to reach their goals. This, in turn, could generate frustration among those who for some reason failed to achieve success in their objectives. It could also lead people to judge those who are not successful in their endeavors (in sports or other areas of life) as lacking will power. Finally, they were told that some critics actually claim that the PG might be counter-productive for the DP's rights movement. Following this explanation, the participants were asked to freely express their opinions on these criticisms. In order to better understand their perspectives and increase the trustworthiness of the interpretations, when appropriate, the interviewer would ask some additional questions and/or would summarize what they understood from what had been said, and would ask them if they had interpreted correctly. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author, who is bilingual, did all the translation from Portuguese to English.

We conducted thematic analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006) using NVivo as a tool. We first coded all the material. Afterwards, we sifted through the code list, and as we read and reread the data, we grouped the codes into meaningful categories and sub-categories using a mixture of inductive and deductive approaches. For this article, the analysis and writing-up were combined in an iterative approach, which cycled between emic readings of the data, the etic use of existing literature, and collaborative writing (Tracy 2013) whilst the first

author spent six-months as a visiting researcher at the second author's institution in 2020. This process involved a constant effort not to dismiss discrepant data and not to let the literature or their own personal beliefs distort the process. We also wrote descriptive and analytical memos to help organize the insights that emerged during this process (Corbin and Strauss 2014). It is important to note here that neither author is disabled, directly works with DP in sport programs or has ever been an elite athlete. The second author has attended the last five summer Paralympic Games as a volunteer accredited staff member of the International Wheelchair and Amputee Sports Federation. We do, however, have over twenty-five years' experience researching in disability and Paralympic sport between us and so consider ourselves to be in a good position to be able to reflect analytically and critically on the interview data.

The study was approved by the Brazilian Research Ethics Committee/ National Research Ethics Council System (CEP/ CONEP). All of the interviewees signed an informed consent form and claimed to prefer that we used their real names instead of pseudonyms in publications that mentioned their participation.

Results and discussion

Of the 24 participants, 23 spontaneously talked about "inspiration" as a legacy of the Rio 2016 PG. We will discuss the data related to this topic in two main parts, each one dedicated to one of the two leading interview questions.

Inspiration as a positive legacy of the PG

The interviewees claimed that the PG were inspiring for different reasons. The most quoted was that it showcased DP' abilities and possibilities. The following quote exemplifies some of what was said regarding this matter: "They inspire. They reaffirm this idea that we are capable

indeed, each one of us with our own story, with our own limiting story, and with our own life story!” (Flávia, VD).

All disabled participants claimed that the examples of the athletes led DP to undergo a self-reflection about their own condition, helping some discover things that they did not dream they could do. As two interviewees noted, the Paralympians’ achievements stimulated people to think like: “Gosh I’m always inside the house ... but there are things that I can do!” (Mário Sérgio, VD). Some participants also claimed that the PG helped DP to realize that they could be more proactive in relation to their impairment, search for autonomy, and independence.

The examples of the athletes inspired people. They could see that it is possible to be autonomous, that they do not have to be dependent on other people, that they can be independent. They can go after what they need! (Mauro, PD)

A study carried out in the UK found that the London 2012 PG had a similar inspirational effect on a group of disabled adolescents (Coates and Vickerman 2016). Whilst this kind of effect is important in places like the UK, where after a long history of struggles for DP’ rights, it is already possible to see DP in successful positions, the display of positive role models seems to be even more important in places like Brazil. While Brazil does have progressive disability laws, they are far from being granted in practice (Kirakosyan 2016). Most Brazilians with physical, hearing and vision disabilities (77%), feel that their rights are not respected (DataSenado 2010). According to the last Brazilian Census, 61.1% of DP, 15 years or older, did not complete elementary education and 46% of DP receive less than a minimum wage per month (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística - IBGE 2012), which corresponds to about U.S.\$185.00 per month as of November 2020.

Some of our participants also said that before the PG, most people did not know that DP could engage in sports. Adriana (ND), for example, commented that a professor who worked with her, after watching some Paralympians on the TV, asked her: “But can they really really

do it? Doesn't it hurt?" which highlights the level of ignorance on this matter, even for people with a higher educational level.

The Rio 2016 PG were an eye-opener for DP to many new possibilities for their lives, including the use of new technologies, such as automated prosthetic limbs, which many of them had never heard about. One interviewee commented that whilst most DP cannot afford such technologies, at least now they know that they exist. This all might have sparked in them a desire to make a change in their lives.

It awakens that dream to get there or to go to some other place, . . . get out of that limited life and go after new opportunities. . . . Many do not have conditions to get out of their house and do not have adequate equipment or prothesis. . . . But they will start dreaming with these possibilities. It doesn't have to be in sports. . . . This will inspire them to want to get out of that life and go after what they want and to fight for what they want! (Mauro, PD)

According to various disabled participants, the PG were also inspiring because they promoted the following kind of thinking: "If he can, I also can!" (Mauro, PD) or "If they can, why can't I?" (Junior, PD). Some of them also said that the PG helped DP to realise that, if athletes, who sometimes have more serious impairments than their own, can engage in elite sports, they themselves can also thrive, be it in sports or other spheres of life. This might have inspired them to act on their own lives.

It inspires. . . . You stop to think that there are people who do not have an arm, do not have a leg and do all of that! (Brune, MD)

For me it was inspiring. . . . Athletes and stories that make me think that we can't complain. There are people with even worse limitations, and even so, have higher performance. (Flavia, VD)

All the interviewees involved with sport programs claimed that the PG motivated people to engage in their programs:

Relatives of people with disabilities began to look for sports programs: "Do you have a adapted sports program here? I have a daughter, I have a son, I have a relative, I have someone close to my home who has a disability. Can they attend this program? ". . . . The PG gave visibility and increased DP' demand for sports. (Adriana, ND)

There is some evidence that the PG might motivate the involvement of some specific groups of DP in physical activity. However, there is still no reliable evidence that this is sustainable in the long run (Pappous and Brown 2018; Brown and Pappous 2018). In England, for example, there was an increase in sport participation at least once a week by DP and people with limiting illness, 16 years or older. But this trend did not last. It went from 15.5% in 2005/2006 to a peak of 19.1% in 2012/2013, and came back down to 16.8% in 2015/2016 (Sport England 2016). Inspiration alone is clearly not enough to sustain participation. Long-term participation demands accessibility of sport structures and sport programmes, among other elements (Misener 2015; Misener et al. 2019; Brown and Pappous 2018).

According to some interviewees, the PG inspired not only DP, but also NDP in different ways.

They can still swim or do any other sport! . . . There are so many non-disabled that . . . don't do what they do! . . . There is overcoming . . . They inspire! (Brune, MD)

Inspiration in the various areas! It doesn't just have to be in sports! . . . " Gee, the guy is there, paraplegic, he's an amputee on both legs and he is falling down over and over again with the chair during the game! He untwists the wheelchair alone! You are there with your problems and think: " Man, why am I valuing my problem so much? I'm worried about this little thing here, do you understand? It messes with people! It is inspiration! (Mauro, PD)

Some of our interviewees also argued that as people see the kinds of obstacles DP have to deal with, they realise that their problems are not as 'bad' as they perceived them. This helps them feel better about their difficulties. The following story told by one of the interviewees, who was also the coach of the Brazilian boccia team during the PG, illustrates this point.

A person approached him and said: Wow! You [athletes] have changed my life! I was thinking bad thoughts about what to do with my own life. Now I see that my life has much more to thank than to complain about. You taught me a lot here! You inspired me! . . . And the guy cried. (Darlan - ND)

The person mentioned above was touched by the fact that the Paralympians lived fulfilling lives even when having severe impairments. He probably felt this way because in

spite of the athletes' supposedly tragic destinies - in the case of the athlete mentioned above - he had serious speech and motor difficulties - they still appeared to live a fulfilling life. A life that, he, with his 'normal' body, apparently did not want to live anymore until he watched the PG.

Some interviewees remarked that Paralympic athletes tend to be more inspiring than "conventional" athletes because despite their impairments and the perceived limitations that their impairments impose upon them, they still managed to overcome environmental (e.g. lack of accessibility) and social barriers (e.g. discrimination and lack of opportunities) that non-disabled athletes do not have to deal with on a day-to-day basis.

To win a gold medal is a superhuman thing for an able-bodied. Now, for a person with disability to get a medal, it is even more special! . . . I think it's an example we need to follow! . . . [They] show persistence and overcoming of different kinds of obstacles . . . lack of ramps, discrimination and other issues (Brune, MD)

Other studies (Cottingham et al. 2014; Cottingham 2015) also found that people felt inspired by the PG because they felt surprised that the athletes were capable of doing sports at a high level, in spite of their impairments and in spite of all the barriers that they have to face that NDP usually do not have to.

Apparently many DP and NDP feel inspired when they see disabled athletes, because they sense that "there are worse things out there". In this context, they feel that they should be grateful for their own situation. Some disability advocates and scholars would call this kind of feeling "inspiration porn", which is defined as a depiction or consumption of narratives related to DP as inspirational and as potential role models, by objectifying and using them with the purpose to amuse ourselves, to feel relieved, or to make other people experience amusement and/or feel relieved in relation to their own condition. This happens when we perceive DP as victims of a "miserable" destiny and in a disadvantaged position. As a consequence, we feel sorry for them and value or super-value whatever they do just because of their supposedly tragic condition (Young 2012b, 2012a).

Inspiration porn is problematic because it influences “how we understand and construe the lives of both specific individuals and groups of people with impairment” (Grue 2016; 841). It reinforces the belief that disability is something negative, mystifies DP’ experiences, and obscures social causes of disability (Grue 2016). The intentional promotion of inspiration porn is not acceptable, because it reproduces negative stereotypes of DP, objectifying them to make others feel better about their own reality. We question, however, whether the kind of inspiration mentioned by the participants of this study is in fact inspiration porn. Apparently, their intention - and the intention of others who they quoted - is not to objectify the experiences of Paralympic athletes for their own good. They simply cannot help not to feel inspired by the athletes’ determination and strength in the face of the numerous difficult challenges that they have to deal with in sports and in their daily lives. As images of successful DP become more frequent in the Brazilian media, and their presence stronger in public spaces, DP and NDP will possibly no longer be so surprised by Paralympians’ deeds.

During the first part of the interview, the participants mentioned only positive legacies of the PG (e.g., they inspire because they show DP’ abilities, they provide positive role models, they show new possibilities for DP’ lives, they motivate DP’ involvement with and/or adherence to sport practices). In the second part, some of them talked about a few possible negative impacts of the Games. Most of them, however, strongly reacted against the criticisms from the literature that was presented to them.

Critical voices: critiques and counter-critiques

Five participants criticized the hero/superhero approach that was presented to them and how it might negatively affect DP. The first argument brought out by two of them is that it might reinforce the belief that to have a disability is a problem both to the individual and to society.

You covertly say to the person that he's a poop. . . . For the disabled person, disability is part of who he is! . . . So if I say to this person: “wow, look this person got over it, he's a superhero!”” Look, he can do it, despite this horrible thing that is his disability.” . . . This “thing”. . . will be part of him for the rest of his life! You are telling the person: “that who you are is bad for society!” While this narrative sounds good, it only generates bad outcomes! (Fernanda, ND)

Fernanda’s quote is aligned with the criticism made against the supercrip narrative and how it may foster ableism and a sense inadequacy and frustration among DP (Howe and Silva 2016; Kearney et al 2019; Silva and Howe 2018). Another interviewee presented a complementary criticism against this narrative:

If you think about this superhero today. What will happen to him ten years from now? Or twenty years from now when he is no longer able . . . to be a superhero? A deep depression? (Denise, ND)

The irony of the superhero narrative, Denise remarked, is that it is not sustainable in the long run. The super-valorization of physical abilities will one day oppress also those who were once seen as heroes. As some scholars point out, we will all, at some point, as we age, lose some of our abilities. Sooner or later, we will all become victims of ableism (Wendell 1989).

Another interviewee made an additional criticism against the superhero narrative also consistent with the literature: it creates an expectation that everybody can “get there”, if they work hard enough (Silva and Howe 2012; Wendell 1989). Those who do not make it, are perceived as lacking willpower and/or as lazy.

The population sometimes ends up looking at other DP thinking: “wow, he's a super athlete! Why don't you try too? ”. . . Then every person with a physical disability becomes a superhero or becomes a person who has not worked hard enough. [Tanhoffer, PD]

Tanhoffer’s quote seems to imply that, while successful athletes gain self-respect and are admired by other people, those who do not achieve similar standards, are seen as even more distant from what was originally expected of them. In other words, ‘the image of the disabled hero may reduce the “otherness” of a few disabled people, but because it creates an ideal which

most disabled people cannot meet, it increases the “otherness” of the majority of disabled people’ (Wendell 1989, 116-117).

Getting close to normalcy, or to super-hero standards is not always desirable and/or possible. Some people do not want to “get there”, and some just can’t, because of the nature and/or the degree of their impairments and/or health conditions (Silva and Howe 2018; Wendell 1989). This may be made worse by social and structural barriers that make it difficult – if not impossible - for some DP to be as successful as expected or desired (Brittain and Beacom 2016).

Another criticism that was made by two participants against the superhero narrative is that it tends to portray the athletes as lonely achievers, as if they had done it all by themselves.

It does not show the trajectory of that person, where he started, what kinds of efforts he did to get there. It suggests that the merit belongs to the person alone . . . as if he had not received any help (Ênio, VD)

This narrative mistakenly sends the message that society plays no part in the person’s success or failures:

When you tell him that he is a superhero, you tell him that society has no responsibility for the problems he experiences. . . . He will have to overcome adversity by himself. As you do so, you take society’s responsibility away (Fernanda, ND)

The criticisms made above run along the same lines as some of the analyses presented by scholars who criticize the “medical model of disability”. In this model, disability is a personal problem to be dealt with by the person him/herself. It neglects society’s responsibility in this process (Oliver 2009). The supercrip narrative supports the medical model as it over-emphasizes individual merit and reinforces the vicious cycle of social inequality (Misener et al. 2019; Smith and Bundon 2018).

Another problem with the supercrip narrative, is that it gives the impression that the athletes have some kind of super-power, reinforcing the distance - a “sense of otherness” –

that exists between the athletes and DP in general (Silva and Howe 2012). This might discourage other DP from even trying to engage in sports.

When they come with the story . . . like "super-athlete overcomes all barriers", this mischaracterizes the human. . . . When you think someone is a super-athlete, when you think he³ is not human, he is superhuman, that distances you! . . . It demotivates the person who doesn't feel fit to even try. (Adriana, ND)

According to Adriana, the media should focus on the sporting trajectory of the athletes so that everyone can see that their results are the fruit of dedication and training.

Many people quit sports because they think they can't get there. . . . If it showed how the athlete got there, people could think: I also can! I will not go from here directly to the highest place in the podium. . . . There is a step by step (Adriana, ND)

While five interviewees criticised the hero/superhero approach, eleven expressed, in one way or another, that this approach might in fact help to break old stereotypes of DP.

What the heck is this? The crip needs to be treated like a crip? We cannot show him as a super-man? . . . What story is this? No, no, and no ! Do they have to continue to be disabled in that old model? (Vilarinho, PD)

The "old model" that Vilarinho refers to encompasses narratives that present DP as fragile, pitiful, and miserable. A positive outcome of the portrayal of DP as heroes, super-heroes, super-efficient and/or super-humans, according to some participants, is that it helps to emphasize DP' abilities, potentials and possibilities. One could argue, however, that a negative outcome of this narrative is that it might promote ableism, discrimination against, and the continued social oppression of those who for one reason or other, cannot reach expected levels of physical performance (Kearney et al 2019; Purdue and Howe 2012).

Like the participants of another study (Hardin and Hardin 2004), some of our interviewees also said that the hero/superhero approach is also common in sports for NDP. It would not be fair not to be able to show Paralympians as heroes, considering that non-disabled athletes are presented in this way. As one interviewee said: "DP are already discriminated against in their daily lives. Now will they also be discriminated in sports? . . . This would be

double-discrimination!” (Vilarinho, PD). Some participants also stated that Paralympic athletes should be considered heroes and role models just like ‘conventional’ athletes.

I think the figure of the athlete as a hero is good. It is not different in sports for people without disabilities. Who doesn't want to be a Neymar? . . . Who doesn't want to be in Messi's position? Who doesn't want to be like Cristiano Ronaldo? . . . It is no different for people with disabilities. . . . People, somehow, they use references! (Ênio, VD)

The media apparently went from one extreme to another: from a pessimistic to an overly optimistic view of DP' abilities and possibilities, as if the athletes were superhumans. As some scholars have pointed out, both approaches are detrimental to the interests DP who do not engage in sport (Silva and Howe 2012). Ideally, the media should progressively change its focus to sportsmanship (Cottingham 2015; Cottingham, Gearity, and Byon 2013). As high performance is a necessary feature of elite sports – and not necessarily a demand in people's daily lives – this change could alleviate the expectation that everyone should perform as well as the athletes (Brittain, Legg, and Wolff 2017). However, this approach might not be attractive to the public, who tend to like inspirational stories. As Paralympic sport is still fighting its way into the market, ‘overcoming’ stories might still be needed as a temporary marketing strategy (Cottingham et al 2013).

While a few of the interviewees were critical of the supercrip narrative, all participants reacted against the assertion that the PG might be counter-productive to the DP' rights movement. Some of them claimed that, if we were to follow this line of thought, we would no longer be able to show other successful individuals – with or without disabilities - regarded as heroes in other fields (e.g., musicians, painters, entrepreneurs, actors, etc.). Otherwise, they would supposedly be raising society's expectations of other people and would keep negatively judging those who are not as successful as they are.

When we talk about Paralympic sport, we're talking about a very select group of people. . . . It is a professional option. . . . People cannot feel frustrated because they cannot do the same things It's the same to say that a singer who is a wheelchair user. . . . He is not a bad influence because he is a successful artist. . . . No one is required to be a high-

performance athlete! . . . [The Paralympian] got there because he worked for it, as did the Olympic athlete (Décio, ND)

No one looks at Cirque du Soleil and says: ‘Hey, why can’t you do that?’ . . . No one judges why a person can’t do what Olympic athletes do. . . . Why have a differentiated treatment for DP? (Flavia, DV).

A few interviewees asserted that DP, like NDP, do not need to be “protected” from hero narratives. They can face as many frustrations and difficulties as needed, like any other person.

“Yes you do need to show our heroes, because DP are not poor things that need to be protected”. . . . How many millions of athletes go to football trials and do not pass them? Why would this have to be different for DP? A NDP also feels frustrated that he cannot go to the Olympic Games. A person with a disability can also feel frustrated. What's the matter with that? (Junior, PD)

Junior, like some others, acknowledges that DP need to face a series of barriers in order to be successful. However, he also thinks that each person needs to find a manner to overcome these obstacles, according to his/her own reality:

Maybe the person watching the Paralympics . . . says: “Oh I want to play basketball!”. But unfortunately your disability is not eligible. But that doesn't mean you can't play boccia, for example. . . . There are problems . . ., for example, to find clubs . . . to buy a special wheelchair. . . . But nothing prevents you to do it! . . . It may prevent you from engaging in the sport that . . . you may want to compete in an elite level. But nothing prevents you from practicing some other sport, even if only in a recreational level (Junior, PD).

For some scholars (Brittain and Beacom 2016; Howe and Silva 2016; Kearney, Brittain, and Kipnis 2019; Silva and Howe 2018), discourses such as the one above might reinforce ableism, and consequently, discrimination against and frustration amongst those who do not “get there”. For many of our interviewees, however, DP should not be regarded or treated differently from NDP. They need to strive to overcome their personal difficulties and deal with their own frustrations as any other person has to do.

Conclusion

Almost all interviewees, except for one, talked about inspiration as one of the legacies of the Rio 2016 PG, mentioning one or more of the following reasons: it provided DP with positive role models; it showed DP' capabilities; it revealed new things that DP could do and new possibilities for their lives; it motivated DP to engage and/or to remain engaged in sports. Various participants remarked that the PG were also inspiring for NDP as well. According to them, the athletes' determination and hard work, in spite of the perceived limitations of both their impairments and environmental and social barriers motivates people to reconsider their own limitations and problems. This, in turn, motivates them to deal with their own issues and difficulties.

Five participants problematized the hero/super-hero narrative for one or more of the following reasons: it reinforces the idea that disability is something bad; it reaffirms the importance of individual merit; it minimizes societal responsibility in promoting DP' rights; and it generates the expectation that other DP should be as successful as the athletes, be it in sports or in other spheres of life. It could be argued that for them – as some scholars claim - the PG reaffirms the medical model of disability, promotes a sense of otherness between the athletes and other DP, and promotes ableism. Most of the interviewees, however, strongly reacted against the idea that is defended by some scholars, that the PG might be detrimental to DP in general and/or to the DP' rights movement. They argued that stories about heroes/superheroes are also told about NDP, be it in sport or in the world outside of sport. They believe that like NDP, DP can also be exposed to other people's success stories, adapt these stories to their own realities, and use them as a source of inspiration. They also claimed that, like NDP, DP can also deal with other people's high expectations of them and with their own frustration for not getting to the same high levels of achievement as elite athletes or other successful people. For them, DP should not be regarded and treated differently to the way

people look at and treat NDP. This would appear to highlight the fact that whilst the supercrip narrative and ‘inspiration porn’ may highlight valid concerns, this does not necessarily mean that Paralympians cannot inspire people to better themselves, and that each context needs to be evaluated individually.

None of the participants mentioned any negative impact of the PG during the first part of the interview, even though they were prompted to talk about both positive and negative legacies. This indicates that for them, what they pointed out as benefits of the inspiration legacy, by far outweigh the problems some of them commented on. The findings of this research support the conclusions of two other studies that challenged the critical literature against the inspirational trope related to Paralympic sports (Berger 2008; Chrisman 2011). These studies, like ours, showed that this trope - which many times is expressed through a supercrip approach - has both a negative and a positive side. On one hand, it reinforces ableism and the medical model of disability (Chrisman 2011). On the other, it shows different possibilities and ways that DP can deal with their own reality (Berger 2008; Chrisman 2011). In the case of our study, it additionally showed that in some cases it might help NDP to overcome some of their own perceived problems.

As we explored the views of a limited number of people with a specific profile, our results cannot be generalized either to the Brazilian context or to other countries. It is important to acknowledge that, even in the same locale, different individuals and communities might have differing viewpoints on the subject. In spite of these limitations, however, our findings lead us to the conclusion that in places like Brazil, where DP in successful positions are still extremely rare, examples of successful DP and stories of athletes as heroes/superheroes may be welcome. Obviously, the hero/superhero/supercrip narrative presents problems, but it also has some potential, considering that the athletes’ determination and strength to face numerous difficult challenges in sports and in their daily lives may inspire people in positive

ways. Bearing in mind that the realities of DP differ from place to place, within different communities, and among individuals in the same group, academic research on the legacies of the PG and on supercrip narratives need to carefully consider the context under investigation.

We hope that in the future, media narratives about the PG will focus more and more on the athleticism of the Paralympians and on the structural and social barriers that the Paralympians have dealt with in their careers. Such media narratives are currently a rarity, especially in countries where disability awareness is less developed. This approach can support actions that might help minimize barriers so that more DP can get involved with sports and/or with other kinds of activities that they wish to and/or need to get involved with, so that they can have a better quality of life.

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