Para Athlete Activism: A Critical Disability Studies Perspective

DAMIAN HASLETT

Para Athlete Activism: A Critical Disability Studies Perspective

By

Damian Haslett

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Declaration

The work in this thesis is based on research carried out by Damian Haslett, under the supervision of Prof. Brett Smith, within the Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, University of Durham, United Kingdom. No part of this thesis has been submitted elsewhere for any other degree or qualification and it is all my own work unless referenced to the contrary in the text.

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Abstract

Recently, there have been calls for researchers to focus on social justice issues in sport, such as the experience of athlete activism. While there has been a rise in research focused on athlete activism, little attention has been given specifically to Para athletes as disability activists. The purpose of this research was to provide an in-depth exploration of *Para athlete activism*: Para athletes as advocates for social change to improve Para sport contexts and/or wider society for disabled people. Underpinned by ontological relativism and epistemological constructionism, this research is framed within a qualitative design and a *Critical Disability Studies* (CDS) perspective. A CDS perspective means this is research that actively works to re-imagine a politics of disability by drawing on an eclectic range of theories and lines of inquiry. A purposeful sample of participants representing three stakeholder groups – 'the Para athlete group', 'the National Paralympic Committee group' and 'the disability activist group' - were recruited in Ireland. Data were collected through interviews and analysed using a reflective thematic analysis. The analysis first captures Para athletes' thoughts about factors that prevent or enable social change for disabled people in society. Next, the contemporary landscape of disability activism in Ireland is illumined. Following this, the thesis focuses on styles and strategies that Para athletes use to create social change in Para sport or wider society, as well as contextual challenges involved in creating social change. The next section concerns a critique of Para athlete activism where I use data to problematise the International Paralympic Committee's new strategy to promote Para athletes as disability activists. The thesis concludes with empirical, theoretical, methodological and practical implications, with an emphasis on how this research contributes to knowledge.

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Publications arising from this thesis

Peer reviewed articles

Choi, I., Haslett, D., & Smith, B. (2019). Disabled athlete activism in South Korea: A mixed-method study. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology.* 10.1080/1612197X.2019.1674903

Choi, I., Haslett, D., Monforte, J., & Smith, B. (in press). The influence of Confucianism on Para-sport activism. *Sociology of Sport Journal*.

Haslett, D., Choi, I., & Smith, B. (2020). Para athlete activism: a qualitative examination of disability activism through Paralympic sport in Ireland. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise.* 10.1016/j.psychsport.2019.101639

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Book chapters

Haslett, D., & Smith, B. (2020). Disability sports and social activism. In M. Berghs, T. Chataika, Y. El-lahib, & K. Dube (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Disability Activism*. (pp.197-208). New York, NY: Routledge.

Haslett, D., & Smith, B. (2020). Viewpoints toward disability: Conceptualizing disability in adapted physical education. In J.A. Haegele. S.R. Hodge, D.R. Shapiro (Eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Adapted Physical Education*. (pp.48-64) New York, NY: Routledge.

Conference presentations arising from this thesis

Haslett, D., Choi, I., & Smith, B. (2018). Para sport athlete activism: Social activist orientations among elite athletes with impairment in Ireland. Oral presentation delivered at the 6th International Conference on Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise, Jul 2018, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

Haslett, D., Choi, I., & Smith, B. (2018). Disability Sport and Social Activism. Oral presentation delivered at the European Congress of Adapted Physical Activity, Aug 2018, University of Worcester, UK.

Haslett, D., & Smith, B. (2018). Disability Sport and Social Activism. Invited oral presentation delivered at the Lancaster Disability Studies Conference, Sept 2018, Lancaster University, UK.

Haslett, D., Choi, I., & Smith, B. (2019). Parasport athlete activism: a qualitative examination of disability activism through Paralympic sport. Oral presentation delivered at the 15th European Congress of Sport & Exercise Psychology, Jul 2019, University of Munster, Germany.

Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter overview

This chapter provides and overview of what this PhD is about and why it is necessary. I start with some broad background on disability activism and Para sport. I then discuss how disability is defined in different ways and how disabled people face different forms of discrimination. After this, I attend to the unique socio-political context of disability and Para sport Ireland. Here is where I highlight how Para sport is governed in the 'all-island' political and cultural context of Ireland.

What is this PhD about?

This PhD is broadly about disability, sport and social change. Specifically, it is about the role that Irish Para athletes play in creating social change for disabled people - Para athlete activism. Drawing on qualitative methods, this thesis brings together the perspectives of Irish Para athletes, disability activists and National Paralympic Committee members. It explores disability in society and social change, the Irish landscape of disability activism, athlete activism for sporting improvement and for broader social good, as well as promoting Para athlete activism. It is the first research to do this.

This PhD is also about a critical disability studies perspective. In the chapters that follow, I draw upon this transformative theoretical avenue to help re-imagine a politics of disability required to address the continuing marginalisation of disabled people in sport and society.

Background

We are living through activist times (Berghs, Chataika, Dube & El-lahib, 2020). Technological advances (e.g., mobile phones, podcasts, crowdfunding, photographs) and the rise of social media have made activism more accessible and inclusive. Hashtag activism is ubiquitous (e.g., #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #ClimiteStrike), individual activists have

become celebrities (e.g., Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai) and protest marches are commonplace. More conservative forms of activism (e.g., #prolife) and violent expressions of activism (e.g., white supremacist marches) are on the rise too. Modern activism is criticised for being too neo-colonial (i.e., culturally insensitive) and too lazy ('clicktivism', 'slacktivism'), as well for language policing and contributing to the phenomenon of 'echo chambers'. Activism has also become 'trendy' thus blurring the lines between consumerism and resistance (Berghs, Chataika, Dube & El-lahib, 2020).

Disability activism is often left out of these broader activist conversations because it is mistakenly seen as having little impact on human rights or as something 'a little different' that only disabled people do – and perhaps only people who identify as disabled. Nonetheless, we have also witnessed a rise in disability activism in recent times. For example, in 2017 in Ireland (the context of this PhD) disability activists demonstrated outside the Dáil (Irish Parliament) for Ireland's failure to ratify the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability (UNCRPD), and in doing so, forced the Irish government to ratify the UNCRPD in 2018 (Conroy, 2018). This action exemplifies how disability activism has progressed, over the years, from a focus on cure (the medical model of disability) to care (the charity model of disability) to independence (social models of disability) to human rights (the human rights model of disability) (Goodley, 2016; Smith & Bundon, 2018). I will discuss the significance of these models in detail across the chapters of this thesis, but first some background to the context in which I will explore disability activism- Para Sport and Para athletes.

'Paralympic Sport', 'disability sport' and 'Para sport' are terms that are often used interchangeably. Whereas 'disability sport' is a general term used to describe sports that accommodate people with physical, sensory and intellectual disabilities, 'Paralympic sport' is often used as a term to describe sports that specifically compete in the Paralympic Games

(Townsend, Huntley, Cushion & Fitzgerald, 2018). Given the developmental goals of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC, 2019), in this thesis, I will use 'Para sport' and 'Para athletes' as terms to accommodate athletes from both 'Paralympic sport' and 'disability sport'. The international Paralympic Committee (IPC) is the global governing body responsible for the development of Para sport and the organisation of the Paralympic Games. As Brattain (2016) said "The Paralympic Games is the second largest multi-sport festival on earth and an event which poses profound and challenging questions about the nature of sport, disability and society" (p.2). In addition to the development of Para sport, the IPC claim advocacy for social inclusion as one of their primary responsibilities. The IPC's vision is to make for an inclusive world through Para sport, and the International Paralympic Committee strategic plan 2019-2022 (IPC, 2019) states:

> There is no escaping the fact that the Paralympic Movement's work has a significant and profound impact on society. A particular area in which we can witness the power of the Paralympic Movement is in how we advance several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which are designed to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. By continuing to capitalise on the growing profile of our activities, sport events and Para athletes, together we can advance the SDGs, engage greater audiences and transform global attitudes towards persons with disabilities, celebrating diversity and uniqueness along the way (IPC, 2019, p. 4).

Furthermore, the IPC supports 200 plus members who have the obligation to "contribute to the development of the vision, mission, objects, purposes and goals outlined in the IPC constitution" (see www.paralympic.org, IPC Handbook, Chapter 2.1, p.6). These members include International Federations and Regional Organisations as well as National Paralympic Committees (NPCs) such as the NPC involved in this PhD project, *Paralympics Ireland*.

The socio-political context of disability and Para sport in Ireland

Research about Para sport and activism is important and necessary because disabled people face significant barriers to participation in society. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognises that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and the attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2015) there are more than 1000 million people with disability globally, that is about 15% of the world's population or one in seven people. Of this number, between 110 million and 190 million adults experience significant difficulties in functioning. The number of people who experience disability will continue to increase as populations age, with the global increase in chronic health conditions.

Disability prevalence rates vary significantly depending on the source because sources define and measure disability in different ways. For example, the Irish 2016 Census tells us that 13.5 per cent of the population in Republic of Ireland has a disability (www.cso.ie). However, this prevalence rate resulted from asking respondents if they have 'any long-lasting conditions or difficulties', chosen from a list of common illnesses and disabilities. To give a contrasting example, in 2017 in Northern Ireland 21.7 per cent of the population has a disability (www.nisra.gov.uk). However, this definition covers people who report a physical or mental health condition or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more where this reduces their ability to carry out day-to-day activities.

For critical disability studies scholars, fixed boundaries in these types of definitions are unnecessarily reductive (e.g., like medical categories); because "what qualifies as a disability in any case varies greatly according to the socio-historical and geopolitical context, and even in a single location the designation remains stubbornly multi-faceted and resistant to definition in terms of both its boundaries and meanings" (Shildrick, 2012, p. 3). Thus a more

'critical' definition of disability is "disability is an overarching and in some ways artificial category that encompasses congenital and acquired physical differences, mental illnesses and retardation, chronic and acute illnesses, fatal and progressive diseases, temporary and permanent injuries, and a wide range of bodily characteristics considered disfiguring, such almost never absolute or static; they are dynamic, contingent conditions affected by many external factors and usually fluctuating over time" (Shildrick, 2012, p. 3). That said, whatever way disability is defined, it is evident that disabled people face discrimination at multiple levels in societies.

Globally, discrimination underpins the (direct or indirect) political, social or psycho-emotional exclusion of disabled people. This discrimination results in barriers to participation in different areas of societies, as well as, violence and abuse targeted against disabled people. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities), disabled people face significant barriers to education. For example, ninety per cent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school. Disabled people also face significant barriers to employment opportunities globally with unemployment rates as high as eighty per cent in some countries. Very few disabled people in the Global South have access to assistive technologies (i.e., devices or products whose primary purpose is to maintain or improve an individual's functioning and independence and thereby promote their wellbeing, Khasnadis, Mirza & Maclachlan, 2015). In addition to barriers to education, employment and assistive technologies, disabled people are systematically excluded from accessing services such as social support and affordable housing. Moreover, research indicates that violence against children with disabilities occurs at annual rates at least 1.7 times greater than for their peers without disabilities (www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities).

Research about Para sport and activism in *Ireland* is also necessary. In Ireland, the socio-political context of this PhD, according to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, in 2018, disabled people experienced higher rates of discrimination than non-disabled people (Banks, Grotti, Fahey & Watson, 2018). For example, for disabled people, the odds of experiencing work-related discrimination was twice as high compared to non-disabled people. Focussing on discrimination in the public services (such as education, health, transport), disabled people were three times more likely to experience discrimination compared to non-disabled people. Disabled people in Ireland are less likely to be economically active than non-disabled people. Importantly, disabled people in Ireland are not only more likely to experience discrimination more frequently than non-disabled people; when they do, it has a more serious effect on their lives. Due to the discrimination that disabled people face at global and national levels, research focused on understanding disability activism form a Para sport context is important. Before I unpack the context of Para sport in Ireland, it is important to state what I mean about *'in Ireland'.*

With the notable exception of association football, most sports in *Northern Ireland* are organised on all-Island basis, for example Rugby Union, Gaelic games, Basketball, Hockey and Cricket. *Northern Ireland* is, of course, a separate country to the *Republic of Ireland*, with its own similar but unique history, culture, and political systems, as well as, disability rights legislation and disability sports advocacy organisations. However, all citizens in the island of Ireland are Irish, if they wish, and Northern Irish athletes can represent 'Ireland', if they wish. In this sense, people involved in Irish sport can be seen cultural intermediaries working at the intersection of culture and politics, providing meaning and challenging legitimacy (Liston & Maguire, 2020). Likewise, most Para sports in *Northern Ireland* are organised on all-Island basis such as, Wheelchair Basketball and Wheelchair rugby and Northern Irish Para athletes can represent 'Ireland', if they wish. I carried out this

research in the context of organised Para sport in Ireland regardless of where people lived '*in Ireland*'.

Para sport in Ireland is organised in different ways and some Para sports have access to more funding and resources than others (see chapter three, participants and recruitment, on 'top-tier' and 'bottom-tier' Para athletes). For example, some Para sports, such as Para-Cycling, are governed by national governing bodies (NGBs) for a particular sport, such as Cycling Ireland. Other Para sports, such as Wheelchair Basketball and Wheelchair rugby, are governed by NGBs for particular impairment groups, such as Irish Wheelchair Association-Sport. Disability sports advocacy organisations such as Disability Sports Northern Ireland (www.dsni.co.uk) or Cara (www.caracentre.ie) help to promote participation in Para sport across Ireland.

Established in 1987 as the Paralympic council of Ireland and rebranded in 2011, Paralympics Ireland's vision is for Irish athletes to win medals at the Paralympic Games (see www.paralympics.ie). According to the Paralympics Ireland Strategic Plan 2015-2019 (2019), their mission is to:

> Support Irish Para-Athletes to reach finals and deliver podium places at the Paralympic Games. We will provide support and advice to NGBs in their delivery of a high-performance pathway for athletes with a disability ensuring that the next generation of Irish Paralympians will be amongst the best prepared and most successful Para-Athletes competing in future Paralympic Games (p.8).

Finally, the socio-political context of Ireland to carry-out this research is necessary, but also timely for the following reasons. First, Para sport is becoming increasingly popular in Ireland, providing Irish Para athletes an increasing social platform (e.g., social media) to raise awareness about disability issues (Brittain & Beacom, 2016; Pate, Hardin & Ruihley, 2014; French & Le Clair, 2018). For example, in 2018, Ireland hosted the World Para

Swimming European Championships. Second, inequality within Para sport contexts, as Bundon and Hurd Clarke (2014) identified, is inextricably linked to disability politics in wider society, such as structural barriers to participation in Irish Para sport (see Haslett, Fitzpatrick & Breslin, 2017). Third, social missions through Irish sport contexts are becoming increasingly popular such as recent mental health awareness campaigns through Irish Rugby (see www.tackleyourfeelings.com) or the 20x20 #ifshecantseeitshecantbeit gender equality movement in Irish sport (see www.20x20.ie).

It is also of timely importance to examine activism through Irish Para sport because Ireland is undergoing a significant period of progressive political change. In 2015, after the successful 'Yes Equality' activist campaign, the Irish state voted to amend the constitution to permit same-sex marriage. Then in 2018, a referendum was passed to remove the constitutional ban on abortion following the 'Repeal the Eight' activist campaign. Also, in 2018, the Irish government became one of the last countries in the world to ratify the 2006 United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). In Northern Ireland, same-sex marriage was made legal in 2020 following the 'Love Equality' activist campaign. For these reasons the aim of this study is to examine Para athlete activism in Ireland.

Overview of the thesis

This thesis unfolds as follows. I begin in **chapter two** by discussing key literature pertaining to my thesis. This includes prior work on non-disabled athlete activism as well as research focused on Para sport and disability activism. In this chapter I also outline my research questions and introduce the overarching theoretical perspective - critical disability studies. **Chapter three** then introduces methodological and paradigmatic underpinnings of the research alongside the methods used to collect and analyse data, how findings are represented, and some suggestions about how to judge the quality of this qualitative research.

In chapters four through eight I present the main body of empirical findings that constitutes this thesis. **Chapter four** focuses on what Para athletes think about disability in Irish society and social change. This chapter is framed by a social relational understanding of disability and captures different factors that either enable or prevent social change for disabled people. **Chapter five** illuminates the landscape of disability activism in Ireland from the perspective of Irish disability activists. This chapter highlights important aspects involved in evaluating disability activism such as socio-cultural events, new narratives and philosophical tensions. **Chapter six** concerns Para athlete activism for sporting improvement. Here I focus on how Para athletes advocate for social change within Para sport contexts. I connect the findings and critical discussion arising from this chapter to the field of Para sport management. **Chapter seven** concerns athlete activism for broader social good. This chapter connects with disability sport psychology literature to capture the ways that Para athletes contribute to disability activism in wider society. **Chapter eight** concerns a critique of Para athlete activism and draws on narrative theory of power. In this chapter I use data from "top-tier" Para athletes, National Paralympic Committee members and disability activists to problematise the International Paralympic Committee's strategic priority to promote Para athletes as disability activists.

Throughout chapters four through eight, where necessary, I add layers of critical discussion to show how the themes and chapters contribute to the aims of the research. In addition, throughout the chapters, I add several critical reflection boxes to show how I situate myself within the research. In these boxes I reflect on my various identities, life experiences and political persuasions, in an attempt to position myself in the research process. **Chapter nine** draws the thesis to a close by pulling together conclusions from the research and summarising its contribution to knowledge. Implications of the research are highlighted in four main areas including empirical, theoretical, methodological, and practical implications.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Chapter Overview

This PhD thesis cuts across an eclectic range of conceptual and theoretical landscapes, traversing the fields of sport and exercise psychology, sociology of sport, sport management, narrative theory and disability studies. This chapter provides a rationale for the PhD as well as an overview of the many concepts and ideas that will be relevant to an understanding of the research context and the chapters that follow. The chapter begins with a general discussion of social activism and social justice. Next, sport and activism research are discussed, highlighting how there is dearth of research in this area outside a North American context. In the next two sections I will first explain why, historically, Para sport has been ignored as a context for disability activism. Then I will explain how, more recently, academics and international sports organisations have begun to argue for Para sport as a context to promote disability activism. After this, the limited empirical research focused on Para athlete activism is evaluated; making a case to study Para athlete activism in Ireland from the perceptive of multiple stakeholders. In the next section I will focus on the overarching theoretical perspective of this PhD - critical disability studies (CDS) – and explain why this lens is important and how CDS will shape the research. This chapter concludes by explaining the research context and purpose as well as specific research aims and questions.

What is activism?

> Activism refers to actions that are directed toward effecting socio-political change on a number of potential dimensions, including precisely articulated policy reforms to broader disruptions of hegemonic values and practices. Activism is rooted in political ideologies and can often be historically situated in broader social and political movements (Sheese & Liu, 2014 p. 20).

Sheese and Liu's (2014) above definition of activism is operationally useful (i.e., clear). However, to answer the question "what is activism?" the following section of this chapter explains different terms related to activism, different forms of activism, different ways in which to evaluate activism and different important aspects of activism. In addition, an explanation of an important common concern of contemporary activism - social justice - is provided.

'Activism', 'advocacy' and 'social change' are overlapping terms that are often used interchangeably. In this this thesis I will, in general, adopt the term 'activism' but I will also discuss how different people use these different terms (e.g., see chapter four). Nonetheless, these terms can also be distinguished from each other at an academic level. 'Activism' refers to action to bring about socio-political change (Cumiskey, 2014). For example, a person who takes action to enact social change (e.g., social equality for disabled people) can be described as a 'social activist'. In contrast, 'advocacy' refers to action to support the needs of a person, group or issue to bring about socio-political change (Cumiskey, 2014). For example, a person who speaks on behalf of another person, group or cause (e.g., social equality for disabled people) can be described as an 'advocate for social change'. 'Social change', where the terms 'activism' and 'advocacy' connect, refers to an alteration in social structure (Durrheim, 2014).

One recent example of a clear alteration in social structure within western democracies is the change in attitudes toward homosexuality that occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century. Up until 1973, homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-II). For instance, in Ireland (the context of this PhD), before 1993, same sex sexual activity was a criminal act. However, these days, attitudes in Ireland towards LGBTQ people are regarded as among the most liberal in the world. Today, discrimination based on sexual orientation has been outlawed in

Ireland. Consequently, the social consciousness of homosexuality has shifted from one of criminalised pathology to one of celebrated human right. Inevitably, an analysis of this type of social change (i.e., alteration in social structure) must account for the role of activism (Durrheim, 2014).

Activism can take many forms, within and across, a continuum of spontaneous, deliberate, individual and collective actions (Sheese & Liu, 2014). Common forms of activism include lobbying, petition, economic boycott, political campaigning (e.g., voting), civil disobedience, riots, media (e.g., hacktivism or internet activism), strike action, hunger strike, peace activism (e.g., moral purchasing, non-violent resistance), community building (e.g., activism, craftivism) and consciousness raising (Sheese & Liu, 2014). Accordingly, there is a research value in considering activism in the plural (e.g., see chapter seven- 'Para athlete activims'), as a range of actions (Corning & Myers, 2002). Importantly however, scholars have highlighted various questions to consider when evaluating activism or assessing actions that constitute activism (Corning & Myers, 2002; Miller et al., 2009; Nilsson, Marszalek, Linnemeyer, Bahner, & Misialek, 2010; Torres-Harding, Siers, & Olson, 2012).

One question towards evaluating activism concerns whether emphasis should be given to more unconventional, 'high-risk' actions, like damaging public property and risking serious injury or imprisonment, or to more conventional 'low-risk' actions, such as taking part in demonstrations, voting, signing petitions and posting statements online. This question is important because one 'activist' could engage in consistent low-risk conventional actions whereas another 'activist' could engage in sporadic high-risk unconventional actions (Corning & Myers, 2002) - which person and what actions are more 'activist'? Another related question concerns what type of coordination between individuals is needed for actions to be considered activism. For example, some social movements are more mobilised,

mainstream or coordinated than other social movements. Therefore, researchers might need to consider evidence of movement coordination such as fund-raising or membership recruitment when evaluating forms of activism (Corning & Myers, 2002). A further question I draw upon to evaluate activism in this thesis concerns the difference between activist intentions and activist behaviours (e.g., see chapter four). This intention-behaviour gap is complex and often misleading. For example, holding discriminatory attitudes does not necessarily mean that people will act in a discriminatory way (Corning & Myers, 2002). In the same way, holding social 'activist' intentions does not mean people will act in an 'activist' way. In response to questions like these, Corning and Myers (2002) offered a definition of individual's activist orientation:

> An individual's developed, relatively stable, yet changeable orientation to engage in various collective, social-political, problem-solving behaviours spanning a range from low risk, passive, and institutionalized acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviour (p.704).

On top of these considerations about evaluating activism, scholars have also explained the following different aspects of activism.

One important aspect is that activism has consequences. For example, individuals who engage in social activism are the facilitators of social change. Furthermore, 'activists' can question the 'status quo' and change the way 'things' are typically done (Nilsson et al., 2010). Another important aspect is that activism is the result of circumstance. For example, circumstantial predictors of social activist intentions and behaviours are socialisation (e.g., parent's orientations towards social justice), the ability to engage in activism (e.g., biographical location), outcome expectancy of action (e.g., self-efficacy), previous social activism engagement, life events (e.g. attending university), political orientation (e.g., socialist, progressive), personal relevance of a situation (e.g., direct experience of oppression

or discrimination), social identification (e.g., a feminist) and age (Corning & Myers, 2002; Fietzer & Ponterotto, 2015; Miller et al., 2009). In addition, Klar and Kasser (2009) made a link to the aspect of 'psychological well-being' by suggesting that activists live more fulfilled lives. Likewise, Leak and Leak (2006) further argued that 'psychological health' is an important aspect of activism. For instance, they claim that interest in socio-political change is positively correlated with life satisfaction, self-esteem, self-actualisation and experiences of positive affect; and negatively correlated with psychological distress, feelings of alienation and experiences of negative affect. Moreover, Miller et al. (2009) made a link to the aspect of 'human political nature' when they highlight that the experience of social injustice can be more powerful than the experience of physical hunger. In addition to these different aspects of activism, scholars have highlighted an important contemporary common concern of activism - social justice.

Concerns of contemporary activism involves challenging systems of domination and inequality such as capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, settler colonialism, heteronormativity and - an important concern for this PhD - ableism (discussed below in critical disability studies section). Taking these concerns together, in contemporary society, it can be said that a common concern of social activism is to work towards enacting social justice.

Having explained terms, forms and aspects of activism, as well as an important concern of contemporary activism (i.e., challenging inequality) I will now turn to literature on activism and the wider social institution of interest for this PhD thesis - sport. In the next section I will discuss how there has been a recent resurgence of research focused on social justice and social activism within the context of sport, and how this research is lacking a focus on Para sport as a platform for disability activism.

Critical reflection: Psychologists for Social Change, Ireland

During my PhD, I had the opportunity to engage in a form of activism that has likely shaped my research. My academic background is psychology (BSc Psychology, MSc Sport and Exercise Psychology) and I am a member of the British Psychological Society and the Psychological Society of Ireland. Resulting from this experience, and my PhD focus on activism, in 2019 I co-founded the Irish branch of a social change movement called - Psychologists for Social Change, Ireland.

Psychologists for Social Change (PSC) is a network of applied psychologists, academics, therapists, psychology graduates and others who are interested in applying psychology to policy and political action. We believe that people's social, political and material contexts are central to their experiences as individuals. Through events, direct actions and publications the aims of PSC are to a) mobilise psychologists (e.g., encourage more psychologists to become involved in political and social action), b) mobilise psychological knowledge (e.g., disseminate psychological knowledge and research in ways that are relevant to current policy concerns) and c) influence public and policy debates (responding to specific policy announcements and media reports).

We believe that the psychological community is uniquely positioned to advocate for social justice issues (Kinderman, 2007). In times of rapid social change, such as during austerity throughout the financial crisis and widening inequality during the recovery, psychologists often have direct experience with marginalised groups who suffer the most. In addition, psychologists also understand the relationships between basic psychological needs and inherent human rights and have the potential to use these insights to inform a wide range of political policies (Kinderman, 2007). Moreover, psychologists have an understanding of communication and persuasion. There is therefore an argument that the psychological community has a responsibility to work on the behalf of marginalised groups at a level above providing individual healthcare (Seale, 2017).

For example, one aim of PSC, Ireland is to increase awareness of the psychological consequences of family homelessness in public discourse. In particular about how austerity policies have contributed to homelessness with damaging psychological costs. Though events and meetings we aim to create socio-political change by highlighting specific ways in which austerity policies impact upon mental health. For example, people feeling humiliation and shame, fear and distrust, instability and insecurity, isolation and loneliness, and trapped and powerless.

Sport and social activism

There has been a recent growth of research focused on sport, social justice and social activism (Long, Fletcher & Watson, 2017). However, much of this research has focused on non-disabled sport. As I will discuss in the following section of this chapter, this research has

come in the form of position stands, practical initiatives, historical perspectives, newly formed research institutions as well as various empirical studies.

Recently, scholars within the fields of sport and exercise psychology (e.g., Schinke et al., 2018), sociology of sport (e.g., Darnell & Millington, 2018) and sports management (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2019) have produced positions on how sport contexts can help towards changing aspects of society for the better. Organisations are embracing positions on social justice too. For example, the *International Society of Sport Psychology* (ISSP) recently issued a position stand to disseminate the general principles required to craft sport contexts in order to promote social, political or community agendas (Schinke, Stambulova, Lindor, Papaioannou, & Ryba, 2015). This position stand explained that the values, language and virtues of sport (e.g., fairness, leadership, inclusion, community, sportsmanship) complement the aims of social justice (e.g., inclusion, equality). Interestingly (i.e., for this PhD work) this position stand emphasised that sport has the potential to reinterpret negative notions of difference and dispel stereotypes. Importantly, however, the authors of the ISSP position stand highlighted potential obstacles to promoting social justice missions within sport contexts. For instance, they explained how sports organisations may not be structurally, methodologically or ideologically equipped to support social justice agendas (Schinke et al., 2015). Helpfully, the article goes on to explain the specific competencies that researchers need to promote social justice missions through sport. Throughout this PhD thesis, for example, I will argue for the importance of understanding historical, social, cultural and political forces involved in Para athlete activism.

Linked to these position stands on sport for social justice, has been the rise in research on athlete activism (e.g., Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Smith, Bundon, & Best, 2016). In this thesis I will use Tibbetts et al. (2017) broad explanation of athlete activism as occurring when athletes use their platforms as sports performers (e.g., visibility, inherent social power, social

influence, stature) to speak out or build awareness about a social cause or social issue (e.g., gender, race, class, LGBTQI, disability/ability or mental health issues), a process that can involve athletes themselves either advocating for social change within sport contexts (see chapter six on activism for sporting improvement) or utilising sport as a stage to address wider issues in society (see chapter seven on activism for broader social good).

Such activism by athletes has recently been embodied by some elite non-disabled sporting 'stars' in certain countries. For example, in 2016, American athletes such as Colin Kaepernick staged symbolic protests such as refusing to stand ('taking a knee') for the national anthem at major sports games in order to shine a light on issues like racially motivated community police brutality (BBC World Service, 2017a). Their actions kick-started a wave of athlete activism across the USA sporting world. Moreover, Colin Kaepernick's act of 'taking a knee' has become widely symbolic in the context of recent Black Lives Matters protests throughout the world. Set against a divisive American political climate, exemplified by President Trump's rhetoric that activist athletes should "know their place" and "stick to sports" (BBC World Service, 2017b), media fascination with sport and activism became prominent. As the rap artist Eminem put it, black athletes across America have become "woke" to social injustice and are "using their platform 'n' stature to give a voice to those that don't have one" (Associated Press, 2017). Then in late 2017, to give another example closer to the context of this PhD, the wave of athlete activism reached the shores of Ireland in the form of "Gaelic Voices for Change"; a Gaelic games athlete-led social movement mobilised to tackle the issue of homelessness in Ireland (Mc Garry, 2017).

Accompanying such public displays of activism by non-disabled athletes and the resulting media attention, there has been an increasing scholarly interest in sport and social activism. For example, the *International Journal of the History of Sport* recently issued a collection of essays on sport and social activism from an historical perspective (e.g., Boykoff,

2017; Cronin, 2017; Kilcline, 2017; Lenskyj, 2017; Morgan, 2017). Together, the essays offer reasons as to why, historically, sports have been used as domains to challenge social inequality. One reason offered is that because sports often resonate with the public, incidents of athlete activism become embedded in generational cultural discourses and, in turn, are passed down through generations. Likewise, sports have a power to connect people who differ in terms of historical, economic, religious or political beliefs. For these reasons, major sporting events like the Olympic Games have become what social movement scholars call political opportunity structures (Cottrell & Nelson, 2010). Whilst some political opportunities may be about seeking to show national power and wealth, other opportunities include the potential structural platform for displaying activism.

In addition, historically, as the essays show, incidents of athlete activism often accompany politically challenging times. One notable example is Muhammad Ali's famed Vietnam war draft refusal (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). Such events remind us that athlete activism is not new, but rather has historically been performed for a long time. Of course, as history also shows, athletes publicly doing activism are still relatively rare when one considers the number of athletes competing across the globe over time. That said, in addition to scholars producing historically framed essays on activism, new academic institutions focused on sport and activism have also been formed such as the *Institute for the Study of Sport, Society and Social Change* (ISSSSC). Along with these research institutions and sport performance societies, individual scholars have also contributed to the topic of non-disabled athlete activism through the following various recent empirical studies.

These recent empirical studies can be divided into two groups. The first group focussed on athletes themselves. For example, Cooper, Macaulay, and Rodriguez (2017), reviewed the literature on African American athlete activism and described a typology of types of athlete activism including community engagement, collective action, public

statements or protests. Kaufman (2008) interviewed twenty athlete activists in order to understand the personal consequences of athletes who become activist. They highlighted the positive consequences (e.g., sense of purpose, vocational skills) and negative consequences (e.g., stress, burnout, public criticism) for athletes who engage in activism. Kaufman and Wolff (2010) interviewed 21 athletes between 2003 and 2008 who had been involved in activism on a range of issues. They identified dimensions of sport that can enable athlete activism, such as social consciousness, meritocracy, and responsible citizenship. Kluch (2020) interviewed 31 collegiate USA athlete activists and offered five different conceptualisations of social justice activism. Ahmad and Thorpe (2020) examined the ways that Muslim sportswomen perform activism online. Drawing on a digital ethnography of social media platforms as well as interviews with 20 Muslim sportswomen, they highlighted two online strategies that Muslim sportswomen use to challenge oppressive discourses. Sanderson, Frederick and Stocz (2016) investigated how the relationship between athlete activism, social media and social identity can contribute to societal change. They used a qualitative methodology with social media data to show how athletes' online conversations about challenging authority can influence wider social movements.

The second group of empirical studies focused on the consequences of non-disabled athlete activism. For example, Schmidt (2018) first offered a scholarly commentary to understand sports media coverage in an era of athletes who are increasingly using their platform to advocate for social and political change. Then, from a content analysis of sports television and newspapers in the USA, he suggested that 'significant and respectful' coverage is given to athletes who advocate for social and political issues. Mac Intosh and Martin (2018) developed workshops to facilitate USA student athletes in discussions about racism, prejudice, diversity and inclusivity. In an experimental study, Cunningham and Regan Jr (2011) found that white undergraduate students perceptions of trustworthiness among African

American male athletes were highest when the athletes engaged on non-confrontational activism and had a strong racial identity. They discussed their findings with regards to commercial endorsement of athlete activists. Smith and Tryce (2019) surveyed 514 USA sports fans about their reactions to athlete activism. They concluded that strong national attachment will cause fans to oppose athlete activism during the American national anthem at sports events. Sappington, TaeHyuk Keum, and Hoffman (2019) then developed and validated the Attitudes Towards Athlete Activism Questionnaire (ATAAQ). This scale purports to measure a range of reactions (affective reactions, desired consequences) toward political behaviour in sport across a range of levels (e.g., professional, collegiate, high school). Thorson and Serazio (2018) surveyed USA sports fans and suggested that conservatives are more likely to resist any intrusion of partisan politics into sport. Parent (2018) used mixed methods to try to define the parameters of social responsibly in USA sports. He called for investments in sport social responsibility to be tailored towards a sport organisations identity.

Taken together, these empirical studies highlight some important knowledge gaps that this PhD will address. First, athlete activism research has prominently focused on North American (in particular the USA) socio-political and sporting contexts. Accordingly, there is little research to help understand athlete activism in other socio-political contexts, such as the context of this thesis- Ireland. Furthermore, research has predominately focused on how elite non-disabled athletes use their sporting platforms to address social issues such as race and gender (e.g., sexism and racism). In comparison, the experience of how disabled athletes address disability issues within and from disability sporting contexts has received much less attention or has even been ignored. Through a focus on disability activism and Paralympic sport this thesis will address this gap.

Despite such neglect, as I will now discuss, there is literature talking *about* disability sport and disability activism. In the next two sections I will first explain why, historically, Para sport has been ignored as a context for disability activism. Then, more recently, how academics and international sports organisations have begun to argue *for* Para sport as a context to promote disability activism.

Paralympic sport and disability activism: An historically tumultuous relationship

Historically, academics have largely ignored Para sport as a context to promote disability activism. More often than not, if Para sport was discussed in relation to disability activism, scholars have highlighted an important reason not to promote disability sport as a domain for disability activism - the relationship between elite Paralympic sport systems and the disability rights movement. As Bundon and Hurd Clarke (2014) described, this relationship as historically tumultuous. Braye (2017b) moreover described the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) and the disability rights movement as unlikely bedfellows; opposed in ideology and related only by their connection to disability. There are several reasons for these types of description.

Firstly, it has been argued that there is little mention of the Paralympics in the history of the disability rights movement (Peers, 2018). In part, this is because disability activists have a central aim to reframe disability as a social and political problem rather than an individual and biological problem. Historically, that is, the concern of disability activists is that the ableist discourses, representations and structures of Para sport will work against this aim it has been claimed (Peers, 2018). For example, because Paralympic sport grew out of the backfields of rehabilitation hospitals (see Brittian, 2016) disability sport thus came to be talked about as a form of therapy, medicine or 'a cure' to a wholly biological problem. Some scholars also highlighted that prevailing media representations of 'heroic athletes' overcoming their disabilities through playing sport reproduces disability to an individual

problem (e.g., Shakespeare, 2016). In addition, disability activists have accused the IPC of being a "paternalistic" structure run for disabled people by able-bodied people in contrast to a preferred self-determined organisation run by disabled people for disabled people (Peers, 2018). For instance, the IPC have yet to embrace a self-advocacy model requiring a minimum 50% disability representation at levels of decision-making bodies such as at a National Paralympic Committee (NPC) level (Peers, 2018).

In addition, there is evidence that disability activist groups adamantly oppose and explicitly protest corporate relationships that the IPC has sought and developed (see Pearson & Trevisan, 2015). Also, some disability activists believe that the Paralympics has a negative impact on disability (see Braye, Dixon, & Gibbons, 2013). One such claim is that Paralympians are not suitable advocates for disability issues because typical experiences of 'disability' are too far away from the image of a Paralympian (Braye et al., 2013). Additionally, as Brittain and Beacom (2016) explained, claims that London 2012 Paralympics improved the lives of people with disabilities in the UK are at odds with findings from disabled peoples organisations (DPOs). These DPOs argued that any Paralympic legacy must be viewed in the context of large scale benefit cuts in the UK at the time that affected disabled people directly and societal attitudes towards disabled people (e.g., portrayed as benefit scroungers in the media) (Brittain & Beacom, 2016). Therefore, as the Paralympic sport context can be a source of annoyance for disabled people and disability activists (see Hodges, Jackson, Scullion, Thompson, & Molesworth, 2014; Shakespeare, 2016), the potential of Para sport as a domain to promote activism could be limited, or not currently as powerful as some might suggest.

Moreover, prominent disability rights scholars have historically ignored the potential of Paralympic sport for promoting disability activism (see Braye, Dixon, & Gibbons, 2015). For example, Shakespeare (2016) argued that prevailing media narratives of individual

athletes ‘overcoming their limitations’ misrepresent disability. For him, the common media and marketing narratives of “heroic overcoming” shifts the focus away from social barriers that oppress disabled people (e.g., poverty) and (re)produces disability and a biological limitation (Shakespeare, 2016). Furthermore, three disability and sport researchers - Stuart Braye, David Howe and Danielle Peers - who are all former Paralympians themselves, have argued strongly that the Paralympics could even be counterproductive to the lives of disabled people beyond disabled people sport (Braye et al., 2015; Howe & Silva, 2016; Peers, 2012). Peers (2012), for example, claimed that:

> Paralympic discourses and practices, in contrast to the claim of empowerment, are implicated in the perpetuation of the practices and unequal power relationships in and through which disability is experienced and sustained (Peers, 2012, p.311).

Braye et al. (2015) moreover reasoned that the positive societal impact of Paralympic sport is overemphasised because more than often non-disabled people write Paralympic discourse.

Finally, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) has gradually moved towards an elite Olympic sports model (see Brittain & Beacom, 2016). And this move exemplifies how, in many ways, elite Paralympic sport, like all elite sport, can exclude and differentiate (Howe & Silva, 2016; Schantz & Gilbert, 2011). For instance, many disabled people do not have the physical ability to participant in Para sports at a recreational level (Howe & Silva, 2016). This situation demonstrates a hierarchy of ability within Paralympic sport that could undermine the agendas of disability activism (e.g., social inclusion). Also, related to this shift in direction, promoting Para athlete activism could be limited by a contradiction that Purdue and Howe (2012) called the Paralympic paradox. That is, elite Para sport athletes are simultaneously under pressure to invalidate perceptions of disability solely focusing on athletic ability, and at the same time, they are under pressure to act as role models for disabled people and social change. Despite these potential constraints, it is important to note

that disability rights scholars increasingly welcome the potential of disability sport as a domain to promote disability activism (Braye, 2017a; Goodley, 2016; Shakespeare, 2016). Braye (2017a), for example, argued that because the Paralympic Games portrays a false impression that disabled people have equal opportunities in wider society, it should be explicitly utilised as a platform to raise emotive disability issues (e.g., a site for overt protests like athletes turning their backs to national flags).

In the context of such concerns for promoting disability activism in Paralympic sport contexts, I will now turn my attention to research that promotes Paralympic sport as an increasingly interesting context *for* disability activism. The genesis for my research, and this PhD thesis, is the following recent academic literature and international sport policies that argued *for* Para sport as a context to promote disability activism.

Paralympic sport: A potential context to promote disability activism

Why might Paralympic sport be a valuable context to promote disability activism? Researchers have highlighted several interrelated reasons. First, the Paralympic Games is becoming increasingly popular as a sporting spectacle. For example, 5,000 broadcast hours of the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games were shown to four billion people in over 150 counties. That is more than the two previous Games combined. As a result of such a vast increase in broadcast hours, the Paralympic Games is now a contender to be considered the world's third largest sporting event, after the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup (Kropielnicki, Rollason, & Man, 2017). This potential to reach a vast number of people across the globe provides an increasing opportunity for Para athletes to promote disability equity. As Brittain and Beacom (2016) said:

> The worldwide media coverage of recent Paralympic Games presents a strong platform from which to start a debate around disability issues. There is no other

> current platform that provides such an opportunity to reach so many nondisabled people who are otherwise generally oblivious to disability issues (p. 515).

Second, along with an increase in the amount of media coverage, the *type* of media coverage that surround Para sport has shifted in favour of disability activism. Historically, media commentators have struggled when trying to communicate disability and sport (see Ellis & Goggin, 2015). That is, Para athletes have often been misrepresented in the media as, for example, "superhumans" for playing sports, or as "brave athletes" for overcoming their impairment. Grue (2016), for instance, contextualised the media coverage of Paralympic games as *inspiration porn* for able-bodied viewers. Media portrayals like these damage the social imagination of disability and prevent Para athletes from representing themselves as whole people, such as social activists it has been argued (Ellis & Goggin, 2015). However, recently, studies on media portrayals of Para sport have found an increase in Para athletes describing societal barriers in the media (e.g., oppressive attitudes, inaccessible structures, employment, housing and transport barriers) as well as a decrease in the emphasis given to accounts of physical impairment (see McPherson, O'Donnell, McGillivray, & Misener, 2016). Likewise, a study by Claydon (2015) found that innovative media campaigns of the London 2012 Paralympics influenced more independent representations of disability in the other areas of the media (e.g., more disabled people shown driving on T.V. programmes).

Through social media platforms, Para athletes now possess the means to express themselves in ways that they control much more (Pate, Hardin, & Ruihley, 2014). Such platforms provide a further opportunity for disabled athletes to engage in disability activism. For example, through such platforms, the modern Para athlete can represent their multi-faceted identities, such as a thriving athlete, or an inspirational role-model, or a conscientious citizen with a concern for social justice. In addition, social media platforms also allow

‘messages’ about disability that come from Para sport cultural contexts to be engaged with, contested, and negotiated on an unprecedented scale (French & Le Clair, 2018).

Third, the Paralympic Games was explicitly founded on a legacy to improve the lives of disabled people (Brittain & Beacom, 2016). For example, the IPC recently connected with the United Nations Human Rights Office to engage in disability activism through the “Transforming Lives Makes Sense for Everyone” (employment activism) campaign (www.paralympic.org). This legacy, combined with the Paralympic values like ‘Equality’ complements the agendas of disability activism (e.g., challenging inequality). For example, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC, 2019) has an explicit agenda to promote the Paralympic Games as a vehicle for social change. The IPC claims that, through displays of elite sport, Para athletes’ breakdown social barriers and discrimination by challenging negative stereotypes of disability (e.g. weak, passive) and transform attitudes. The ostensible ‘success’ of this agenda has also been harnessed by recent Paralympic Games host nations. For example, the London Organising Committee, the IPC, and the UK Government all claimed the London 2012 Paralympic Games positively impacted the lives of disabled people in the UK (Brittain & Beacom, 2016). These claims are given further force by quantitative (see Brittain & Beacom, 2016) and qualitative (e.g., Hodges et al., 2014) studies, that suggested a positive shift in public attitudes towards disability in the UK as a result of the Paralympic Games. For example, Hodges et al. (2014) found fewer attitudes of sympathy or pity towards people with impairment as a result of the London 2012 Paralympic Games. In light of such claims, it would appear that those interested in social activism have an opportunity to capitalise on this positive shift in public attitudes. In addition, and key to this PhD (see chapter eight), in 2019 the IPC developed a strategic policy to promote disability activism through Para sport.

Strategic priority 3 of the IPC Strategic Plan 2019 to 2022 (IPC, 2019) aims to promote disability activism through Para sport. The IPC, through their members (i.e., National Paralympic Committees) and activities (i.e., Para sport events) plan to: use Para sport to change the storyline of disability (objective 3.1); advance the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (objective 3.2); utilise the growing platform and credible voices of Para athletes to highlight social barriers that are disabling people with impairment (objective 3.3); and cultivate a generation of Para athletes to act as advocates for the Paralympic movement and disability rights (objective 3.4). This strategy is, either implicitly or explicitly, framed in language of political models of disability such as a human rights or UK social model of disability (see Smith & Bundon, 2018). I will discuss these disability models in more detail throughout the thesis (e.g., see section on critical disability studies).

Theoretically, political models underpin disability activism because they explain how social barriers can disable people with impairments (e.g., inaccessible buildings) and promote rights to disability equality (see Goodley, 2016). Moreover, complementing this strategic plan, the IPC has recently highlighted its commitment to advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (see www.paralympic.org). Examples of the IPC's recent engagement in activism, as well as an increasing disability representation at a decision-making level (e.g. required athlete representation on the IPC board), indicate a philosophical shift towards disability activism at an organisational level (Peers, 2018).

Now that arguments for and against connecting Paralympic sport with disability activism have been addressed, I turn attention to research that has focused on the *experience* of Para athletes engaging in activism. As will be explained in the next section, there is a limited amount of empirical research that specifically studied Para athlete activism.

Nonetheless, some recent studies from the UK, Canada and South Korea provide an evidence base for this PhD thesis to significantly develop.

Para athlete activism

Kurt Fearnley, five-time Paralympian wheelchair racer, deliberately exploited his spotlight as the Team Australia flag bearer for the 2018 Commonwealth Games to directly challenge the oppression of disabled people. Whilst summarising his sporting journey to success, he drew attention to his social activist mission outside of sport:

> One last big community who I am proud to be a part of and need to recognise is the disability community. Every battle I win on the track or for a new ramp or change of policy that brings long-deserved rights and access to people with disability - is their win. If I can use my profile and ugly mug to give a voice and face to those who don't have the chance themselves, I must (Fearnley, 2018, p.1).

Media quotes such as this provided observational evidence of Para athlete activism. And although there has been research talking about disability, sport and activism (as described in the previous two sections), there is only a small amount of empirical research (i.e., five published studies) that specifically focused on the experiences of disability activism from the perspective of Para athletes (see Braye, 2016; Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2014; Choi, Haslett, & Smith, 2019; Powis, 2018; Smith et al., 2016). In this subsection, I subject this small body of Para athlete activism research to a critical review in order to justify the theoretical and methodological approach embraced in this thesis.

Importantly, these studies, published over the last several years, suggested that Para athlete activism research is becoming an emerging field of enquiry that this PhD project research can significantly develop, empirically. First, there is little available evidence to understand what active Para athletes even feel or think about disability in society and social change, inequality or disability rights movement. On the one hand, this lack of attention gives

the impresssion that Para athletes are not activist because they belive that disabled people are treated fairly in society. For example, five of the six retired UK Paralympians that Braye (2016) interviewed were not explicitly aware of the disability rights movement in the UK. Also, in a UK based study, Smith et al. (2016), reported that the majority of Para athletes in their study believed that disabled people were largely treated fairly, equally and respectfully in society. On the other hand, Choi et al. (2019) found that elite Para athletes in South Korea were more likely to engage in social activism than disabled non-athletes. I will address this lack of attention in chapter four by exploring areas such as, what Para athletes feel about disability in Irish society and social change.

Linked to this lack of attention on what Para athletes feel about disability and social change, previous Para athlete activism studies suggested that the second area to be developed concerns understanding the landscape of disability activism *in context.* For example, in a Canadian study, Bundon and Hurd Clarke (2014) highlighted that inequalities within disability sport contexts should be viewed as inextricably linked to disability activism in wider society. In a South Koran study Choi et al. (2019) highlighted how Para athletes were motived to engage in activism for broader social good through the context of the *PyeongChang 2018 Paralympic Winter Games.* I address this empirical knowledge gap in chapter five by demonstrating the importance of understanding *the context* of national socio-cultural events, different types of disability activisms, emerging social movements and new activist narrative to watch in Ireland. This is important because Para sport may contribute to, or have good reasons to avoid, parts or all of the landscape of disability activism *in* context.

The third area that previous research suggested to develop is around how Para athletes advocate for change specifically within Para sport contexts, to improve Para sport (see chapter six). For example, Smith et al. (2016) defined a Para athlete *sporting activist identity*; "as a type of identity that advocates for change inside sport for the purpose of transforming

policy, practices, and organizations that are believed to restrict one's own individual or team sporting success" (p. 141). Bundon and Hurd Clarke (2014) explored the various advocacy styles that Canadian Para athletes adopted to promote changes *within* Para sport contexts such as creating more accessible and inclusive sports environments. They described a continuum of advocacy styles amongst Para athletes. These included more congenial styles (e.g., making friendly and quiet suggestions for change), to the more confrontational styles (e.g., demanding inclusive policies and insisting on rights), to a mixture of congenial and confrontational styles (e.g., engaging in a power struggle). However, as I address in chapter six of this thesis, there is very little evidence with which to understand different advocacy areas in Para sport (e.g., media representation or coaching) and where Para athlete do, or don't do, activism to improve Para sport.

The fourth area in need of development is around Para athlete activism for broader social good (see chapter seven). For example, Braye, (2016) interviewed six retired UK Paralympians to explore what they understand about disability rights movements in broader society. Smith et al. (2016) contended that Para athletes who are activists for broader social good perform what they termed a *political activist identity*; "defined as a type of identity that advocates for change outside sport for the purpose of resisting and transforming discourses, attitudes, non-verbal acts, policies, and environmental structures that socially oppress people in their everyday lives" (p. 143). This involves, for example, Para athletes signing petitions, engaging in organized protest rallies or writing to their local Member of Parliament about disability discrimination in wider society. Smith et al. (2016) also interpreted why and when athletes performed a *political activist identity*. For example, they questioned why all para-athletes in their sample advocated for Para sport improvement but only some adopted a *political activist identity*. However, the conclusions made by Smith et al. (2016) raised a significant concern that I have addressed in chapter seven.

Smith et al. (2016) argued that athletes' who defined themselves as 'athlete first' (e.g., "I am an athlete with a disability") eschewed a *political activist identity*. In contrast, athletes who defined themselves as 'disabled first' (e.g., "I'm a disabled athlete") adopted a *political activist identity*. Athlete activism research, like this study from Smith et al. (2016), is problematic because it implies activism as a dichotomy (e.g., this athlete either is or is not a political activist because they do or do not adopt a disabled first identity). It also puts pressure on other researchers to *declare* athletes as either activist or not activist. For example, Powis (2018) also honed-in on the role that 'disabled first discourse' played on Para athlete activism for broader social good. Reflecting on his ethnographic fieldwork with the England Visually Impaired Cricket squad, he surmised that engagement in disability activism for broader social good is not compatible with Para athletes who choose to reject a disabled first identity. In another example of creating a dichotomy, Choi et al., (2019) used a mixed method design to examine activism amongst elite Para athletes in South Korea. Their quantitative analysis suggested that elite Para athletes were more likely to engage in social activism than disabled non-athletes. I think these types of dichotomous conclusions demonstrate a concern with the direction of research in this small body of literature; a concern I address in chapter seven.

The final area to develop involved a need to incorporate the perceptive of other key stakeholders. For example, the retired Paralympians in Braye (2016) study provided interesting observations about the relationship between Para sport structures and disability activist groups. Some felt that disability activism was reserved for people with much more severe impairments. In addition, they highlighted that disability activists who are critical of Para sport should focus their criticism more towards the Paralympic system and less towards Para sport athletes themselves. I address this gap in chapters six and nine where I incorporate the views if disability rights campaigners from outside sport contexts on the contribution of

Para sport to disability activism and promoting Para athlete activism. As all previous studies in this area have focused on Para athlete activism from the perspective of Para athletes, I incorporated the views of National Paralympic Committee members with regard to promoting Para athlete activism (see chapters eight).

In addition to highlighting important directions of travel, the published studied noted above have informed the theoretical and methodological approach in this PhD project. Apart from the one exception of a narrative theory framed study (i.e., Smith et al., 2016) all studies are generally devoid of theory. And, whenever theory is incorporated, the disability models approach is used. For example, Smith et al. (2016) further argued how a political activist identity and disabled first discourse promotes socio-political conceptualizations of disability, such as a social relational model or a human rights model of disability (Smith, & Bundon, 2018), but Para athletes who avoid a political activist identity may reproduce both a medical model understanding of disability (see Smith, & Bundon, 2018). To address this significant lack of theory, I have adopted a critical disability studies perspectives (explained in detail in the next two subsections). On this basis, most chapters in this PhD adopt a different theatrical perspective to help frame the analysis, and develop the field.

In terms of method, apart from the one exception of a mixed methods study (Choi et al., 2016) all previous studies have adopted a qualitative approach. I think that a qualitative approach is useful to understating Para athlete activism as the literature has clearly suggested that important questions in this area are complex. In addition, the literature strongly suggested that capturing the complex interactions of context, meanings, experiences, feelings and social interactions is key to developing Para athlete activism research. To give an example of problems with quantitative studies in this area, Choi et al (2019) hypothesised that South Korean disabled non-athletes would be more likely to engage in general social activist behaviors than elite Para athletes, such as voting, protesting, boycotting or socio-

political engagement. However, they found that Para athletes in their sample scored higher than disabled non-athletes on their version of Corning and Myers' (2002) Activism Orientation Scale (AOS). I argue that this study demonstrates the limitations of a quantitative approach in this area because a) is there not enough literature in this small field to develop a reasonable hypothesis in any direction, b) the AOS did not purport to measure disability activism and c) the AOS never demonstrated validity in the context of disability, sport or South Korea. However, in this mixed-methods study their quantitative approach significantly informed their qualitative direction and wider claims that they made about Para athlete activism.

This thesis addresses these knowledge gaps and adds to the emerging field by using a qualitative approach to examine Para athlete activism, from multiple perspectives, within an Irish sociocultural and Para sport context. An Irish context was focused on primarily for reasons highlighted as well as that I am Irish, I work within the Irish Para sport system, and I had access to Irish participants (see chapter three on recruiting participants and chapter one on disability and Para sport in Ireland). That being said, to address the aims and research questions of this project, which are detailed shortly, I will draw on the literature known as critical disability studies - the overarching theoretical perspective of this PhD.

A critical disability studies perspective

A relatively new and exciting way to think about disability comes from the powerful emergence of what has come be called Critical Disability Studies (CDS) (see Goodley, 2013; Shildrick, 2012). CDS can be described as a paradigmatic shift that builds on the foundational perspectives of disability studies (e.g., the social model of disability) while integrating new transformative agendas associated with the recent diversification of critical social theory (e.g., postcolonial, queer and feminist theories) (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). The introduction of the word "critical" denotes a sense of self-appraisal: reassessing

where we have come from, where we are at, and where we might be going (Smith & Perrier, 2015). Thus, by connecting disability studies to intersections of class, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, CDS has become a lens that goes beyond understanding disability to understanding society in general. As Goodley (2016) writes "while critical disability studies might start with disability it never ends with disability" (p.19). Shildrick (2012), for example, described CDS as the academic site to watch because it is a space that can ask questions of embodiment, identity, and agency as they affect all living things. Therefore, thinking about disability through a lens of CDS can help stimulate the field of Paralympic sport research as it calls upon scholars to be open to using an *eclectic* range of theories and new lines of critical enquiry.

But what exactly "are" critical disability studies? A useful way to think of CDS is as the result of the emergence of many interrelated perspectives and developments in disability research over the last 20 years. Reflecting on recent writings (Goodley, 2013; Goodley, 2016; Goodley, Liddiard, & Runswick-Cole, 2017; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Shildrick, 2012; Smith & Bundon, 2018) these developments include: the influence of disciplines previously on the outskirts of disability studies entering the field (e.g., affect studies); the incorporation of sophisticated social theories to make sense of complex social phenomenon (e.g., austerity, technology, inequality, globalisation, capitalism); a move to view disability as possibility and affirmative (i.e., "cripping" disability); an examination of resistance and agency; a move away from the preoccupation with binary explanations (e.g., disability v impairment and individual v society); a desire for more complex conceptual understandings of disability oppression (e.g., the social relational model of disability, see chapter four); a move to challenge disablism (i.e., the social, political, cultural, and psycho-emotional exclusion of people with impairments) and ableism (i.e., the contemporary "normative" ideals on which the able, healthy, autonomous, productive citizen is based); a desire to

theorise the material realities of disability (e.g., biological impairment); and, the merging of Marxist accounts with those from feminism, queer, post-colonial, critical men's health, discourse or narrative studies.

Connecting with CDS also involves: respecting the building blocks of disability studies (e.g., the social model of disability); considering the impact of global, national, and local economic contexts on the lives of disabled people; adopting a position of cultural relativism; remaining attuned to the relational qualities of disability (e.g., impairment in relative cultural context); understanding that any analysis of disability should not preclude consideration of other forms of political activism; promoting praxis (i.e., the intertwining of activism and theory); conceptualising the impaired body as simultaneously cultural, social, biological, fluid, lived, and could be lived; challenging the dogmatic tendencies of some theories and theorists through reference to an eclectic mix of theories; producing new ways that can inform activism and are informed by activism for the purposes of undoing some of the historic damage done to disabled people; throwing the spotlight on the community as the place to address issues of social change and wellbeing (Goodley, 2016; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Smith & Bundon, 2018). Although offering many benefits, such as seeking to theorise in diverse ways and challenging disablism/ableism and viewing disability not necessarily a tragedy but as affirmative, few Paralympic sport researchers have connected explicitly with this way of thinking. However, in recent years, more Paralympic sport researchers are beginning to connect with critical disability studies (e.g., see Keer & Howe, 2017; Smith & Perrier, 2015; Townsend, Cushion & Smaith 2017; Townsend, Smith & Cushion 2016). My research aims to develop this connection.

Critical disability studies is a useful perspective to understand disability activism and sport. For instance traditionally disability sport psychology research has generally focused on individual qualities like the motivational factors that influence participation (e.g., Jaarsma,

Dekker, Geertzen & Dijkstra 2016), or how participation in sport impacts on personal health (e.g., Martin, 2015; 2017). Traditional sport psychology research on disability has also, as Smith and Perrier (2015) claimed, "either knowingly or unknowingly, often been framed by a medical model understanding of disabled people" (p.95). A medical model understanding of disabled people conflicts with the aims of disability activism as it positions disability as an individual problem and a responsibility to overcome. However, emerging CDS sport researchers can not only appreciate how important aspects of the social model of disability can complement disability activism (e.g., disablism and social inequality), they can also consider how various forms of political activism shape the lives of disabled people (Keer & Howe, 2017; Smith et al., 2016). This transformative theoretical avenue provides disability sport scholars with an appropriate paradigm to support and investigate the experience and influence of Para athlete activism (Smith & Perrier, 2015).

In addition, a critical disability studies perspective allows Paralympic sport scholars, like me, to re-imagine disability in Para sport contexts by going beyond the social, political and economic aspects of disability, as theorised in the traditional field of disability studies, to encompass and engage critically with the discursive, cultural, psychological and relational dimensions of disability (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). For example, scholars have recently drawn on critical disability studies to shine a light on how disability is conceived, or could be conceived, in various areas of sport such as transitions out of Paralympic sport (Bundon, Ashfeild, Smith & Goosey-Tolfrey, 2018) and the media representation of Paralympic sport. Importantly, connecting with critical disability studies involves adopting an openness to using an eclectic range of theories and diverse lines of inquiry such as transformative critical social theories (Goodley, 2016; 2018), intersectionality (Campbell, 2008), interdisciplinary connections (e.g., theories of psychology and sociology) and future-

forming modes of inquiry that focus on interpreting socially engaged action (see Gergen, 2015, 2016).

Critical disability studies in this PhD project

How can CDS help to gain an understanding of Para athlete activism? CDS is a useful perspective to meet the aims of this PhD because it allows Para sport scholars, like me, to foreground disability as a political issue (Goodley, 2016) and, accordingly, take disability activism seriously. Adopting a critical disability studies perspective is appropriate because it helps me to think as a disability activist researcher (Goodley, 2013). For instance, this PhD is research that actively works to re-imagine a politics of disability by challenging conditions of disablism - the (direct or indirect) social, political or psycho-emotional exclusion of people with impairments (Reeve, 2014) and ableism - a culturally normative favouritism for certain characteristics within social institutions (Campbell, 2008). In this thesis, I do this by viewing Paralympic sport as a cultural context involving discourses, materiality, and practices that can further oppress disabled people and/or transform societal understandings of disability. This involves remaining attentive to processes that can contribute either to the exclusion and/or inclusion of disabled people.

Furthermore, CDS are clearly and necessarily eclectic and can include, for example, critical social theory, intersectionality and interdisciplinary connections. This eclecticism should be seen as a strength because what brings CDS scholars together, as Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) said, is an agreement that addressing the continuing marginalisation, undervaluing, and discrimination of disabled people requires diverse theoretical lenses as these cannot be addressed simply through liberal or neo-liberal policy and legislation. On this basis, most chapters in this PhD adopt a different perspective to help frame the analysis. For example, chapter four is framed by a social relational model of disability, chapter six is contextualised in sport management literature, chapter seven draws upon disability sport

psychology, and chapter eight is framed by narrative theory of power. In addition, throughout the chapters I have connected with ideas from studies of ableism, disablism, power, narratives and intersectionality, as well as theories from prominent sociologists such as Bourdieu and Goffman. But why have I included these ideas interdisciplinary connections but excluded many other possible frameworks and perspectives? Although eclecticism and diverse lenes in a CDS perspective should be seen as a strength, for some, this could be considered a limitation. Theoretical eclecticism, for example, can be open to scholarly accusations of epistemological incoherence.

To address such an argument, I argue that a CDS perspective has practical relevance in real world projects focused on using Para sport for wider societal change. To give one example, the International Paralympic Committee is currently involved in project called 'Para Sport Against Stigma' (see www.paralympic.org). This is an international, interdisciplinary project taking practical actions to use Para sport to reduce the stigmatisation and discrimination of disabled people in Sub-Saharan Africa. This four year funded project demonstrates how reducing discrimination requires diverse theoretical lenses. Para Sport Against Stigma is a demonstration of CDS in action because it brings together perspectives from scholars in disability sport management, psychology and sociology, anthropology, media and creative industries, as well as from, Para athletes and disability activists. Although there are many other perspectives involved in Para sport research, the Para Sport Against Stigma project connects with CDS by adopting an openness to taking on an eclectic range of theories and lines of inquiry and - *without privileging one perspective above others* - asking what difference it can make to the discrimination of disabled people (Shildrick, 2012). In this practical sense, CDS is overarching space from which to think through a host of political, theoretical, and practical issues that are relevant to Para athlete activism research.

Accordingly, within the constraints of this PhD project (i.e., time, funding, academic experiences, background, location), the interdisciplinary connections and theoretical ideas that I have chosen, or not chosen, result from me asking the question - what difference do they make to the discrimination of disabled people in society?

The PhD project: The research context and purpose of the research

As explained in this chapter, there has been a recent resurgence of research interest into sport and social activism. However, much of this research comes from a North American context and focused on how non-disabled athletes use their sporting platforms to challenge issues like racism and sexism. Although Paralympic sport and disability activism have had an historically tumultuous relationship, more recently, academics and sports organisations have argued for Para sport as a context to promote disability activism. Five recent empirical studies on Para athlete activism suggest how this area is emerging as an important and timely field of study; however, many knowledge gaps remain. I have also argued for the theoretical field of critical disability studies as a progressive way to research Para athlete activism.

The purpose of this PhD is to utilise a lens of critical disability studies to examine disability activism within and through Para sport within an Irish socio-political context. This purpose is important for reasons already outlined in this chapter, but it is also timely. For example, on the one hand, the International Paralympic Committee's new strategy (IPC, 2019) to promote Para athlete activism is supported by the aforementioned academic literature. On the other hand, however, there is little empirical evidence with which to understand what promoting disability activism through Para sport actually means to key stakeholders at a national level context (see chapter eight). For example, the IPC's international level strategy could be opposed or accepted in different ways for different national level socio-political reasons. Accordingly, I have incorporated the perspective of three groups of stakeholders in this thesis. The first and second group of key stakeholders

included in this PhD thesis are ‘Irish Para athletes’ and ‘National Paralympic Committee (NPC) influencers. These two groups are included here because, for example, the IPC’s vision might not be realised without their support at a national level. The third group of key stakeholders are ‘Irish disability activists’, and are included here because, for example, critical insights from this group can help evaluate what promoting disability activism through Para sport means. This purpose is original (novel research questions below) but also important and timely because of, for example, the IPC’s aforementioned strategic policy.

Research aims and questions

Aim one (addressed in chapter four) - To understand Para athletes’ ideas and opinions about what enables or prevents social change for disabled people in Ireland. My central research question to address this aim is:

1. What do Para athletes think about disability in society and social change?

Aim two (addressed in chapter five) - to capture an understanding of the disability activism landscape in Ireland. My central research questions for this aim are:

1. In what ways is disability activism changing in Ireland?
2. How is disability activism done in Ireland?
3. What areas will be important for the future of disability activism in Ireland?

Aim three (addressed in chapter six) - To understand how Irish Para athletes act to improve Para sport. My central research questions for this aim are:

1. What areas within Para sport do athletes want to see social change, and why do they want to see social change?
2. How, if at all, do Para athletes act to create social change within Para sport contexts?

3. What challenges do Para athletes face when creating social change within Para sport contexts?

Aim four (addressed in chapter seven) - To understand how Irish Para athletes contribute towards disability activism for broader social good. My central research questions to address this aim are:

1. Why and when do Para athletes take actions to create social change for broader social good?
2. How, if at all, should Para athletes do disability activism?
3. What are the sociocultural contexts that prevent and enable disability activism?

Aim five (addressed in chapter eight) - To understand what promoting disability activism through Para sport means to three groups of key stakeholders within an Irish socio-political and Para sport context. My central research questions to meet this aim are:

1. Do Para athletes and Para sport organisations have a responsibility to engage in disability activism?
2. How, if at all, should disability activism be performed from a Para sport context?
3. Is Para sport even a suitable context to promote disability activism?

Chapter Three: Methods and Methodology

Chapter overview

In this chapter I describe how I studied Para athlete activism. I begin by introducing qualitative research as my chosen method of inquiry. Next, I explain the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin and guide this research. After this, I introduce the participants and describe procedures for data collection and data analysis. Following this, I discuss how I will represent my qualitative findings in this thesis. I will finish by highlighting some ethical considerations, as well as suggesting some criteria to help judge the quality of this research. At each stage I will offer a justification and rationale for my choices.

Qualitative research: What and why?

Qualitative research is a craft skill (e.g., it involves time, practice and intellectual engagement) and field of inquiry (e.g., it cuts across multiple disciplines) surrounded by complex shifting interconnected concepts and assumptions (Smith & Caddick, 2012). Because of its multiplicity and open-ended nature, qualitative research is difficult to precisely define - it can mean different things to different people. That recognised, there are several characteristics of qualitative research that help understand it. One important characteristic is that qualitative researchers embrace subjective meaning and complex social contexts. For example, one aspect of this research project is to scrutinise the meaning of disability activism for athletes in the context of Paralympic sport and their wider social, political and cultural context. As Smith and Caddick (2012) said, qualitative researchers are:

> interested in the multiple meanings that people attach to their subjective experiences and seek to identify, describe and interpret the social structures, spaces and processes that shape these meanings. Furthermore, for qualitative researchers, people's lives, societies and cultures are complex. As such, rather than embracing simplistic

descriptions of human lives, societies and cultures, they embrace complexity (Smith & Caddick, 2012, p.61).

Another characteristic relates to sampling. Qualitative researchers often, but not always, select a small number of purposefully sampled individuals for their investigations. Researchers often choose individuals or sub-cultures that can provide rich information towards understanding people and culture in complex ways. One aspect of this research project, for instance, is to focus on the sub-culture of Paralympic sport. Finally, qualitative research can also be characterised in terms of the set of paradigmatic assumptions a researcher holds (e.g., the basic set of beliefs about the world a researcher subscribes to). For example, qualitative research often, but not always, tends to be informed by interpretivist philosophical paradigms such as constructionism, critical theory and related ideological positions like Marxism.

In recent years, the field of sport and exercise science has seen a rapid growth of interest in qualitative research. This expanding scholarly community of practice and intellectual engagement is evident by a) an increase in qualitative studies being published in sport science journals, b) an increase in the number of authors producing qualitative research, c) an increase in different types of qualitative research being published, and d) the creation and development of qualitative research journals (e.g., *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*), conferences (e.g. the *International Qualitative Conference in Sport and Exercise*) and societies (e.g., *International Society of Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*).

I believe that adoption of qualitative research offers a number of advantages for this project. First, qualitative research facilitates an understanding of the processes involved in the focus of the project – social activism and social change. For instance, qualitative research can help to illuminate the various processes (e.g. personal, social, cultural and political) that

facilitate the various ways that disabled people advocate for social change. As Sparkes and Smith (2014) argued, "The ability of qualitative research to get at the processes that lead to various outcomes is a major strength of this approach and is something that experimental and survey research is often poor at identifying" (p.17). Second, a qualitative approach enables the close exploration of participants lives. For example, it has the capacity to bring a wealth of detailed and rich information about the social world of participants. This helps towards the project aim to interpret the phenomena of interest (e.g. disability activism, social change) in terms of the meaning participants bring to them. Finally, an important aspect of this project is to interpret our research through a lens of the activist theoretical paradigm - critical disability studies (explained in detail in chapter two). For example, one assumption from critical disability studies, that I hold throughout this project, is that disability is a fundamental part of human diversity.

Ontology and epistemology

Adopting a philosophical and paradigmatic lens allows me to take a position on the nature of realty, what can be known about reality, and how to go about knowing this. Sparkes and Smith (2014) quoted Lincoln:

> Paradigms and metaphysics do matter. They matter because they tell us something important about researcher standpoint. They tell us something about the researcher's proposed relationship to the Other(s). They tell us something about what the researcher thinks counts as knowledge, and who can deliver the most valuable slice of this knowledge. They tell us how the researcher intends to take account of multiple and contradictory values she will encounter (p.9).

For this project, I adopt metaphysical assumptions of ontological relativism and epistemological social constructionism. This has influenced the research design to be located within a hermeneutic methodology and underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm.

Adopting an ontological position of relativism means I assume social reality to be mind-dependent, multiple and malleable. That is, I believe what 'exists' in our social world is very much dependent on (rather than independent of) our human minds. I also believe that subjective realty is humanly constructed and shaped in ways that make it fluid and multifaceted. Adopting a position of epistemological social constructionism means I assume the path to knowledge about social reality is subjective and constructed through relational interactions. That is, I believe the process of inquiry involves interpreting the interpretations of others. For example, one aim of this project is focus on understanding the ways participants construct meaning about the phenomena of social activism. A hermeneutic methodological approach within an interpretivist paradigm means this research is designed to understand how people make meaning of human experience by engaging directly with participants, and through collecting and analysing qualitative data.

Sampling and participants

After gaining university ethical approval for the study (see ethics section below), participants were recruited through three purposive sampling strategies: maximum variation, criterion-based and snowballing. The combination of sampling strategies ensured that participants provided useful data, represented a variety of experiences and shared inclusion criteria attributes (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). All participants were aged 18 or older. Three groups were established: The National Paralympic Committee (NPC) group; the disability activist group; and the Para athlete group.

The criteria for inclusion into the NPC group were active staff or board members of the Irish NPC - *Paralympics Ireland*. The criteria for inclusion for disability activist group were people who a) identified as disabled b) identified as disability activists and c) were actively involved in Irish disability rights groups. For the Para athlete group, a criterion-based sampling strategy ensured that all participants shared inclusion criteria attributes. The criteria

for inclusion attributes for this group were a) aged 18 or older b) with a physical impairment that classifies for participation in structured Para sport and c) an elite Para athlete. An elite Para athlete was defined as someone who has participated in elite talent programmes and/or represented Ireland at high level events like the World Championships or Paralympics, and/or, has experienced some sustained success at the highest level of their sport (Swann, Moran, & Piggott, 2014). Para sports included in the sample were Para sports that were, are, or plan to be, events at the Paralympic Games (www.paralympic.org). A snowballing strategy was drawn upon also to ensure that participants in the Para athlete group provided useful data. This means, at times, some participants were asked to recommend other participants that might have 'different' views that could provide 'different' data (e.g., a particular experience of sport, disability or advocacy). A maximum variation strategy ensured that the Para athlete group represented a variety of experiences. By this I mean effort was made to include participants that represented different ages, genders, Para sports and career stages.

Participants in the Para athlete group reported a range of impairment experiences (e.g., spinal cord injury, spina bifida, visual impairment, amputation, cerebral palsy). Nine Para athletes described their impairments as being acquired. Ten Para sports were represented in the sample (Wheelchair Basketball, Wheelchair Rugby, Boccia, Amputee Football, Powerchair Football, Para cycling, Para athletics, Para table-tennis, Para swimming, Para archery). Nine participants in the Para athlete group held 'decision-making' positions in Para sport organisations (e.g., employees, board members, athletes commission members). Six participants from the Para athlete group described themselves as active in Para sport but currently retired from "top tier" level sport (e.g., Paralympians who represented Ireland in Paralympic Games before London 2012).

Importantly for this study I sought to include what I term *"top tier"* and *"bottom tier"* Para athletes. *Top tier* Para athletes were athletes who (at the time of data collection) received

state funding directly and/or participated in Para sports graded as "Gold" by Paralympics Ireland (i.e., National Paralympic Committee). According to *Paralympics Ireland Strategic Plan 2019 – 2025* (2019) athletes from "Gold sports" (e.g., Para swimming, Para athletics and Para cycling) are state funded athletes that have 'medal potential' (podium pathways) at the Paralympic Games and therefore "receive the majority of available resources" (i.e., access to physiological, psychological and nutritional support). For example, "top tier" Para athletes in this sample were Para athletes who either represented Ireland in the Rio Paralympic Games 2016 or plan to represent Ireland in the Tokyo Paralympic Games 2020 (now planned for 2021). I then term "Bottom tier" Para athletes as all other athletes in the sample who do not (at the time of data collection) receive state funding directly or currently do not participate in Para sports graded as "Gold sports" and therefore receive significantly fewer resources.

Critical reflection – Irish Wheelchair Association-Sport

For several years, I have volunteered in different Para sport contexts (e.g., with a Goalball team in Guatemala in 2014). For example, during this PhD, I volunteered with the Irish Wheelchair Rugby team. I also held the position of secretary (2018-2020) on the board of Irish Wheelchair Association-Sport (IWA-Sport), the National Governing Body for wheelchair sports in Ireland. I believe that this experience has shaped my thesis in a number of ways.

First, this experience influenced my decision to separate "top-tier" from "bottom-tier" athletes. I think this is analytically useful because I have witnessed a 'division' (recourses, recognition) within the Para sport landscape in Ireland. That said, this separation has also troubled me because this sample is diverse in terms of experiences. For example, some "bottom-tier" were once "top-tier" (e.g., Paralympians pre-London 2012) and others hold positions of power within the Irish Para sport system. Also, I could be, problematically, re-enforcing (creating) hierarchies in a thesis about equality. In addition, some "bottom-tier" sports have more access to more resources than other "bottom-tier" sports because of their powerful NGBs (i.e., disability football attached to Football Association of Ireland).

Second, I knew personally a number of the participants. This was great both in terms of recruitment and having an established bond with some athletes. However, my perceived position of 'power' (i.e., board member) must be acknowledged in a PhD about challenging power. For example, in one of my interviews I assumed the participant knew that I was on the board of IWA-Sport - they didn't – and when they started to criticise IWA-Sport, I mentioned that I was on the board and this felt awkward.

Participants from the Para athlete and NPC group were recruited following a request to Paralympics Ireland (see Appendix D). Namely, a letter was sent inviting Para athletes and staff/board members who met the sampling criteria to take part in the study. I also recruited participants through my personal contexts as I am involved in the disability sport sector in Ireland. Participants from the disability activist group were initially recruited at an Irish disability activist seminar that I attended and subsequently through a snowball sampling strategy (e.g., initial participants suggested others for me to contact). I sought to include disability activists who were diverse in age and gender and who were connected with a range of disability rights groups such as the Centre for Independent Living Ireland, Disabled Women Ireland and the Disability Federation of Ireland.

The result of this process was a sample of 44 participants. Six participants (two females and four males) represented the NPC group (four of which were also Para athletes and therefore also included in the Para athlete group). 31 participants (13 females and 18 males) represented the Para athlete group, 14 of which were "top tier" Para athletes. 11 participants (six females and five males) represented the disability activist group. For reasons of confidentiality, I have not provided a table of participant demographics, given that there is a small Irish Para sport community and members could be easily identified. In other words, to minimise deductive disclosure and maintain ethical standards it was deemed sensible by the ethics committee and myself that participant demographics should not be included here. Suffice to say that the sample was diverse in terms of age (e.g., 18 to 60 years), gender, impairment type, employment status, sport type and disability rights groups.

Data collection

Data were collected in Ireland through one-to-one semi-structured recorded interviews. 33 interviews were conducted in person. In some cases (e.g., feasibility, convenience) digital methods were used (i.e., Skype), and written survey interviews were used for functionally

nonverbal participants (see Appendix I). In person interviews were conducted in convenient, quiet, accessible, agreed-upon locations such as hotel lobbies, universities, training grounds or offices. Before all interviews, participants were given an information sheet (see Appendices A,B,C) to read and all athletes provided consent (see Appendix E) for the interview. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants the freedom to discuss experiences most important to them but also gave me the opportunity to focus on the aims of the project (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Drawing on previously cited literature (e.g., Bundon, & Hurd Clarke, 2014), I developed the initial interview guides (see Appendices F,G,H). These interview guides were also developed (refined) throughout the data collection process.

Examples of questions included in the interviews were "what areas would you like to see social change in Para sport?", "how do you advocate for social change in Para sport?" "why don't you advocate for social change in Para sport?", "Can you tell how you feel about social change around disability in Ireland in 2018?", "What does disability activism mean to you?", "Can you describe your experiences advocating for change in your sport or in wider society?", "How do you feel your actions contribute to social change around disability?", "In what ways does Para sport contribute to social change around disability in Ireland?", "Is Para sport a good context to promote disability activism?" and "Do you feel Irish Para athletes and Para sport organisations have a responsibility to engage in disability activism?"

I used researcher generated photographs, quotes and videos (see Figures 1-8) to invoke memory and elicit accounts from the participants (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). I decided to use the technique of researcher generated (in contrast to participant generated) elicitation in order to elicit conversations about the many different forms of activism. When I considered appropriate, researcher-generated elicitation techniques were used to facilitate a conversation with participants (I explained my interpretations of the photographs, quotes and videos for those who needed). Examples of elicitation techniques drawn upon were

photographs or videos of disability activism, photographs of activism through sport (e.g. overt public protest, community projects), athlete activism quotes, and Paralympic discourses, such as a photograph of the Olympic values (friendship, respect and excellence) alongside the Paralympic values (courage, determination, inspiration and equality). Accommodation for accessibly was made in dialogue with participants.

Occasionally, in the conversations I adopted a more 'antagonistic' form of interviewing such as deliberately introducing competing theoretical discourses into the conversation. An example of 'antagonistic' interviewing are questions such as "why do you not use your platform to advocate for disability rights?", "surely your organisation and athletes have a responsibly to advocate for disability rights?", "Why don't you use your platform to highlight issues like inaccessibility?", "Could Para sport organisation do more for disabled people?", "Why do Paralympians only highlight the 'good?'" According to Dowling and Flintoff (2011) this form of interviewing can provide value in activist or social justice research (e.g. critical objectives) because it can create a space for alternative storylines to emerge in the data. This form of interviewing also complements my future-forming approach to research (see Gergen, 2016) concerned with social change and "what could be". As the negotiation of meaning is at the heart of conversation, allowing participants to 'argue their case' through 'slight provocation' can, for example, generate multiple stories of disability (Dowling & Flintoff, 2011). In turn, this style could produce ideas that can contribute towards transforming disabling practices in sport or society. The interviews (lasting between approx. one and three hours) were transcribed verbatim. This data collection process resulted in a large and qualitatively rich data set.

Researcher generated videos, quotes and photographs

Figure 1- UNCRPD protest

Figure 2- Irish Football Team with pride rainbow

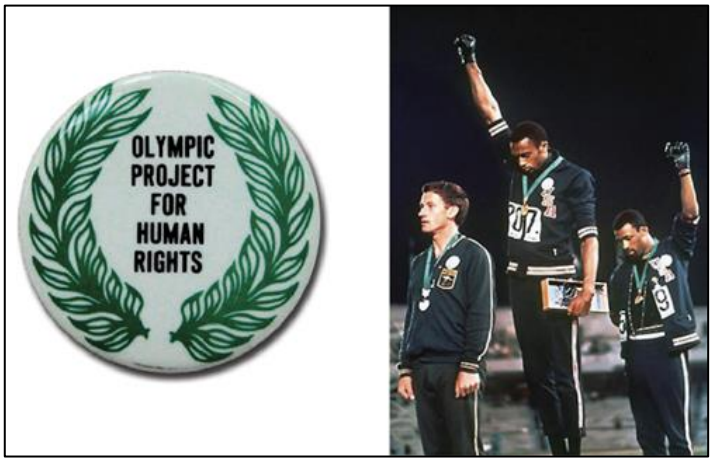

Figure 3- Olympic Project for Human Rights

Figure 4- Gaelic Voices for Change

Figure 5- The Olympic and Paralympic values

Figure 6- Great Brittan Wheelchair Rugby rainbow laces campaign

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjvYZ2jvvp8

Figure 7- Yes I can, if

"One last big community who I am proud to be a part of and need to recognise is the disability community. Every battle I win on the track or for a new ramp or change of policy that brings long-deserved rights and access to people with disability - is their win. If I can use my profile and ugly mug to give a voice and face to those who don't have the chance themselves, I must" (Para athlete)

Figure 8 - Paralympian quote

Data analysis: A reflexive thematic analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to organise themes in the data (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). RTA, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2019), is appropriate for my research interests because it is a flexible method, enabling me to analyse the data inductively at times (e.g., focused on new experiences), deductively at times (e.g., guided by previous literature), critically at times (e.g., questioning social norms), reflexively at times (e.g., considering my position within the study), and 'future-forming' at times (e.g., societally focused and culturally sensitive, see Gergen, 2016). RTA is an iterative (recursive) method of data analysis that involves working back and forth through a framework of six phases. The first phase - data familiarisation through the process of immersion - involved forming ideas about patterns in the data by listening and re-listening to interviews, and then reading and re-reading transcripts. In the second phase, codes (i.e., segments of data that appear interesting to the researcher) were generated from the data set relevant to the objectives of the research. In the third phase, the codes that shared meaning were clustered together to develop themes (i.e., meaning related to a central organising concept). The aim of this active process was to develop themes from codes that share meaning to "say something" about the data relevant to the research question (Braun et al., 2016).

In the fourth phase – reviewing and refining the themes - I drew on "critical friends" (e.g., academic colleagues) to challenge the construction of themes (Smith & McGannon, 2018). In addition, themes were further refined after feedback from colleagues at disability and sport conferences. In the fifth phase, themes were defined in order to capture the essence

of each theme (e.g., to show each theme's scope and boundaries) and to clarify how each theme fits into the overall "story" of the research, in relation to the purpose of the research. Finally, the sixth phase involved writing up (i.e., this PhD thesis). To do this, I drew on advice from Braun et al. (2016) that the final analysis must provide a concise, logical, coherent, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story. For example, concise data extracts (e.g., participant quotes) were chosen to exemplify the prevalence of themes.

Representation

Chapters four to eight (empirical results chapters) concern findings in relation to my research questions and are written in the style of a 'realist tale'. A realist tale, according to Sparkes and Smith (2014) is a common way of representing qualitative findings that involves attempting to represent the participant's point of view while drawing on theories and concepts to illuminate the findings. Accordingly, I write these chapters through themes with an aim to tell a theoretically dense account of the 'story' from the participant's point of view where, in general, I (as the author) am 'absent' from the text. For example, in my results chapters four to eight, in general, I do not provide frequency counts (e.g., "Two Para athletes said..") when reporting my results, but as a general rule, I use "few" (e.g., a few of the disability activist group explained….") to refer to less than a quarter of the participants point of view, "some" to refer to less than a half, and "most" to refer to around two-thirds or more of the participants. I then use summary quotes ('cleaned-up' at times for ease of reading) to exemplify the themes. That said, throughout the themes in the results chapters, I occasionally disrupt this 'realist tale' style by illumining my role in the construction of the themes. I do this by weaving a series of critical reflection boxes throughout the chapters in order to position myself as a reflexive qualitative researcher throughout the process.

Ethics

In terms of *procedural ethics* (see Sparkes & Smith, 2014), this research received full ethical approval on 24th Aug 2017 from the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Ethical Review Committee, University of Birmingham, UK: Ethical Review ERN_17-0941 (note: I started my PhD in University of Birmingham and then transferred to finish in Durham University). There are two points with regards to *procedural ethics* in this research worth noting. The first point is that many participants in this study were deemed public or prominent participants. In addition, this research was concerned, in part, with how prominent people 'speak out' in public ways. Accordingly, I made participants aware of the risk of implicit disclosure (see Appendices A,B,C) and emphasised that their data/identities would be confidential but not anonymous. I also managed the risk of implicit disclosure by avoiding presenting specific information about participants in this thesis and publications resulting from this study. For example, the specific location of participants, length played in a particular sport, affiliation with specific organisation, specific professional title or sport. In addition, I assigned codes to participants quotes presented in the chapters (ath1,2..31 for Para athlete group; act1,2…11 for the disability activist group; NPC1,2..6 for the National Paralympic Committee group).

> **Critical reflection: Ethics in action**
>
> Throughout this PhD, I also aspired to respect the dignity of the research participants at all stages. This involved balancing my commitment to the wider aims of the project with sensitivity for the participants autonomy. For me, this involves being ethical in context. So, throughout these reflexive comment boxes in the chapters, I have given some examples of relational ethics in action (Sparkes & Smith, 2014. I will attempt to show that, at times, this is easier said than done.

The second point concerned keeping the study inclusive. Due to the wide spectrum of physical disabilities, there was potential that this study could be seen as inaccessible to certain disabilities such as people with sensory or written language impairments. To account for these risks, I considered study accessibility by consulting with disability organisations

about appropriate communication methods when recruiting their members. Likewise, participants had the opportunity to have their informed consent recorded. Resulting, in part, from this process I created a survey interview on Qualtrics and communicated via e-mail to functionally nonverbal participants (see Appendix I).

Criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research

In recent years, there has been much debate in sport science literature about how rigour in qualitative research is developed and evaluated (see Smith & McGannon, 2018). For example, it has been popular among qualitative sport and exercise scholars to apply a criteriological approach to judge rigour. This means to draw on a set of universal markers that can be used to evaluate all qualitative research in a predetermined manner (see Tracy, 2010). However, this universal approach to judging rigor is problematised by differing qualitative methods and methodologies that are underpinned by differing metaphysical assumptions (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Williams, Smith, & Papathomas, 2016). Therefore, it is becoming increasingly important that criteria to judge quality are appropriate to the form of inquiry undertaking (e.g., Williams et al., 2016). Accordingly, in relativist inquiries like this thesis, a constructed (and open-ended) list of contextually appropriate characteristics is more useful to evaluate quality than a universal set of criteria (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Thus, for this study, I constructed a subset of appropriate characteristics from the many proposed criteria to judge qualitative research (Smith, 2018; Smith & McGannon, 2018; Tracy, 2010). In terms of judging the quality of my PhD and the analysis offered, I used different criteria to enhance the rigour of the work (Smith & McGannon, 2018). These criteria, as well as the strategies used to achieve them, were embedded throughout the research process, and are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1- A flexible list of criteria for evaluating the methodological rigor of this research

Criteria to enhance rigour	Strategies used to achieve criteria
Credibility: Is the research plausible and persuasive?	• I have provided in-depth illustrations of the data to show culturally situated meanings (Tracy, 2010). • Within the themes, I have demonstrated expansionistic depiction by showing the unfolding complexity of interpretations (Tracy, 2010). • I have utilised multiple theoretical viewpoints (e.g. critical disability studies, sport psychology, sociology of sport) that can 'speak to' researchers from different paradigmatic persuasions (Tracy, 2010).
Reflexivity: How has the interpretation of the data been challenged and developed?	• Critical friends (e.g., colleagues in sport organisations, participants, internal and external researchers, and peer-reviewers) have been sought to provide "a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, multiple and alternative explanations and interpretations as these emerged in relation to the data and writing" (Smith & McGannon, 2018, p.13).
Epistemological coherence: Are assumptions stated and consistent with the research processes and conclusions?	• The epistemology and ontology that underpins my work is made clear (McGannon, Smith, Kendellen, & Gonsalves, 2019). • Epistemological social constructionism and ontological relativism has informed my research questions, methodology, interpretations of the data, and how I discussed the results (Poucher, Tamminen, Caron, & Sweet, 2019).
Resonance: Can the research meaningfully reverberate and affect the audience?	• I have offered thick descriptions and rich interpretations of the data that could be transferable to different situations (e.g., naturalistic generalizability; (Smith, 2018). For example, we have shown how our data supports previous qualitative studies in the Para athlete activism in different contexts. I encourage future researchers to do the same (Smith, 2018) • I connected the background literature with the focus of the study and the interpretation of the findings (Tracy, 2010).
Significant contribution: Does the study extend knowledge? improve practice?	• I demonstrated theoretically significance by connecting disability sport psychology research with critical disability studies (Tracy, 2010). (e.g. see chapter seven) • I demonstrated heuristic significance by offering novel areas that challenge the idea of promoting activism through Para sport (Tracy, 2010). (e.g., see chapter eight) • I demonstrated practical significance by offering practical insights to support Para athlete activism (Tracy, 2010). (e.g., see chapters six and eight)

Chapter summary

In this chapter, I set out my approach to conducting this research project, from the type of qualitative design and underpinning philosophical assumptions, to the procedural mechanics and how represent my findings. I also discussed ethical considerations and ideas about how to evaluate the methodological rigor of this PhD project. The next five chapters contain the main body of work that constitutes this thesis- the empirical results chapters

Chapter Four: Disability in Irish society and social change.

Chapter overview

In this chapter I will address the first central research questions of this thesis - what do Para athletes think about disability in society and social change? The aim of this chapter to understand Para athletes' ideas and opinions about what factors enable or prevent social change for disabled people in Ireland. The Social Relational Model (SRM) of disability (Thomas, 2004b) will be first introduced as the theoretical framework for this chapter. After this, three themes will be presented that draw on data from the *Para athlete group*. These themes are called: 'The cultural and political domain', 'The structural and attitudinal domain' and 'The physical and psychological domain'. Within each of these domains, Para athletes explained how social change for disabled people in Ireland is being enabled or prevented. By this the participants meant that there are contexts where social change around disability in Ireland is improving *and* there are contexts where improvement is much needed. This meaning was evident in some initial responses to my question: I've been talking with athletes about disability in society, how do you feel we are doing in Ireland, in 2018, around 'disability'?

> Male bottom tier Para athlete: I dip in and out of being really optimistic and being a little pessimistic. I'm in a chair since I was seven years of age and I've had really really positive outlooks, and then I've experienced things where they're very negative. So I do chop and change depending on my experiences. And the negative experiences would impact me more than the positive ones because they're much more impactful I suppose. So I think that there's still a good way to go in educating Irish people in what equal is. You know equality. Look I'm repeating myself. Being equal is for everybody (ath3).

Female top tier Para athlete: I think we're kind of starting to get it a bit but I think we're definitely behind the UK (ath16).

Male top tier Para athlete: I think we've improved in certain areas but I think we have a long, long way to go (ath30).

Female top tier Para athlete: For a long time, we were getting better but I think we've kind of just petered off and gone backwards (ath31).

The athletes moreover explained how Para sport experiences had broadened their social and political perspectives on disability in Irish society and social change in two main ways. Firstly, cross-cultural experiences (e.g., traveling internationally to compete) enabled athletes to contrast disability in Irish society (e.g., attitudes and accessibly) with other parts of the world. Secondly, cross-carnal comparisons from witnessing multiple lived disability experiences in Para sport contexts also influenced athletes' perceptions about disability in society and social change. As one top tier female Para athlete explained in a conversation about how her perception of disability changed through her experience of Para sport:

I never considered myself disabled and I probably still don't. But- you know but being around say like my [Paralympic athlete] friend X and stuff like that. Say like, we're going away on a training camp in a couple of weeks and she'll always bring her wheelchair on those because there's a lot of walking involved. And I just see stuff more that I didn't notice before. So, like you know, even I'm learning more than I used to. Even though I'm essentially in the 'disabled box' - you know - but not as much as other people would be. So, it's been - yes - it's good like I mean because it gives me more of a perspective because I see all this stuff, I'm starting to pick up on things, and I'm like – "Well, that's not right!!" (ath16).

Importantly for this PhD thesis, that is concerned with the disability activism in Ireland, most of the Para athlete group said that they had little knowledge about the disability rights movement in Ireland, such as landscape of disability activism in Ireland or a detailed understanding of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. That said, most of the Para athlete group were interested in, and had a lot to say about, disability in Irish society and social change. Following each theme, a layer of critical discussion is added to show how each theme contributes to the wider aims of this thesis. But I will first explain why the social relational model is a useful framework for this chapter.

Theoretical framework: A social relational model (SRM) of disability

The SRM (Thomas, 1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2012, 2014) is a conceptually progressive understanding of disability that can be employed as an explanatory and analytical device. As described by Thomas (2007) the SRM builds on a discontent with the individualist tradition (i.e., the medical model of disability that considers the individual mind and bounded self as the fundamental atom of human life) and problems with the social model of disability (see Smith & Perrier, 2015).

The medical model (also known as the individual model) explains disability has a problem of reduced physical function that can be solved by medical intervention (Smith & Bundon, 2018). This approach has been heavily criticised for painting a negative picture of disability such as the implication that some individual's bodies are 'normal' while others are 'abnormal' (Reindal, 2008). The social model (Oliver, 2004), in contrast, explains how society causes disability through social oppression. The 'solution', under the social model, is to challenge negative attitudes and breakdown restrictive environmental barriers (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001). As Goodley (2016) said, "the social model is classic counter-hegemony: an alternative idea to the medical/individual tragedy that serves the aims of paramedical professions such as rehabilitation, medicine, psychology, special educational

need and social work" (p.11). The implication of the social model has been liberating for people with physical disabilities, as the 'problem of disability' is viewed as socially constructed and lies outside of the individual (Reindal, 2008). However, both the medical and the social model are problematic as explanatory or analytical devices because they each undervalue important experiences of disability; such as the experience of social oppression in the medical model or the lived experience of disability in the social model (Smith & Perrier, 2015). Whilst the social and medical models conceptualise disability and impairments as originating in the individual, in the 'conceptually progressive' SRM these are reconstituted as manifestations of social relationships (Thomas, 2007).

Thomas (2007) argued that the study of disability should "engage both with social structure (order) and social agency (action) and should therefore accommodate an analysis of social relations and social forces that construct, produce, institutionalise, enact and perform disability and disablism. The lived experience of both disablism and impairment should have its place, as should theorisations of impairment, per se" (pp.181–182). In other words, what differentiates the SRM (and makes it attractive to me) as will be described in the next paragraphs, is an expansion of how we understand disablism and impairment.

The SRM uniquely encompasses and extends our understating of disablism. Thomas (2014) promotes a focus on understanding of disablism as the term "disability" has acquired a confusing mix of meanings within disability studies and in society. Disablism, as defined by (Thomas, 2012) refers to:

> The social imposition of avoidable restrictions on the life activities, aspirations and psycho-emotional well-being of people categorized as 'impaired' by those deemed 'normal'. Disablism is social-relational in character and constitutes a form of social oppression in contemporary society- alongside sexism, racism, ageism, and

> homophobia. As well as enacted in person-to-person interactions, disablism may itself arise in institutionalised and other socio-structural forms (Thomas, 2012, p.211).

In other words, emerging not from an individual's mind, but from oppressive relationships with structures and human beings, in the SRM different people at different times and places can experience different forms of social oppression that fall under what Reeve (2014) calls the *psycho-emotional register of disability*; namely (a) psycho-emotional disablism, (b) structural disablism, and (c) internalised oppression (see Reeve, 2002; 2004; 2014). Psycho-emotional disablism can be separated out as emerging from two sources. Indirect psycho-emotional disablism is, for example, associated with the experience of structural disablism (i.e., exclusion from opportunities, services and activities) and recognises the psycho-emotional consequences of such experiences. For example, feelings of dislocation, humiliation or disrespect resulting from various levels of exclusion such as inaccessible trains or being made to use the back entrance to access some buildings (Reeve, 2014).

The second source, direct psycho-emotional disablism, recognises the consequences of discriminatory - often unpredictable - negative social interactions that disabled people can have with others. This means looks, words, and actions of others (e.g., family, friends, strangers, professionals, other disabled people) can become pathologizing "acts of invalidation." For example, being stared at or talked over, experiencing patronising comments ("does she take sugar?") or assumed tragedy ("what happened to you?"), and overhearing thoughtless words ("I'd rather be dead then in a wheelchair") may produce considerable emotional distress for this disabled person.

Internalised oppression, as described by Reeve (2014), emerges as a result of a relationship that disabled people can have with themselves as result of such hostility. Operating at a psychic level - often unconsciously - and common among subordinated

groups, internalised oppression is a powerful example of disablism because it has direct influence on what disabled can become. Disabled people can devalue disability, lower self-worth and intrinsic value as a consequence of living a culture that relentlessly views disability as negative. For example, internalising ablest norms can be seen in behaviours such as disabled people positioning themselves in hierarchies relative to other disabled people (dispersal), hiding impairment to avoid negative reactions of others (emulation), or overachieving in order to prove they are better than 'normal' (e.g., supercrip stereotype, see Grue, 2016).

In addition to disablism, the SRM also usefully extends our understating of impairment. Thomas (2014) finds the binary separation of impairment and disability in disability studies unhelpful. Nonetheless, she promotes the analytical separation as a useful explanatory device. She argues that impairment and disablism are thoroughly intermeshed within the social conditions that bring them into being and therefore the conceptual focus should be on the relationship between them. In her critique of the materialist social modelist's reluctance to "deal with" impairment, she highlights that there is a) a "realness" to impaired bodies and that this - material - experience within a social world requires attention and b) not all restrictions can be explained by wholly social barriers (e.g., physical pain). In other words, the biological entity can be held directly responsible for restricting some activities a person can do and, at times, damage psycho-emotional well-being. In addition, she argued that impairment, like disability, is also a socially-constructed, culturally-specific, linguistically-shaped category (see Thomas, 2014). To help in this regard Thomas (2012) introduces the concept of *impairment effects* into the SRM, defined as:

> The direct and unavoidable impacts that 'impairments' (physical, sensory, intellectual, emotional) have on individuals' embodied functioning in the social world. Impairments and impairment effects are always bio-social and culturally

> constructed in character, and may occur at any stage in the life course (Thomas, 2012, p.211)

The SRM is thus a conceptually progressive way to analyse, explain and frame disability in Irish society and social change.

Theme 1: The political and cultural domain

The 'political and cultural' domain captures Para athletes' perceptions about social change at a political and cultural level. In the SRM, political systems (e.g., the government) and cultural institutions (e.g., media) shape the experience of disability in important ways (Thomas, 2012). The participants spoke about the following aspects at this level that are enabling or preventing progressive social change for disabled people in Irish society.

Most athletes said that a progressive period of political change in Ireland has led to a progressive culture of social inclusion that is enabling social change. As highlighted in chapter two, in 2018 the Irish government ratified the 2006 United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the state voted to repeal the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, paving the way for the legalisation of abortion. In 2015, after the successful Yes Equality (LGBTQI) campaign, the Irish state voted to amend the constitution to permit same-sex marriage. Accordingly, most athletes compared disability activism to other activist movements (e.g., LGBTQ rights movement) in several ways. Connecting with intersectionality helps to understand how markers of disability, social class, race, gender and so on intersect and how activist responses to these markers of difference can constitute each other (Goodley, 2016). The consequences of this period of political change, they said, had led to a culture of inclusivity and a subsequence rise in disability activism. However, and importantly for this thesis about disability activism, most athletes in this study said they preferred to use different terms for "disability activism" such as "disability advocacy", "disability awareness" or "social inclusion".

Linked to this progressive culture of inclusivity in Ireland, some athletes highlighted how the role of social media enabled a rise in young Irish disabled 'celebrities' from different cultural contexts such as sport, fashion, the arts, business and journalism. A few athletes, for example, emphasised that a rise in disabled 'celebrities' from outside the context of Para sport is progressive in terms of disability advocacy because this widens the landscape of disability representation. As one female bottom tier Para athlete explained:

> …so that's why I did speaking for [a sports conference). And it was only like15/20 minutes just talking about my experience. And I have no problems doing that. But I suppose because it's through sport, that's my passion. Whereas these guys [celebrity disabled people] they might be artists or engineers or…so you know what I mean?? So that's you know where they're coming from. Have you seen [entrepreneur] from *Izzie Wheels*? But also then have you spoken to [activist] from *Legless in Dublin*. Look her up as well. She writes blogs about accessibility of restaurants. I'll tap into her stuff if I'm going out with the girls. She's fabulous. *Izzie Wheels* I think you know the young girl, that's from a business point of view and a creative point of view. I loved the way [X] herself says she's the ambassador of the brand and you know they are young and dynamic. And you know what I particularly enjoy about this [advocacy and representation] - it's not from Para sport! (ath24).

Pearson and Trevisan's (2015) research on disability activism in the "new media ecology" examined the changing nature of disability activism through the influence of social media and new forms of activism. They highlighted the ways that formal established disability organisations (e.g., disability charities) and formal disability activist organisations (e.g., the Centre for Independent Living) have become 'digitised' in terms of their activism. Moreover, Pearson and Trevisan (2015) highlighted the ways that ideologically dispersed

‘disabled celebrities’ such as high-profile Para athletes and those mentioned in the previous quote are increasingly contributing to the landscape of disability activism.

In contrast to these areas that are enabling social change, the Para athletes in this study discussed four factors at a political and cultural domain that are preventing social change from happening. They said that these four factors can contribute towards apathy about social change in Ireland for disabled people, at both and societal and individual level. First, athletes expressed frustration that ‘disability’ is often left off the diversity train in Ireland. By this they meant that that disability activism is less popular and more complicated than activism from other social movements (e.g., gay pride). For instance, some athletes highlighted that disability discrimination is easy to ignore because sometimes it is more of a political and social ‘afterthought’ than an overt form of prejudice (e.g., overt homophobia or racism). A few athletes also said that social change around disability is prevented by how activists from the recent *Yes Equality* (LGBTQI rights) and *Repeal the Eighth* (abortion/gender equality) campaigns did not fully reciprocate how disabled people backed their activism in Ireland. As one bottom tier male athlete said in a conversation about social change in Ireland:

> When we voted yes in the *Yes Equality* campaign [LGBTQI rights] we felt that, you know, Ireland has ticked the box for diversity. And then we haven’t. There’s a whole catchment of people with disabilities out there who aren’t catered for in the same way. And like I was the first one to take on the whole *Yes Equality* campaign, because I want people to be treated the same way I would like to be treated. So, to me it was a no-brainer. And I think the way the LGBT campaign was very clever in that they didn’t make it about the people who are gay. They made it about their families, their friends, everybody. So, that’s why it became so resonant with society and people bought into it. They understood the true implications, and we probably need to do

> that. And I'm looking for that community to back the people with disabilities the same way we did them (ath32).

Second, athletes highlighted how a lack of disability representation in Irish media is preventing social inclusion for disabled people. For example, a few athletes highlighted that whilst it is commonplace for UK Paralympians to represent 'disability' on popular reality TV shows in the UK media such as *Strictly Come Dancing*, this is still not the case on Irish mainstream media.

Third, the athletes explained how ideologically dispersed 'disabled celebrities' can, paradoxically, prevent progressive social change. By this they meant that, on the one hand, the rise in 'disabled celebrities' increases disability representation and awareness, but on the other hand, some 'disabled celebrities' promote disabling ideologies. For instance, a few of the athletes in this sample were (hyper)critical of some high profile disabled sportspeople (who are not Paralympians) in Irish culture that use their influential public platforms (e.g., popular influential Ted Talks) to promote a disabling (regressive) medical model ideology of disability (Smith & Bundon, 2018). The particular criticism, from these few athletes, was that some 'disabled celebrities' are assumed to be speaking on behalf of *all* Para athletes and *all* disabled people because of the dominance of the medical model ideology in Irish society. As one bottom tier male Para athlete said about an influential Irish disabled sportsperson:

> He's got a profile. But within disability in terms of the people I speak to that have spoken about him, it's all negative really, all completely negative. He's sending out completely the wrong message. He's sending out the message of if you've acquired a disability don't give up, there's gonna be a cure, you're gonna be fixed. That's fuckin disgraceful. That is absolutely disgraceful. But I think his message is awful. In my job I like to think I have a lot of integrity. In my old job they supported his trust, and

> because I'm the token wheelchair guy in the job they asked me to do something with the trust. I said "not a chance. Not a hope am I doing anything with that trust!" (ath5).

Finally, some athletes said they were concerned about how the rise in a culture of political correctness and social justice was preventing progressive social change. They said that political correctness was making disabled people apathetic about (shy away from) engaging in disability activism or acting to create social change. One example of this political correctness, they explained, is disabled people on social media calling out various microaggressions or policing disability language. By this they meant 'political correctness' is being emphasised at the expanse of addressing wider (more important) structural changes. As one bottom tier male Para athlete said: "I feel like people are becoming oversensitive and think that everything is discriminatory. Don't get me wrong there's still discrimination of disabled people but people sometimes are not focusing on the big issues while protesting on petty things" (ath10). Or as one top tier female para athlete explained further:

> Everyone has a kind of a cause these days. The referendums, with all sorts of different social issues and everyone has a kind of a cause. Who is not happy and who is complaining about the government and about society, you know?.... and political correctness, see then I think there is like also a kind of fine line like, I think obviously again it is up to people's individual preferences but there would be like disability activists, I saw one person who was like, "Oh you shouldn't refer to us as 'disabled people' you should refer to us as 'people with disabilities' because we are people before our disabilities". And I was kind of like "ugh, don't make it more complicated than it already is". Like we want to highlight the actual problems and I felt like that wasn't a real problem. Like I would refer to myself as a disabled person, like, it doesn't bother me (ath7).

Critical reflection: The lived experience of disability.

To guide my analytical thinking in this chapter I drew on a social relational model of disability and concepts such as (in)direct psycho-emotional disablism, internalised ableism and impairment effects. Although I believe that we (i.e., people who live in western societies) are all caught up, in some way, within a neo-liberal ableist ideology, I do not myself have any direct experience of social, political or psycho-emotional exclusion based on physical impairment (i.e., disablism). For example, I do not have the experience of being refused to access public transport or public buildings because of my body. What I mean is that this model and these concepts are useful because they aim to capture the lived experience of socialised impairment, but I do not personally have this lived experience. One the one hand, as a researcher, this makes the analytical process interesting and enjoyable because I must try to 'tease apart' participants experiences of 'indirect disablism' from 'direct psycho-emotional disablism' from 'impairment effects' from 'internalised ableism' and so on and so forth. On the other hand, however, this can be difficult (almost impossible??) without the lived experience of socialised impairment. This made me reflect back on some assumptions about disability that I made in the interviews with participants.

For example, in general, the data used in this chapter came from the beginning of the interviews with Para athletes. And because this project is, in essence, about 'disability' and my questions were often about 'disability'. For instance, I would probe athletes about whether they had experienced or witnessed forms of discrimination. In addition, because I lack the lived experience of disability my questions were often guided by critical disability studies literature and focused on forms of oppression, for instance I'd ask- "what do you think about public access?" or "what do you think about employment discrimination? What I mean is although most athletes where interested in talking about disability in Irish society and social change, I got the impression from some athletes that I was focusing too much on negative aspects of life. It was like, at times, I was 'othering' by fishing or digging for experiences of discrimination. For example, some athletes would remined me that it is entirely possible to experience barriers and still live a good quality of life. My feeling was there was speciesism among some participants about some pre-conceived assumptions that I had about disability, or agendas that I had about disability activism. The 'lesson' from this reflection might concern problems associated with researchers reading too much literature before collecting qualitative data.

I probably thought that disabled people think about 'disability' much more than they do.

Theme 2: The structural and attitudinal domain

The 'structural and attitudinal domain' captures Para athletes' perceptions about social change at a structural or attitudinal level. Participants spoke about the following aspects at

this level that are perceived to be enabling or preventing social change for disabled people in Irish society.

At a structural level, most athletes highlighted the areas where structural disablism prevents social change in Ireland. In the social relational model of disability, structural disablism is an experience of social oppression resulting from exclusion from opportunities, services and activities (Goodley, Liddiard, & Runswick-Cole, 2017). The athletes explained that the experience of structural disablism can happen in different contexts and that it can prevent disabled people from traveling, working, socialising and spontaneity. Importantly, most of the athletes were keen to point out that, in general, access to the structural environment is improving in Ireland in many areas but, at the same time, there is still "a long long way to go" (ath26). For example, most athletes highlighted how disabled people are excluded from opportunities in life as a result of inaccessible public transport in Ireland. As one bottom tier female Para athlete said:

> This is my fifth year in Dublin. And since I was in first year I haven't been able, like normal college students would go out two/three times a week and out till three and four in the morning. I think I've been out a handful of times since I've been in first year, and it's because of the transport issue. Like if I went into town I'd be scared that I wouldn't have a way home basically, unless I had a guy like the guy I was telling you about earlier like who was reliable and I could say to him oh will you pick me up at this time and he would say yeah no problem and you could ring him directly. He had a wheelchair accessible taxi. But like a lot of these companies as well, you ring in a central office number and you don't have a direct line for a wheelchair accessible taxi driver. And then it's very easy for them to say "oh yeah sorry there's none available". But I think it's generally a problem, a widespread problem.
>
> **Interviewer: How does that make you feel?**

> You would be frustrated. Your friends are going out and like they're saying to you "oh why don't you come out with us", and you're like "well I'd love to come out but I've no way of getting home". So yeah it is frustrating but like you kind of just get used to it like. At the start yeah I was really annoyed and stuff, especially in first year because like obviously First Years are out all the time. And you're kind of looking at all your friends and being like "why can't I do that?". But then I suppose just because nothing has changed in the last number of years you just kind of get used to it and accept it (ath20).

This quote also illuminates how psycho-emotional disablism (frustration, annoyance and apathy about social change) is a side effect of repeated experiences of structural disablism (Goodley, Liddiard, & Runswick-Cole, 2017); or how disabled people *feel* disablism.

Whereas inaccessible transport is an example of an overt form of structural disablism, most athletes also described how more subtle forms of structural disablism prevent social change for disabled people in Ireland. In particular, most athletes drew on discourse like "access never really means access" to explain how disabled people are often indirectly excluded from opportunities and services at a structural level. For example, participants explained that venues (e.g., restaurants, pubs, nightclubs) can have accessible entrances but that the disabled toilets are inaccessible (e.g., used as storerooms). They also noted that disabled people can attend concerts or sports events in Ireland but that they might not be able to see performances, or they are forced to be separated from friends. They explained moreover how employers are willing to hire disabled people but that that places of employment (e.g., offices, buildings) are sometimes inaccessible. Participants furthermore described the irony of work by disabled artists being exhibited in inaccessible buildings. As one male bottom tier Para athlete said:

> I was meant to go to a Christy Brown exhibition. I saw it in the Irish Times in *The Ticket* magazine and I said "I'm gonna go to that". I loved Christy Brown's work, his paintings and his books and stuff. I've read them over the years. I said I won't ring ahead, surely it's accessible, but I rang them ahead just to be safe. I said "I'm a wheelchair user looking to go to the Christy Brown exhibition, I'm just making sure it's accessible". She said "I'm so sorry to say it's not accessible" I laughed and said "you're joking". And she goes "no, it's in the Little Museum of Ireland and we have ten steps up to it". I said "you're celebrating one of Ireland's most successful disability literature kings and people with disabilities can't get in!?!" She deeply apologised, "it's an old building and it's a listed building and we're trying to get a lift in but the council, with the listed buildings, won't allow you to modernise it". Think of the ridiculousness of that!?! (ath5).

Athletes also highlighted how public transport is accessible, but that disabled people need to give notice (e.g., from four to 24 hours' notice) to transport companies about when and where they will be travelling. As one male bottom tier Para athlete said:

> I went on the Air Coach there, it was around February, I'd say it was. I had to book that two days in advance you know for the wheelchair. I couldn't just hop on the Air Coach there today and get the bus up to you to do this interview or anything. It's very backwards that way. Everything should be accessible in cities. It's 2018. It's not back in the 1790's anymore. It's really bad [in Ireland] (ath2).

The athletes explained how transitions in life can illuminate experiences of structural disablism and its 'side effect'- psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve, 2014). Life transitions, they said, can increase or decrease experiences of structural disablism. For example, athletes spoke of how experiences of structural disablism can increase or decrease when disabled people transition between educational environments (e.g., school to university), places of

employment (e.g., university to work), geographical locations (e.g., moving to Ireland from another country), sports clubs (e.g., from recreational to elite level) or housing environments (from family home to own home). For example, one female bottom tier Para athlete highlighted the progressive link between decreased experiences of structural disablism and increased psychological well-being/progressive social change:

> There's a lot of newer [accessible] places going up and up now like. I was in Newry there a couple of months ago and they've a brand-new sports centre there and it's the best thing I've actually ever seen. It's unbelievable. Just in Newry. Newry leisure centre. It's brand new. Oh my God it's like… It's only an hour from here so we had a match there a couple of months ago. And we were the first people to play there. And oh my God. Seriously the venue was amazing. I'd nearly train up there. Yeah it was massive for access. It was brilliant. Brilliant. Yeah. Being able to get into like say a changing room or a wheelchair toilet in your basketball chair is massive. Because you have to transfer into your everyday chair for smaller [disabled toilets] (ath26).

In addition to aspects at a structural level, athletes spoke about how social change for disabled people in Ireland is enabled or prevented at an attitudinal level. In the social relational model, disabled people can experience enabling or disabling attitudes in different social relations and contexts (Reeve, 2014). For example, the experience of looks, remarks, comments or assumptions about disability can be either discriminating or inclusive. The athletes spoke about how social change at in attitudinal level is enabled or prevented by the following five social relational affects.

First, participants spoke about how attitudes are influenced by *generational affects*. By this they meant disabled people are more likely to experience patronising disabling attitudes (unintentional or intentional) from older people in society in contrast to younger people, such as the patronising "ahh aren't you just great for getting out of the house" (ath11)

attitude. Second, they spoke about how attitudes influenced by *geographical affects*. By this they meant that different geographical locations, such as urban or rural areas, can influence the experience of enabling or disabling attitudes. Third, related to generational and geographical affects, athletes spoke about *religious affects*. By this they meant the historical dominance of religious power in Irish society can influence the experience of disabling attitudes in different contexts. As one male bottom tier Para athlete said:

> The amount of times you get blessed like [in Ireland]. I was in town last week and I was walking down Patrick's Street and there was a woman who started blessing me. I went to cross the road. She turned with me and kept blessing me. And then she doubled back on herself to follow me to finish blessing me the whole way up. I was across the road at this stage and walking back up Patrick's Street and she just continued blessing me [laughing]. You wouldn't get someone from a Muslim country doing it or any other religion. It's an Irish attitude from years ago that if you end up in a wheelchair or whatever you were basically just put in a house and that's it. It was almost a shame on the family to go out. It's still nearly - not like that - but you still here people saying "awe it's great to see you out" or "aren't you great you're doing this" or whatever. I'm like no, "I want to be an elite athlete!!" (ath2)

In the social relational model of disability, the repeated experience of disabling attitudes like these can result in the social experience of indirect psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas, 2014; Reeve, 2014). Indirect psycho-emotional disablism involves the loss of confidence or self-esteem as a result of negative social interactions (Reeve, 2014). In contrast, enabling attitudes resulting from, for instance, generational or geographical affects can increase confidence or self-esteem among disabled people, and enable progressive social change (Reeve, 2014). Fourth, athletes spoke about how *class affects* influence attitudes about disability. For example, one male top tier Para athlete explained how class can

influence attitudes by exemplifying how parents from different class backgrounds respond differently to how their children reacted in public to disabled people. He said:

> It's [i.e., attitudes] a generation issue and it's a geographical as well. Like I think people in Dublin have a very different attitude to people in the rest of the country. Like, for example, like the most, the most regular occurrence of people who mention disability is young kids. Like they'd point it out, they'd be saying "ah look"… and a lot of the time it's based on class, the more affluent parents say "oh Jesus no, stop, stop, stop, that's rude". One time I was in training and I came out of the shower and I was just showering away and there was a kid just opposite on the other side of the showers and he was just staring at me. And I was like "oh no, he's going to say something". And you can just tell, you can just get the vibe, he's going to say something. And he was like "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy" and I was like "ah here we go, here we go, what's he going to say". And then most of the time I just, like I don't, it takes a lot to offend me. And he was "Daddy, Daddy, look at your man, he's very small". And the father came in, and he looked at me, looked back at him and he goes "look at you, you're bleeding small, get out of the shower". Do you know what I mean?? and it's like that, you know what I mean?? And that's a good attitude. He [the dad] probably would be working class and he was like "look at you, you're bleeding small as well". That's, I think that's, it's a very helpful attitude because that kid is going to go "right, oh Jesus". But if their parents cover their eyes or drag them out, Jesus that's awful, the kid won't learn, the kid won't learn anything from that (ath17).

Fifth, athletes spoke about how *disability gains* can influence enabling attitudes and social change. By *disability gains* they meant that being disabled has benefits in many social interactions and contexts. Importantly, younger participants emphasised the ways that disability "opens doors" in their social and vocational lives (perks, attention, difference-as-

good, diversity-as-advantageous, disability-seen-as-creative). As one top-tier female Para athlete said' "it's all about diversity nowadays…you're even more likely to get a job because you have a disability, you know what I mean" (ath22). A few other athletes highlighted the advantage of being different in more inclusive societies like Ireland. As one top tier female Para athlete said:

> I think like, I don't know, I don't know how to describe it, but I just think…. It's really weird. It's like being different is fashionable. And it's really weird. And it's like…Its, it's, like you wouldn't even mean it to happen, but say if I was like in bar and I was just having fun with my friends. Like if my friend was like able bodied and really, really attractive, the guy would be more interested in me, because I'm different. I mean, that's weird. There's creepy people out there [laughing]. I've actually like had this conversation with like a girl in a wheelchair that I know and I was like "It's as if like, if you're a semi-attractive looking disabled girl, you're like gold dust" (ath13).

Critical refection: Patronising attitudes

Through my experience playing Wheelchair Rugby, I have had the opportunity to 'experience' some assumptions about disability first-hand. One time when I was in a rugby chair, on the side of the court, I got patted on the head by a spectator. Another time, during lunch at an Irish training session, someone came into the hall to look for information. I was the least experienced person in the hall to ask, but because I was the only one standing up, it was assumed that I was 'in charge'. Another time, a T.V reporter came to training, and because I was in a rugby chair, he assumed that I was disabled. I remember thinking how awkward and 'different' the conversation was.

At times, in the interviews with participants, I drew on these examples in an attempt to 'connect' with experiences about patronising attitudes.

Finally, a few athletes spoke about how enabling attitudes can act as antidote for structural disablism. By this they meant that while structural aspects in Ireland (e.g., policies

towards making the built environment more accessible) were lacking, positive attitudes in social interactions can sometimes make up for this. That is the experience of structural disablism (e.g., inaccessible buildings) can increase psycho-emotional disablism (e.g., anger) but enabling attitudes (e.g., disability gains) can decrease psycho-emotional disablism (e.g., increase self-esteem and well-being). As one male bottom tier Para athlete said:

> I would think overall I think Irish people are quite good [when it comes to attitudes]. What's great about Irish people in comparison to other countries is that our policies may not be up there with some other countries, but it's the individual people that sometimes can be more patronising. But I think individual Irish people, Irish people are friendly as a nation. They do try to help on the street for example. If you're a blind person and you're going around or you're a cane user and you're lost and you ask for help, I think most people will help you. In other countries in Europe they may have better systems but on a practical day-to-day level people won't bend the rules as much. Irish people are great at bending rules. My girlfriend is German and she's visually impaired. She lives in Ireland. She hated the way our systems are not, they're not great at times. You know what she says is that she loves Ireland because people are friendly, because people will help you, and because in Germany she said people are not quick to help you even if you have the cane. She doesn't use a cane. She's like myself. But she will use it when she goes to new places or she'll use it in the winter time. She'll use it because people will help her quicker. But she said in Germany she said they stick by rules. So if you're not entitled to something you're not entitled to it. In Ireland people tend to bend them to help you. So I don't know. I think we're lagging behind on policy. We're lagging behind on mainstreaming. But yet as a nation Irish people by their nature, individuals can be very helpful. Sometimes that makes up for it. It's a strange thing (ath5).

Theme 3: Psychological and physical domain

The 'psychological and physical' domain captures athletes' perceptions about social change at a psychological and physical' level. They spoke about the following aspects at this level that are enabling or preventing social change for disabled people in Irish society.

At a physical level, athletes spoke about the influence of impairment effects on social change. In the SRM, impairment effects capture the direct impacts that 'impairments' have on individuals' functioning in the social world. The concept of "impairment effects" has been highly influential in British disability studies (Goodley, 2016) because it allows scholars to acknowledge that impairments can have a direct and immediate impact on daily life without undermining the importance of prioritising the impact of disablism (Thomas, 2014). This is, in part, because it explains impairment, like disability, is also a socially-constructed, culturally-specific, linguistically-shaped category (see Thomas, 2014). Most athletes, for example, talked about how social change happens slower for disabled with more severe impairment effects. For instance, most top-tier Para athletes in this sample spoke about how they were relatively "physically lucky" in terms of impairment (this is further discussed in chapters six, seven and eight). By this they meant that they did not experience many direct forms of structural disablism due to the effects of their impairments. As one top tier female athlete said:

> like I mean like I'm short but like I really haven't encountered any major barriers. Like literally my main problem is I can't reach the top shelf in some shops, that's kind of where it ends for me you know. I don't have any mobility issues or anything like that so it's kind of it's something I really discovered myself I suppose over the last few years because I never considered myself disabled and I probably still don't (ath16).

The athletes said that another aspect at the level of impairment effects that prevents social change is that impairments are "real" and can be restrictive on their own. For example,

some athletes discussed how social change for disabled people is different than other historically marginalised groups (e.g., based on gender, race, sexual orientation or ethnicity) because there are many "real" contexts where disabled people do not 'want' to be disabled, due to impairments effects. As one male top-tier Para athlete said:

> I'm not saying there is something wrong with being disabled but it *is* an adversity. Like just because you're let's say black or gay, doesn't mean you have to be disadvantaged, you absolutely should not be disadvantaged, you shouldn't be disadvantaged if you're disabled, but it's unavoidable. Like you could have the most inclusive, open society where everything is done right and you'll still face adversity. Like I'll still probably experience back pain before all my friends or I'll still have foot cramps or pains that my friends won't experience until they're 60, but I'll have them in my twenties and thirties, but that's the reality….and I'll say it to any of my friends and be open about it, I wish almost every day that I wasn't disabled. And most people with disabilities would wish every single day, wake up and say "I wish I wasn't disabled". Now that's not to say "oh Jesus I'm depressed or oh Jesus I'm crumbling inside" I'm not. But I still am at a disadvantage, you know what I mean??. Like I'd probably trade even the Paralympics and all of that because, I'd probably still get involved in sport but like things that, like say if I wanted to be a soldier or I wanted to be a doctor or I wanted to be a police officer, I can't, I can't do any of that …and there is opportunities and there is a lot of assistance in that regard but the parameters is quite narrow. There's very few, now there's a lot of things you can do but there's an awful lot you can't do sometimes (ath17).

In addition to aspects at a physical level, the Para athletes described how aspects at a psychological level can enable or prevent social change. Preventing social change for disabled people in Ireland, as the athletes described, was tied to disabled people responding

to disablism in deeply emotional ways (Goodley, Liddiard, & Runswick-Cole, 2017). The athletes spoke about how the experience of structural barriers (e.g., inaccessible buildings, transport, limited employment opportunities), forms of political exclusion (e.g., medical card, benefits system, access to personal assistants) and prevailing negative cultural attitudes (e.g., assumptions, discourse, media stereotypes) can negatively affect the mental health of disabled people (e.g. thoughts, emotions and behaviours). Reeve (2014) connects social inequalities with mental health through psycho-emotional dimensions of disablsim. That is, different people with different impairments - at different times, spaces and places - can experience different forms (conscious or unconscious) of various socially-engendered restrictions (attitudinal, structural, political) called disablism. When repeated, disablism can be internalised and affect subjective well-being (e.g. confidence, mood, self-esteem, body-compassion) and psychological growth (e.g., limit what people feel they can become). For instance, some athletes explained the salience of damaged mental health from social oppression at certain stages of life transitions (e.g. school to university, university to employment, moving to a new house, professional sport to employment).

In addition to the psycho-emotional dimensions of disablsim, the athletes described how internalised ableism in Irish society can prevent social change. Internalised ableism happens when disabled people internalise societies prejudice and see disability as something to be ashamed of (Goodley, 2014). As one top-tier female Para athlete said.

> I think a lot of disabled people are just ashamed of having a disability, or insecure, ashamed, have no self-esteem, have no confidence and that's what makes it worse as well. I think it's from media. There's not a lot of disabled people in the media…. like it affects people's mental health as well, so like it probably affected me a lot more than I realised when I was younger. My insecurity and that might have transferred to the pool and I mightn't have performed as good as what I was (ath13).

A deep-seated concern common among most athletes, was how overprotective parenting can "bubble-wrap" young people, damaging their confidence and restricting their psychological growth through the process of internalised ableism. As one bottom-tier female Para athlete explained.

> Like, yeah, a lot of them are parents who've had kids with disabilities and they're like 'Oh this is how you should treat them' and you're like 'No!' Like what they need is just like a scary Rugby Coach to come in and scream at them. That's what they need…. 'But like that's why disabled people feel like they can't do things. It's because they've been told their whole lives that they can't. It's so strange, because I know a girl who like, she's not even that disabled. She has Cerebral Palsy, but she's 18, but I'm pretty sure she's never gone out with her friends or and like she, if she talked to one of us she'd go back, you could hear her going back to her Mom and be like "Oh my God, they talked to me, blah, blah." And I'm like "that's not the mind frame of an 18 year old girl". And there isn't anything wrong with her other than her CP and it's so strange (ath13).

Some athletes also highlighted how the experience of emotional labour (Wharton, 2009) can prevent social change. Goodley (2016) explained how maintaining emotional labour (e.g., regulating anger for fear of being positioned as resentful, ungrateful or unhinged) can be psychologically exhausting in a 'demanding' able-bodied world. For example, the emotional labour involved in day-to-day vigilance (of looks, comments, or non-consensual contact) or in self-motoring behaviour to fit in with social expectations (e.g., expected to be grateful, cheerful or passive). Alongside these aspects that can prevent social change, at a psychological level, athletes also spoke about aspects at a psychological level that can enable social change. For instance, most participants highlighted the ways inclusive

contexts, such as participation in sport and psychical activity, can improve self-esteem and confidence for disabled people. As one bottom tier female Para athlete said:

> For about a year I wouldn't even let anyone see me. If anyone knocked, even my family, if they knocked at the door and I hadn't got my leg on, oh wait and I'll go put the leg on, or I'd sit there and I'd cover myself. Now I go around my local park jogging on my crutches with one leg, and I don't care who sees me. I got a new confidence in myself as well. From doing the football. Yeah. Whereas before I started doing the football I wouldn't let anyone see me. And I was like "oh I'm not going out on my crutches". I'm not letting people see me. Whereas now doing the football I'm really proud that I play football and I play for [football club]. If I meet people in the park and I'm on my crutches it doesn't bother me to stop and talk to them. Whereas before I'd be like hiding and getting real embarrassed. But I got a new lease of life. It's from meeting other people and it's from doing the football. The football just changed my life completely. The sport just changed me completely (ath18).

Critical discussion

Throughout these three themes, I showed that the Para athlete group had a detailed understanding of the social process and psychological impacts of disabling social barriers and enabling environments. One important overall finding from this chapter is that most Para athletes felt that in general, disabled people were treated unequally and, at times, disrespectfully in society. This is a significant finding because, in contrast, most UK based Para athletes in a study by Smith et al (2016) "assumed that disabled people were now largely treated fairly, equally, and respectfully in society. Thus, it was reasoned that engaging in activism outside sport was largely needless" (p.144). Another important finding from this chapter is that most Para athletes were passionate and articulate about this issues that disabled people faced in society and social change. This is also a significant finding because it

suggests that Para sport is a useful context to gain knowledge about disability activism. That said, as I will discuss in chapters seven and eight, being passionate about disability issues, and having a healthy understanding about the areas that are enabling and preventing social change, does not necessarily transfer into disability activism (i.e., taking action to create social change). This chapter also demonstrates how Para athletes can have a good understanding of disability and social change, without a structured understanding of disability rights issues or, as I cover in chapter five, specific knowledge of disability politics and the nuances of the wider landscape of disability activism in Ireland. This chapter also has important implications for the social relational model (SRM) of disability in sport.

The findings in this chapter illuminate how the effects of psycho-emotional disablism, structural disablism, and internalised oppression, which are all key elements of the social relational model, can be profound. Self-esteem, confidence, feelings of worth and ontological security can be damaged as a result of negative social interactions, political and cultural institutions, attitudes and discourse - whether intended or unintended (see Richardson, Smith, and Papathomas 2017). In such social interactions, a disabled person's psycho-emotional well-being is not simply undermined. As a result of such undermining, they may avoid future behaviours, such as engaging in activism. Hence, psycho-emotional disablism can damage well-being as well as place limits on what disabled people can do and what one can become.

The SRM is also useful for understanding disability in society and social change because, by centralising impairment, it can allow scholars to distinguish between restrictions in society due to the effects of impairment (impairment effects) and socially imposed restrictions (disablism) (Townsend et al., 2017). For example, when impairment effects are just corporeal, disablism is absent (i.e., social oppression is not engendered because it is the biological "realness" of having an impaired body that simply affects activity and well-being) (see Smith & Perrier, 2015). As denominated in this chapter SRM can allow scholars to view

the body as biological, experienced, socially constructed, culturally fashioned and agentic; thereby viewing impaired bodies as simultaneously biological, lived, social and cultural (Smith & Perrier, 2015).

Certainly, the SRM needs to be empirically studied much more in disability sport because it holds various potential benefits. For example, one underused application of the SRM is to utilise this viewpoint to understand the effects of positive social relationships, such as the experience of enabling discourse and structures, on psycho-emotional wellbeing, and subsequent "ways of becoming". Accordingly, resulting from the findings in this chapter I suggest that future studies using the SRM in disability sport should incorporate a concept I will term *psycho-emotional enable-ism*; meaning increased self-esteem and confidence as a result of 'positive' enabling social relations (e.g., disability gains, geographical affects, inclusive environments). For instance, in this chapter, the Para athletes described how enabling social relationships and contexts can have positive effects on confidence, self-esteem and well-being.

Chapter summary

This chapter captured the Para athlete groups' ideas and opinions about factors that enable or prevent social change for disabled people in society. I utilised the SRM as a theoretical framework to understand disability in society and social change across three important domains as described by the Para athlete group: 'The cultural and political domain', 'The structural and attitudinal domain' and 'The physical and psychological domain'. In addition to contributing to wider research, this chapter should be seen as an important base layer of this rest of the thesis. In the next chapter I focus on the landscape of disability activism in Ireland. After that, I will go on to discuss activism to improve sport (in chapter six) and wider society (in chapter seven), as well as a critique of Para athlete activism in chapter eight. Nonetheless, throughout the following thesis I will relate Para athlete activism to important

areas highlighted in this chapter such as social relations, structural environments, cultural and political institutions, attitudes and discourses, as well as biological impairment and psychological factors.

Chapter Five: The landscape of disability activism in Ireland

Chapter overview

This chapter will address the second central research aim of this thesis - to capture an understanding of the disability activism landscape in Ireland (e.g., the disability rights movement in Ireland). One important purpose of this chapter is to enable the reader to contextualise the Para athletes' thoughts about disability in Ireland and social change (chapter four) within the wider landscape of disability activism. Accordingly, this chapter does not address the disability activists group thoughts and ideas about Para sport as a context to promote disability activism (as this will be addressed in chapter eight). That said, most participants in this group were interested in the role that Para sport plays in social change for disabled people in Ireland, and how Para sport will continue to contribute to - or distract from - disability activism in Ireland (see chapter eight).

In this chapter, three themes are presented drawing on data from the *disability activist group*. The first theme addresses the research question: in what way is disability activism changing in Ireland? This theme is termed "*Socio-cultural events*" and captures four socio-cultural events that are shaping the direction of disability activism in Ireland. The second theme addresses the research question: How is disability activism done in Ireland? This theme is called *"Philosophical and strategic differences"* and captures tensions that arise from how disability activists *do* activism in different ways. The third theme addresses the research question: What areas will be important for the future of disability activism in Ireland? This theme is termed "*Activist areas to watch*" and captures four areas that can be used to evaluate contemporary disability activism in Ireland. After the themes are presented, a critical discussion is added to show how this chapter contributes to the wider aims of this thesis.

Theme 1: Socio-cultural events

The disability activist group explained how the disability rights movement in Ireland was undergoing a significant period of change. As one female disability activist said in response to the question: What do you think about the disability rights movement in Ireland?

> I think it's in a kind of a change at the moment. The Centre for Independent Living are rebranding and they're having a day on the 22nd of September to kind of rebrand, and I'm going to that. They lost a lot. Martin Naughton died. John Doyle died. They were the guys that were kind of moving things along. I mean Martin Naughton, I knew him as well and he'd be like "we need younger people". At the time he was like "we're not gonna be around all the time". It's kind of getting young blood into activism. It is tricky to find the [younger] people that are interested in activism, it's trying to get them to kind of be more active. I know the chairwoman of the Centre for Independent Living, [X]. I know [X], so she's very involved in it all that. She's the new chairwoman. I'm not sure exactly why they're rebranding but they are rebranding. It's kind of trying to reinvigorate it because it's kind of gone asleep kind of. You need kind of younger people. There would be people that would be kind of like "oh yeah this is terrible, but they don't do anything about it". So, you just need to kind of go right. You need to walk the walk instead of just talking the talk. I mean that's me as well. I'm kind of like "oh this is terrible". At one time I might have been more like "right I'm gonna do something about this", but I'm not as much as I was. Sometimes things are just like banging your head against a brick wall. Especially if you go to politicians they'll spin you a line and nothing will change. I have very little faith in them (act1).

This theme captures four recent socio-cultural events that the participants said are influencing this period of change in disability activism. These events involve a leadership

vacuum resulting from the deaths of some prominent and influential disability activists in Ireland, intersectional social movements, austerity measures post 2008 Irish economic downturn, and the rise of online disability activism.

A leadership vacuum

Most of the disability activist group highlighted the recent deaths of some prominent Irish activist leaders as an event that influenced disability activism in Ireland. By this they meant that a sudden loss in leadership created a vacuum that is contributing to the changing landscape of disability activism in Ireland. As one female disability activist highlighted, "my politicisation which was through The Independent Living Movement. Martin Naughton and Donal Toolan, RIP. Donal has me where I am. I keep thinking about what would they think about what I did today" (act2). In her book *A bit Different: Disability in Ireland,* Pauline Conroy (2018) outlines 114 important events between 1684 and 2018 that have impacted social change around disability in Ireland. For example, the first Catholic School for the Deaf established in Cork in 1822, the Irish Wheelchair Association is formed in 1960, the first Minster of State of Disabilities appointed in 2016, and the first deaf person is called to jury service in 2017. Importantly, Conroy cites the deaths of two disability activists, Martin Naughton (in 2016) and Donal Toolan (in 2017), as events that have had a significant impact on the history of disability activism in Ireland (they are the only two activists mentioned in her 114 events). Conroy (2018) explained how Martin Naughton and Donal Toolan's activism was shaped by the independent living movement philosophy and UK social model of disability. A few of the disability activist group said that this leadership vacuum, along with the other events outlined below, had opened a space for different philosophical, strategic, generational and gendered approaches to disability activism to emerge in Ireland.

Austerity

Most of the disability activist group highlighted how austerity measures that followed from the 2008 Irish economic downturn as a socio-cultural event that influenced disability activism in Ireland. They explained how austerity measures shone a spotlight on disability inequality in Ireland. For example, participants said that austerity has influenced how disability is connected to poverty (e.g., cuts to benefits systems or reduction in income), work (e.g., how high unemployment has triggered a 'disabled people are lazy' stereotype), independence (e.g., a reduction to independence from cuts to care hours or charity funding) and housing (e.g., a lack of suitable and affordable housing) (see Ryan, 2019). This spotlight, they said, has fuelled individual activism, as well as how disability organisations engage in activism (i.e., disability charities becoming more politicalised and coordinated due to austerity). However, they also said that the event of austerity impacted on how disability activism is done. For example, one male activist explained how austerity had led to a culture of disability entitlements as opposed to disability rights, and how this effects activism. He said:

> Right, I think the problem is that in Ireland we have a lack of rights. We have legislation but we have a lack of rights. But we're overpopulated with entitlement. And that's why people I think are scared of challenging because they don't see it as a right, they see it as an entitlement. And entitlements can be given and they can be taken away. And that reduces activism (act7).

A few of this disability activist group also explained how austerity led to a focus on disability as only a socio-economic problem, with a focus on employment inequality. As one female activist said "And there's a whole culture then if you look at neoliberal stuff that goes on. 'Work will make you great'. Now this whole thing. The only action around disability seems to be around employment" (act2). Flynn (2017) argued that in Ireland "disabled people are expected to overcome austerity following the economic downturn by adhering to the

ideals of ableism, and the demands of reigning neo-liberal ableist capitalism" (p.151). She further argued that, for disabled people, a precarious sense of self becomes heightened in times of austerity. She went on to suggest that a critical disability studies perspective is useful in considering how austerity impacts disability activism because critical disability studies goes beyond only seeing disability as a socio-economic problem to take account of the complexity of the experience of disability across psychological, relational and cultural domains (Flynn, 2017).

Intersectional activism

Like the Para athlete group in chapter four, most of this disability activist group cited a progressive period of social change in Ireland as an event that has influenced the direction of disability activism. For instance, in 2018, the Irish government became one of the last countries in the world to ratify the 2006 United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). This event, coming after referendums on same-sex marriage (Yes Equality activist campaign) and abortion (Repeal the Eighth activist campaign) gave a platform to disability activists. In addition, these events contributed to a rise in intersectional activism; were disability activism and activists intersect with other forms of activism such as gender and race equality (Goodley, 2016). As one female disability activist explained:

> Through the referendum I've met a lot of younger disabled women who have suddenly found to be proud about their disability and equate that with feminism which they have been brought through feminism you know. They have been telling me you know mainstream education I was grand, but now "I'm in trouble. I don't know where to go, what to do. I want to move out of home or I want to do my own thing. I can't afford the type of accommodation I need. I can't get on the housing list". Whatever those issues are. You know they're facing up to so much and they've suddenly become radicalised to some extent you know.

Interviewer: And this is the intersectional feminism that we're talking about??

Yeah absolutely. And you see people being proud to take a photo of themselves. I don't know what the hashtags are but you know you'll see them. #disabledandcute I think. It's all that sort of stuff you know. And lots of people you know who are now talking about the need for fashion to be more accessible, the beauty world and whatever to be more encompassing of different types of bodies. To be proud of your body (act2).

Online activism

Some of the disability activist group highlighted the rise in online activism as a socio-cultural 'event' that has influenced disability activism in Ireland in different ways. For instance, they differentiated online activism from a "chained to the railings" old-style approach to activism. Such traditional 'stereotypical' forms of activism (e.g., protest marches), they said, did not guarantee traction with politicians or the media because they are sometimes perceived as a "passive approach" (act7). On top of this, participants said that there were many barriers to engaging in traditional forms of activism (e.g., gatherings outside of the Irish parliament). These barriers include cost linked to travel or unemployment, and accessibility because of marches that do not offer accessible routes or that are lacking in ramps, for instance. In contrast, the rise in online activism influenced the disability landscape because it is more accessible, it enables the formation of national and international communities and written activism allows people to absorb information and understand it in their own terms. In addition, online activism is intersectional, as one female disability activist said:

Online activism is a big part of what I do because I mightn't have the energy to go out and protest. You know I mightn't have the energy to navigate crowds. I mightn't be able to book the bus in time. So, I suppose sharing a lot of my life online. I'm very to the point with my views. You know I'm very anti-government. I'm very vocally

> outspoken about disability and about women's rights and about LGBT rights, and I get to a protest when I can (act5).

Theme 2: Philosophical and strategic differences

This theme is about how disability activism in Ireland is changing due to the consequences of socio-cultural events, such as those discussed in the previous theme. The participants said that disabled individuals and disability groups do activism in very different ways. These different ways can create tensions between disability activists and are, at times, problematic for enabling progressive social change. For example, some of this group highlighted how a collective voice, required to implement strong social change, was both lacking and needed in disability activism in Ireland due to diverse ways of doing activism. As one female disability activist said:

> There's a massive, I think personally, lack of cohesiveness about [disability activism]. And every time anybody tries to make an organisation that's cohesive there's five people doing that at the same time with different kind of focuses and different kind of aims. There's nobody that's kind of covering it all (act4).

These different focuses and aims, the disability activists explained, have resulted in tensions outlined in the next two sub-themes: *philosophical tensions* and *strategic tensions*.

Philosophical tensions

Most of this group of disability activists explained how there are philosophical tensions between disability activists in Ireland. By this they meant that, as a consequence of events such the leadership vacuum or the rise in progressive social movements in Ireland, disability activists increasingly differ in their identity politics. As Mallett and Runswick Cole (2014) explained, "identity politics is a term used when a person claims their identity as a member of an oppressed group or marginalised group and uses this as a point of departure for political action" (p.86). According to Mallett and Runswick Cole (2014), different identity positions,

in terms of political action, can come from a wide variety of philosophical sources. Some of this disability activist group, for instance, explained how there has been a rise in influential young female disability activists in Ireland that take an intersectional philosophy towards political action. Mallett and Runswick Cole (2014) drew on ideas from Crenshaw (1990) and defined intersectionality as:

> Intersectionality refers to an interdisciplinary methodology (way of studying) which is interested in the intersections between different social identities, especially between collective groups of minorities and the systems of oppression and discrimination with which they live. It has its roots in feminist sociology but it has broadened its focus to other minorities based on race, sexual orientation, class and disability. Its main insight is that conceptualisations of oppression which focus on only one identity (such as sexism, racism, homophobia or disablism) do not adequately address or examine the complex forms of oppression that result from interesting minority identities (p.99).

The participants from this group explained how these "intersectional feminist" disability activists had become politicised though considering how a politics of disability overlapped or conflicted with politics of gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity and so on. As one female disability activist said "I think activism is very much intersectional. I'm a bisexual young disabled woman. I'm part of the LGBT community. I'm part of the disabled community" (act5). Another female disability activist explained the different philosophies:

> And the other thing about it is I think there's definitely, not necessarily an age gap, but there's definitely, for example, some of the younger movement that I see, they're more focused on intersectionality, so how disability interacts with feminism or… That's kind of actually the main one because it's been obviously very prevalent in Ireland in the last few months. So there's been a great kind of catalyst and the referendum has been very useful that way. But then you have kind of the old crowd

> that won't talk about that, and they're talking a lot, I personally think about, independent living and concerned about you know people being put into nursing homes, and obviously that is perfectly fair. So, you've got kind of that side of things and you've got the other side of things, and then there's a few different ones in the middle. But those are kind of the two main ones [i.e., philosophies] that I see (act4).

This quote highlights how events, like the same sex marriage referendum in Ireland, influenced intersectional activist approaches among Irish disability activists. Moreover, it suggests how an 'intersectional' philosophy can be in tension with alternative forms of identity politics. For example, a few from this disability activist group highlighted how activism that is underpinned by an intersectional philosophy can be in tension with activism underpinned by either social oppression or biological impairment. In other words, what Hughes (2009) termed *social model stalwarts* (underpinned by oppression) or *biological citizens* (underpinned by impairment).

Social model stalwarts, said Hughes (2009), is a form of identity politics that claims disability on the bases of social oppression. In contrast, biological citizens claim impairment or biomedical diagnosis as their political point of departure (Hughes, 2009). The disability activist group explained how philosophical tensions arise because the *intersectional activists* are concerned with discourse, culture, representation, ableism, psychosocial well-being and disability pride. In contrast, the *social model stalwarts* are more concerned with structural and attitudinal barriers, independent living, political power, promoting disabled led organisations (i.e., "nothing about us without us"). Then the *biological citizens* are concerned with self-advocacy for the own impairment groups, social policy for health care, benefits and interventions. This quote from a male disability activist exemplifies philosophical tensions between disability activists in Ireland:

We have to think of a common ground "a rising tide floats all boats" so we are all moving together because "divide and conquer" has been done to the disability community all over the years. Some of our own activists and advocates are a bigger pain in the arse, you know the woman [X], the traveller in the wheelchair, the gay traveller in the wheelchair, well she turned around a few weeks ago and said "disability is a gay feminist issue". [Senator Y] comes back with [sarcastically] "so I'm a feminist now?", it was around Gay Pride and herself and [female activist] and [other female activist] were are going on about feminism, and how disability is a gay feminist issue only.

Interviewer: What did they mean by that?

I haven't a fucking clue, I was like "come on, it used to be traveller issue and now it's a feminist issue, and now it's a gay feminist issue, will you make up your mind!!". See I grew up the 80s, in Dublin, I marched in Pride when it was dangerous and now people are telling me I'm a male chauvinist!! They are making subsections of subsections of subsections and then it's just 'divide and conquer'. First it was gay, then lesbian and gay, then LGBT, now trans, ahh will you fuck off, I have a pain in me hole with it all (act8).

Strategic tensions

Closely related to philosophical tensions between disability activists, this group also talked about strategic tensions related to how disability activism is done in Ireland. For example, some of the 'older' participants in this group that I interpreted as 'social model stalwarts' (because of their affinity to an independent living philosophy) were concerned about how younger activists were doing activism. One male disability activist said "I'm worried, there are not many people coming up the ranks for two reasons. First is that people are given services too easily do not have to fight. The other thing is other thing is that activist are

looking after themselves, lobbing for their own needs" (act9). He then went on to say that younger 'celebrity' activists were, in his view, more individualistic in their activism in comparison to activists from his generation that were more politically strategic. He explained "the new influx of activists, I'm not sure if they are right people, they are being led by one are two people, maybe the wrong people because of their narrative, you have to be aware of politics, and they are not aware of the political context, when to put the boot in when not to"(act9). He went on to add, "I see people calling themselves independent but not realising how depended they are" (act9) thus suggesting that younger activists don't share the same meaning about independence and disability rights that 'the older generation' does.

Another strategic tension reported by this disability activists group was between an "educate and advocate" approach and a "calling out" approach. By an "educate and advocate" (act8) approach" they meant working *with* people and organisations to create social change, such as working with a transport organisation with an aim to educate them about accessibility. By a "calling out" approach they meant working *against* people and organisations to create social change, such as publicly shaming a transport organisation within an aim that they improve accessibility and change policy. As one female activist said:

> Some people are very focused on accessibility, and maybe you know if I was a wheelchair user and I came across more problems and stuff it would be harder and I would be more angry too, but some people just. There's one person I know and anything at all that isn't accessible or any time someone in the media says a wrong word or a bad word or something wrong they're picking up on it straight away and they're emailing them and they're contacting them. And I just think having all that anger and frustration all the time must be exhausting (act6).

The participants from this group explained that consequences of these tensions are a disability activism landscape in Ireland that can be perceived as philosophically divided or

strategically vague. As one female disability activist said; “one thing I would see in the disability rights movement is that it’s very nebulous I find” (act4). She went on to say that some activists are, “kind of in the nicest way possible *rebels without a cause*. They have a new cause every week. So they’ve got loads of passion but they don’t kind of come across very cohesive. It’s like “we need this, we need this!” and I’m like - what exactly what you need? Do you know what I mean?” (act4). Another female disability activist said that these tensions mean that some disability activists do not associate with other activists and that “there’s this cancel culture that people talk about. You know if someone does one thing wrong they’re like oh they’re cancelled, “we’re done with them” (act5).

Critical reflection: such a new and interesting experience for me.

Although I am experienced researching and interacting with Para athletes (my BSc and MSc research was also focused on Para sport), I had very little experience or knowledge about disability activism in Ireland before meeting members of the activist group. For instance, in my naiveté, I assumed that I would find disability activists in Ireland to be a co-ordinated group. This was not the case. Also, in comparison to the Para athlete group, I found that the disability activist group were ‘more’ enthusiastic about this research (it is about activism). For instance, whereas I often travelled around Ireland to ‘grab’ an interview with high-profile busy athletes, I found that some disability activists were much more willing to travel to meet me, sometimes at great distance.

Also, through this experience, I followed many fascinating disability activists online. There is no doubt that this new and interesting experience has influenced my interpretations of the data. For example, early in my PhD, I attended a disability activism seminar in Dublin in which a number of the participants could not make due to inaccessible Irish public transport. I found this experience to be both shocking and ‘eye-opening’.

This also made me reflect on the position of non-disabled researchers doing disability activism research. I recall early in my PhD process being invited to contribute to an online Twitter discussion about disability activism with disability activists. I initially though that this was a great opportunity to share my ‘expert’ evidence-based thoughts on activism/advocacy. However, over the years, I have avoided such ‘public’ engagement as I do not feel that I am the ‘right type of person’ and I perhaps that I would be taking up space. That said, I have published research on activism (e.g., in an expensive disability activism handbook) and given ‘expert’ talks in academic spaces that are inaccessible to many of my participants. I feel much safer engaging in these academic contexts, but it is deeply conflicting and concerning. I claim to be an ‘activist’ academic but at the same time I do not promote myself as a disability activist. Do not have all the answers to this concern but there is certainly ableism in academia that needs to be challenged.

Theme 3: Activist *areas to watch*

This theme captures areas that can be used to evaluate contemporary disability activism in Ireland. The disability activists said that the following areas will be important to continuously evaluate the direction of disability activism. Mallett and Runswick-Cole (2014) argued that social movements are formed with the purpose of change in mind and suggested criteria by which to judge disability activism. For example, whether public behaviour, specific legislation or political change has resulted from activism. Or whether disabled people have been empowered through consciousness raising as a result of activism. The disability activist group described the following activist areas to watch.

New emerging activist narratives

Some of the disability activist group said that the impact of new narratives will play an important role in evaluating disability activism, going forward. By this they meant that emerging narratives can become a medium for activism. Smith (2016) explained how narratives are a 'cultural recourse' that people, like activists, use to do things such as motivate action, enrol others in a cause or connect people to a social movement. This is because, as Smith (2016) said, stories about events imbue our experience with meaning. The participants offered one example of a new narrative to watch which was about how some disability labels (e.g., autism) are becoming celebrated and desirable in culture while other disability labels remain lamented (e.g., spinal cord injury or depression). As one female activist said:

> Say for example people with dyslexia. They don't necessarily see it as a disability because they also sometimes are very creative at the same time. Do you know what I mean? So they're like "yeah okay I have this impairment but this is the benefit that I have as a result of it". And I think we need to get that across the board. And it's

> actually coming to the forefront in autism. It's definitely changing and it's definitely the focus of that movement. It's very much not the focus on like – illness (act4).

Another emerging narrative to watch, said the disability activists, was the story of politicalised parents of disabled children. As one female disability activist said:

> But I do think, for example, the recent [abortion] referendum we have seen parents of children with Down Syndrome saying "DO NOT use my child in your campaign on either side". You know and I think that's a new narrative. That is parents who are quite politically, well they've become politicised because of the situation that's in front of them (act2).

By this she meant that the new story of non-disabled parents of disabled children actively challenging ableism is helping to promote disability as a human and civil rights issue. The more disability is a viewed as a rights issue and the less disability is viewed as a medical issue is one way to evaluate the success of disability activism in Ireland (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014). She said that this new narrative was important because one struggle for change in the Irish disability landscape was parental influence on how disabled people transition to adulthood. As Barnes (2007) explained:

> As the majority of disabled children have non-disabled parents with little knowledge of disability issues it is important to address their fears and concerns. It is equally important to recognize that several factors contribute to disabled young people's prolonged dependence on their families. These include the absorption of disability and child related benefits into the familial budget, parental over protection, unemployment and underemployment, lack of peer contact, and the cumulative emotional and psychological implications of social exclusion known variously as 'felt stigma' or 'internal oppression' (Barnes, 2017, p214).

A further emerging narrative to watch, said the disability activist group, were the increasing narrative of 'empowerment and inclusion' and the deceasing narrative of 'emancipation and rights'. They said that a narrative of 'empowerment and inclusion' of disabled people was increasingly popular but, at the same time, it is vague, ambiguous, harder to implement change with and easy to ignore. In contrast, a narrative of 'emancipation and rights' is underpinned by political and social models of disability that are harder to ignore but becoming less popular in some contexts. As one male disability activist said:

> But somehow along the line people talk about [disabled] people being empowered. I totally disagree with empowerment. People are emancipated. We should have an emancipatory approach whereby we enable people to understand the power that they have. A passive approach is an empowerment approach because we're telling people that they have power. But we don't actually enable them to understand the power that they have. When they block a bus from going down the street. When they chain themselves to an office. When they blockade the council meeting in Donegal to campaign against cuts to services. To ask why do disabled people have to wait ten times longer who are homeless, who are living in inappropriate accommodation that that's acceptable. Why are we not there blockading their meeting and therefore preventing them from doing something. That's an emancipatory approach because what we've said is that you have power and you can use it (act7).

Mainstreaming

Most of the disability activist group said that the impact of mainstreaming will also play an important role in evaluating disability activism going forward. By this they meant that there is a relationship between engagement in activism and how young disabled people experience increasingly inclusive environments such as 'mainstream' schools, universities and sports clubs. They said that this relationship is important to watch because disabled people may be

less likely to become politicised and engage in ‘activism’ or ‘advocacy’ who are 'included' or 'mainstreamed'. As one female disability activist highlighted:

> For a lot of years, it was that attitude that stopped me from engaging with disability activism. You know I was so eager to be mainstreamed. You know I went to an all-Irish primary school. I went to an all-Irish secondary school. You know, mainstream schools. I never would have considered going to a disability club. I was like “no that’s not my scene, they’re not my people”, you know because I had this view on what disability was. You know as I got older and when I was making my documentary I fell into the community really. It was completely accidental as most things are when it comes to activism. I was like oh hold on, maybe being disabled isn’t actually the worst thing in the world (act5).

A few of the activist group further argued how disabled people can eschew disability activism as a result of mainstreaming because of a lack of interaction with other disabled people while growing up. As one female disability activist said:

> And there’s an impact of mainstreaming on people’s expectations. You know they went to school and they were with their able-bodied friends and they went to college. But you come to the end of college and you lose all your supports because they’re not out there the other side. There’s a lot of disabled people in mainstream who don’t want to know other disabled people. They’re ashamed of their disability. There’s a lot of that stuff that goes on. They don’t know how to cope. This cohort in their twenties that I see, and people suddenly going “oh I am disabled and I’m now faced with not getting on the bus or not getting a job or not being able to go to the nightclub or not going through the rite of passage the same as my able-bodied peers, and I don’t know any other disabled people to talk to. What do I do?” (act2).

Language and representation

Most disability activists said language and representation will be an important area to watch. By language, the participants meant that challenging discourse (i.e., how disabled people are talked about and communicated) is coming to the forefront of disability activism, and how this area will be increasingly important going forward. As one female disability activist said:

> So, language is a massive thing around disability. There's this big debate about do you call it a disabled person or a person with a disability? That one annoys me. Bigger fish to fry. My rule of thumb is I say I can call myself a disabled person. I won't get offended if anybody calls me a disabled person. But if you want to be PC and just say a person with a disability. But then people get irate over it…But language is very important. The easiest example is mental health conditions. You know calling somebody psycho is not acceptable anymore. Or you know skitzo is obviously not acceptable. That was a little bit more acceptable a few years ago. There's the R word which is now acceptable nowhere….Those kind of messages are harder to get across to people (act4).

The ways that disability is talked about is important because activists feel language can perpetuate stereotypes of disability. As Mallett and Runswick-Cole (2014) said "It has been argued that stereotypes of people with impairments often correspond to individual and medical model ideas of disability. An example of this would be in how they 'negatively' associate having an impairment with leading a restricted and unfulfilling life. In relation to this, ideas of charity, pity and tragedy are overlooked" (p.57). The activists in this study explained that cultural stereotypes of disability come in many forms such as perpetuating disabled people as pitiable, an economic burden or an inspiration for 'overcoming the odds'. They said these stereotypes can be experienced in many different social interactions and contexts such as on the media or even during close encounters with others. The activist group

said that language used to talk about disability is increasingly important because of the connection with stereotypes, and how disabled people are expected to emotionally labour (see Wharton, 2009) in response to stereotypes. As Goodley (2014) said:

> emotional labour refers to those times when the self has to act in ways that fit the expectations of others. Disabled people learn biographical responses to the expectations of non-disabled culture – the demanding public – which might range from acting as the passive disabled bystander, the grateful recipient of others' support, the non-problematic receiver of others' disabling attuites. Maintaining this emotional labour can be psychologically testing (p.63).

In addition to language, that activist group said that representation is an important area to watch. One area to watch they said was disability representation within disability activism. For example, a few disability activists drew on the well-known disability slogan "nothing about us without us" (act4) to explain how some disability experiences are missing from disability activism. As one female activist said "There's pecking orders in the disability community. That's one of the things that really annoyed me was the way in which people in some movements look down on people with intellectual disabilities. And you have the acquired who look down on the people who were born with disability and all of that stuff you know" (act2). Or as another female disability activist explained:

> There's something about us without us within us. It gets very confusing. I think it's very problematic because for the same reason as it's problematic to have people who don't have disabilities representing people with disabilities, you don't get the same nuances and you don't get the same depth, and you don't get the same focusing on areas (act4).

Another area to watch, they said, was disability representation in cultural contexts (e.g., in sport or in the media). For example, most of this group grappled with ideas about how disability will be represented, or should be represented, in the media going forward. By this they meant that how commonly recurring media stereotypes of disabled people are challenged (e.g., pitiable, burden, object of ridicule or the super-cripple who positively overcomes disability) will an important area to watch in disability activism (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014). For example, a few of this group explained that an example of progressive media representation in movies, is when disability is visible but not the whole story of a character. A few of this group also talked about the possible value of disability pride in disability representation, as one female disability activist said:

> There's a danger around positivity. Smiley happy shiny Crips versus the whole angry Crips. I get it. It's hard to be the thing in the middle you know. That's why the pride thing is, I think the pride thing is a useful thing because it doesn't go through the positivity overcoming always smiling thing. It's more about in your face and yeah we're gonna get on with it and we're gonna have a party and we're gonna fight for rights and stuff like that you know (act2).

Critical discussion

In this chapter, I captured an understanding of the disability activism landscape in Ireland from the perspective of the *disability activist group*. The findings from this chapter contribute to the wider aims of my thesis in several ways. First, it is useful to compare and contrast the Para athlete group (chapter four) with the disability activist group in regard to disability and social change. Although most of the Para athlete group reported to know little specifically about the landscape of disability activism in Ireland, their ideas and opinions about social change overlap with the disability activist group in significant ways. For example, both groups highlighted the significance of online activism, representation, progressive social

change in Ireland, intersectionality, language and celebrity activists. This is an important finding because, as I will argue in later chapters (e.g., chapter seven), Para athletes can 'be' activist without identifying as *an* activist and can 'do' activism without intentionally or consciously *acting* to create socio-political change.

Second, the findings in this chapter are useful in terms of evaluating Para athlete activism. In response to my first research question about how disability activism is changing in Ireland, I captured the importance of socio-cultural events. Therefore, researchers should consider events as an important factor that inferences the direction of Para athlete activism. For example, in chapter seven I discuss how Para athletes use events in their careers, such as the Paralympic Games, to build their activist platforms. In response to my second question about how disability activism is done, I highlighted the importance of philosophical and strategic differences. This theme illuminates the significance of identity politics in disability activism. As Mallett and Runswick-Cole (2014) said, "already a complex construct, identity becomes even more so when exploring the experiences of individuals in multiple minority groups" (p.86). I will show in later chapters how this becomes even more complex when incorporating an athletic identity. In response to my third question about the future of disability activism, I highlighted four areas to evaluate contemporary disability activism that I believe researchers should consider important. For example, in the following three chapters, I will connect Para athlete activism to narratives, mainstreaming, language and representation.

Chapter summary

This chapter was about the landscape of disability activism in Ireland. In a similar way to chapter four, this chapter can also be considered as a base-layer to the rest of the thesis. As well as being able to contextualise Para athlete activism within the wider landscape of disability activism in Ireland, this chapter will also have practical implications for promoting disability activism. For example, in chapter eight, I critique the International Paralympic

Committee's ambitions to promote disability activism through Para sport at national levels. I will argue that an understanding of disability activism at national levels will have important implications for the realisation of such ambitions. Before this however, in the next two chapters I will focus on how Para athletes act to improve Para sport and/or wider society for disabled people.

Chapter Six: Para athlete activism for Para sport improvement

Chapter overview

This chapter will address the third central research question of this thesis - how do Para athletes advocate for social change within Para sport contexts? The particular focus of this chapter is an understanding of how Irish Para athletes act to improve Para sport. Firstly, in line with critical disability studies perspective (i.e., utilising an eclectic range of theories and disciplines), the field of Para sport management will be introduced as the theoretical backdrop for this chapter. After this, three themes will be presented that draw on data from the Para athlete group. The first theme addresses the research question: what areas within Para sport do athletes want to see social change, and why do they want to see social change? This theme is termed *advocacy areas within Para sport* – and captures four areas in Para sport where athletes in this study believe that advocacy is required. The second theme addresses the research question: how, if at all, do Para athletes act to create social change within Para sport contexts? This theme is called '*front stage' and 'back stage' advocacy* – and is about how Para athletes advocate in different ways in public and non-public contexts. The third theme addresses the research question: what challenges do Para athletes face when creating social change within Para sport contexts? This theme is termed – *how power mediates advocacy* – and concerns challenges to how Para athletes advocate by highlighting four paradoxical ways in which power operates in the lives of Para athletes. Following the results as connected to each theme, I will add a layer of critical discussion to help contextualise the findings here within the wider Para sport management literature. Taken together, this chapter contributes to the field of Para sport management by offering a comprehensive heuristic to support Para athletes in advocating for social change within Para sport contexts. Most participants in this study constructed and performed what Smith et al.

(2016) termed a *sporting activist identity* defined as "a type of identity that advocates for change inside sport for the purpose of transforming policy, practices, and organisations that are believed to restrict one's own individual or team sporting success" (p.141). Most Para athletes also welcomed new ideas from research to help manage their sporting activist identities.

Critical refection: Para sport in Ireland is a small world

Throughout this PhD I was practically involved in managing Para sport in Ireland. As a board member of a Para sport national governing body (NGB), I have personally advocated for social change in some areas. For example, I used my research knowledge about barriers to participation in Para sport to secure funding for a 'women in Para sport' project. I have also been more involved in, what I term in the PhD, bottom-tier Para sport contexts. This experience has shaped my thinking and my interpretations of that data, I believe. For example, because I knew some of the 'bottom-tier' athletes personally some of the issues brought up in the conversations were, in a way, obvious to me.

This is problematic because, in a sense, I was too close to the context; the interviews might have gone a different direction had I not known some of the participants or had others not known I was involved in Para sport. Also, I found that this type of research inevitably involves people bringing up personal grievances. For example, on a few occasions I found myself changing the conversation when it felt like I was 'gossiping' about people. This connects with my attempts to be ethical in action (i.e., relational ethics, Sprakes and Smith, 2014). On the one hand I felt that sometimes I missed out on great data towards my research aims, on the other hand, I was not always comfortable about discussing mutual connections. Para sport in Ireland is a small world.

Para sport management

Thinking with critical disability studies requires connecting with an eclectic range of theories and disciplines. Accordingly, this chapter connects, theoretically, to the discipline of sport management and in particular the sub-field of Para sport management. Recent sport management research aimed at improving Para sport has highlighted a need to capture the perspective of Para athletes. For instance, Patatas and her colleagues (Patatas, De Bosscher, & Legg, 2018; Patatas, De Bosscher, Derom, & De Rycke, 2020) interviewed stakeholders (e.g., high performance directors) to find specific policy factors to improve Para sport and argued that "Para-athletes' lived experiences of their sports careers would add further insights

to the findings" (Patatas, De Bosscher, De Cocq, Jacobs, & Legg, 2019 p.19). Likewise, Evans et al (2018) developed a framework to improve psychological wellbeing for athletes within Para sport contexts. However, they argued that "evidence tying program conditions to athletes' perceptions of Para sport experiences was limited" (Evans et al, 2018 p.88). Recent sport management research aimed at improving Para sport has also highlighted a need for scholars to engage critically with disability studies and disability theory (see Kerr, & Howe, 2017). For example, Para sport management scholars have engaged with disability theory to work towards improving: access to participation (e.g., Howe, & Silva, 2018); psychological well-being (e.g., Smith & Perrier, 2015); transitions to retirement (e.g., Bundon et al., 2018) the media (mis)representation of Para athletes (e.g., Kearney et al., 2019; McPherson et al., 2016); the Para sport classification system (e.g., Howe & Kitchin, 2017); and the standard of coaching within Para sport contexts (e.g., Townsend et al., 2015). The three following themes contribute to these recent developments in Para sport management literature.

Theme 1: Advocacy areas within Para sport

This theme describes four areas of advocacy where athletes in this study felt social change is required: 'visibility and respect'; 'leadership and coaching'; 'funding and sponsorship'; 'classification and participation'. The participants argued that advocacy for social change is required in these areas to empower Para athletes and Para sports in different ways. Most participants in this study drew on *social comparison* (Sabiston & Pila., 2014) as a rhetorical device to justify a need for advocacy in these areas. That is, they argued that advocacy is needed by *comparing* social change in these four areas to other sports, other athletes or other countries. As one bottom tier female Para athlete said: "Disability sports aren't funded nowhere near as much as able-bodied sports. Which means obviously competing is a lot more difficult both individually for the athlete and also collectively as a team" (ath20).

Visibility and respect

'Visibility and respect' means that advocacy is required to increase the amount of media coverage given to Para sports and to challenge any disrespecting attitudes towards Para athletes. That is, the participants believed that increased visibility can empower Para athletes and Para sports in various ways, such as improved access to sponsorship and funding for bottom tier Para athletes. Disrespecting attitudes, they said, comes in the form of three disability stereotypes that are well documented in Para sport management research (see Rees, Robinson, & Shields, 2017). These are a) the 'supercrip' stereotype (see Grue, 2015) when Para athletes are assumed to be overcoming their disability through 'superhuman' determination, b) the 'tragedy' stereotype, when Para athletes are depicted as courageous for merely participating in sport, and c) the 'inspirational porn' stereotype (see Grue, 2016) when Para athletes are contextualised as inspirational people for a non-disabled audience. The athletes said that these disrespecting attitudes can be experienced in various Para sport contexts such as daily interactions with non-disabled people, media depictions of Para athletes and the discourse used to market and promote Para sport. For instance, most Para athletes in this study explained why the Paralympic values - 'inspiration', 'determination' and 'courage' - are a type of 'disrespecting attitude' (see McNamee, 2017 for a critique of the Paralympic Values). As one bottom tier female Para athlete explained:

> The Paralympic values are much more about overcoming adversity. And like yeah basically I think that whole [television advertisement] campaign about 'superhuman' like it's all about "aren't these individuals incredible for playing sport"… I don't really like the metaphor of 'superhuman' because I feel like they're not really. People who are Paralympic athletes aren't 'superhuman'. They're just human. And yeah they're competing at a very high level and they do have additional challenges to everyone else but I don't think they're 'superhuman'. They're still only human at the

> end of the day you know. And I think just emphasising the whole kind of *determination* and *courage* and all this sort of thing, it kind of brings you back to the fact of "oh aren't they great" (ath20).

The athletes said that these disrespecting attitudes can be disempowering because, when repeatedly experienced, they can result in a form of psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve,2014). By this they meant Para athletes can internalise these attitudes and place limitations on athletes and Para sport becoming something affirmative and feeling valued.

Critical refection: researcher generated elicitation and accessibility.

Throughout the interviews, on occasions, I used elicitation techniques to provoke a conversation. On the whole I found this to be useful in terms of data collection, and it was also a fun way of breaking up the conversation. However, this had accessibility implications for my research, I believe. For example, I showed Para athletes images and videos of different forms of activism or Paralympic discourses (e.g., the Paralympic values). For visually impaired participants I would then ask about accessibility (e.g., would you like me to describe the image?). This was usually appropriate but on one occasion, a participant was very critical that I had not made the video truly accessible. This made me uncomfortable as the project was, in many ways, about access. This is an example of how access never truly means access and researchers claims of inclusivity should be treated with scepticism.

Leadership and coaching

'Leadership and coaching' means that advocacy is needed to improve disability-specific knowledge among some "decision makers" in Para sport contexts. In other words, the participants said that some coaches, national governing bodies and sport directors don't understand or respect the nuances of Para sport and/or the lived experience of disability. They explained that improved disability-specific knowledge can improve Para athletes' development across many stages of their careers by empowering Para athletes with, in the conceptual language of Bourdieu (1986), *social or cultural capital*. Social and cultural capital are types of power resources (e.g., access to media visibility, high performance coaching, sport science) that flows to individuals perceived to be respected members of a group (see

Brittain, Biscaia, & Gérard, 2019). For example, some Para athletes said that contexts within Para sport where leadership and coaching lack disability-specific knowledge can result in oppressive behaviours and disrespecting attitudes. As one top tier female Para athlete said:

> There needs to be more retired Para athletes coming into coaching to bring that understanding of disability through. Yeah it is important because you know you have different needs when you go away like. You need to know. Your coaches need to know when you get away you know that you need access to bathrooms. You know it's not okay to just manage for four days like you know. So, they need that level of understanding as well that you can't travel for 38 hours you know without lying down for a while. You know different issues like that. There does need to be an understanding of that. I know sometimes it's kind of you know "you're an athlete and we're not paying any attention to your disability" And it's like – no! (ath31).

Funding and sponsorship

'Funding and sponsorship' means that advocacy is required so Para athletes and Para sports receive improved access to economic capital. Economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Brittain et al., 2019) includes financial resources such as income and money that play a key role in empowering the development of Para athletes. Brittain et al. (2019) argued that a lack of economic capital within Para sport contexts is mediated by the consequence of an ableist ideology. By this they mean Para athletes face specific economic barriers (e.g., cost of equipment, travel for competitive sport opportunities) and, at the same time, there is a normative preference for economic capital flow towards non-disabled sports (Brittain et al., 2019). For instance, most participants said that more access to funding and sponsorship can improve performance for bottom tier Para athletes as well as visibility for top tier Para athletes. As one top tier male Para athlete said:

> If you look at any other sport, I mean, I've been competing in Paralympics sports since 2005, as I've said. I've won fifteen to twenty gold medals and never been beaten in Para sport in my whole career. But if you pick any other sport in the world that Ireland had somebody who was unbeaten for twelve years and won that many gold medals, you would never hear the end of it. But yet again, how many people know [me]? Well, it's not going to be massive numbers, do you know what I'm saying? So there right away tells you, there's a difference somewhere. Because how many people in global sport have went over ten years unbeaten? That says it for itself (ath14).

Classification and participation

'Classification and Participation' first means advocacy is required to increase participation in various areas of Para sport. That is, participants said increased participation specifically for female athletes and athletes with higher support needs is required (see Slocum, Kim, & Blauwet, 2018) and also increases in participation is needed, generally, at recreational and elite level. As one top tier male Para athlete said:

> I think participation anyway across internationally and nationally a lot of work needs to be done to increase it. I separate two things. One is participation in general for people with disabilities in sport. That's one thing. The second thing is participation in international sport for people with disabilities. I think they're two separate issues but both of them need to be addressed significantly….Participation is important just from the point of view of social issues, but then participation at high level is important because I think the Paralympic sport will gain a higher level of interest and exposure when there is tighter competition across all categories, which is not always the case (ath29).

Related to participation, these athletes explained that advocacy is needed for a consistent, fair, correct and clearly communicated classification system. As one top tier male Para athlete said:

> Classification is a big problem. Now not for me. I'm lucky that in my class there's guys that are worse than me in my class. There is classes where you see guys and they're not in the right class. It doesn't affect me but there's guys that actually should be in my class that are in a lower one. And it would probably affect me because they'd be probably quicker than me. They're winning it in a class that they shouldn't be in, winning medals easy (ath1).

Patatas et al. (2020) described the classification system as a Para sport management policy factor that influences athletes' career in its entirety, from the attraction phase to the retirement phase. The athletes argued that changes in the classification system could have a number of empowering effects such as increased participation and improved access to sponsorship and visibility.

Theme 2: 'Front-stage' and 'back-stage' advocacy

This theme is about how and when Para athletes advocate in the different areas described in the previous theme. That is, the participants in this study described different actions, as well as contexts, in which to create social change. Drawing on Goffman's (1974) concept of 'front-stage' and 'back-stage' performances, and Goffman inspired work by Roderick and Allen-Collinson (2020) on social interactions among athletes, two sub-themes are key here.

Advocating from the 'front stage'

For Roderick and Allen-Collinson (2020), when athletes with high-profiles perform from the 'front-stage' they are working to persuade specific audiences in public contexts (e.g., interactions with types of media). Then because 'front-stage' performances are impacted in different ways by perceived public scrutinization, athletes also work from the 'back-stage'.

‘Back-stage’ work happens in a perceived ‘safer’ non-public space (e.g., interactions within sports organisations) when athletes can act in a more authentic character and are not under pressure to display certain ‘front-stage’ (i.e., public) characteristics (Roderick & Allen-Collinson, 2020).

Advocating from the ‘front stage’ here means advocacy behaviour perceived to be open to scrutiny from a public audience (i.e., in a public context). For instance, most participants in this study said that they advocated for Para sport in various ‘public’ contexts (e.g., social media, mainstream media, podcasts, school talks, public events, conferences). Two types of ‘front stage’ advocacy, termed *passive* advocacy and *proactive* advocacy, are interpreted in the data.

Athletes said that they engaged in *passive* advocacy when they perceived that they had little power to create change in public contexts. Passive here means actions that are unreflective in contrast to strategic in nature. One example of passive advocacy is when a bottom tier Para athlete (i.e., low public profile) makes an unreflective comment in a public interview about general lack of funding for Para sports. Another example is when a top tier Para athlete ‘lends their profile’ to an advocacy event (e.g., an event to increase participation in Para sports) but in a disengaged (i.e., passive) way. As one top tier female Para athlete said:

> I have to do a talk in a university tomorrow [sighs]. They're doing like a vision sports day. So it's kind of like they're getting people to come in and like do sports but like blindfolded or whatever, get the experience of doing the sport. I think there are going to be athletes there who are visually impaired who are like talking about their experience in sport. So like maybe like because I think they want someone who has vision impairment, saying like ‘Oh well this is what I do or you know’… they just wanted me to be the guest speaker.

Interviewer: Do you know what you're going to say?

[no] they were like, 'Just come and talk about you' and I was like, 'Okay', so I usually get there and I'll like suss it out, do you know what I mean? I talk at conferences and stuff like.

Interviewer: Is tomorrow something you want to do?

I mean [sighs]. Yes. Like I don't mind (ath8).

In contrast to these passive actions, athletes also engaged in *proactive* advocacy performances in the 'front-stage'. Proactive means actions that are strategic in nature in contrast to unreflective. Participants said that proactive advocacy happens when Para athletes perceived that they had power to influence social change in public contexts (e.g., media interviews). At times, Para athletes engaged in forms of proactive advocacy that risked the withdrawal of power resources. For example, Para athletes in this study said they risked the withdrawal of economic capital (i.e., financial support) when they proactively choose to take legal action against Para sport organisations to challenge qualification processes, or when a Para athlete retires from top tier Para sport altogether because of an unfair classification process. A few participants also said they risked the withdrawal of social capital (i.e., visibility, trust) when they proactively choose to publicly call out national sports awards for not recognising Para athletes. One top tier female Para athlete, for example, explained how she proactively refused to speak to certain media that disrespected Para athletes:

There was not one Irish journalist over for [the World Championships], not one like! And we [the Irish team] nearly came up with a pact, coming back into the airport, that we wouldn't talk to Irish journalists because it was like - "If you want to talk to us about World Championship's experience you probably should have been there, not just welcome us home in the airport!!"…..then [national television station] wanted to

> do an interview with me when I came home [from the World Championships]. Then the hour before the interview, they're like "we're going to have to cancel it completely" and I was like, "Why??" And then they rang back saying, "Now we found 60 seconds for you at the end of the show". I was like, "No!". The request [to go on the show] came through *Paralympics Ireland* and I went back to *Paralympics Ireland* and I was like, "you can tell them to Fuck-off". I was like "you're actually joking me - do you want to cover us or not?? if you want to cover us you actually give us a slot, you know, not these 60 seconds at the end". I'll never go on [national television station] again, you'll never see me on [national television station] (ath16).

At other times, in contrast to these high-risk actions, Para athletes engaged in more subtle forms of proactive advocacy in 'front stage' contexts. Writing letters to media companies to request more Para sport visibility or actively promoting Para sport through their own social media platforms are subtle ways of advocating for increased visibility and respect, the athletes said. The athletes in this study also explained how these subtle forms allowed them create change in a proactive way without being publicly positioned as ungrateful or risking the withdrawal of power resources (e.g., economic, social or cultural capital). Goodley (2016) explained this experience as a form of *emotional labour* when disabled people are under pressure to regulate emotion (e.g., not displaying anger in public contexts) for fear of being positioned as resentful, unhinged or ungrateful. For example, a few athletes also spoke of how they learned, with experience, to subtly led lead journalists away from disrespecting attitudes in real time. As one bottom tier female Para athlete said:

> When I had the interview with the [national newspaper] they were kind of trying to go down that line, like "oh the diagnosis, was it horrible? how was that for you? for your parents? were your parents devastated?" And I was just kind of not going there. I was trying to steer them away from that [disrespecting attitude]. I think a lot of the time

> [media] want the sob story. They want the "aw look at me, isn't this dreadful, isn't this awful". Whereas I think it needs to be more positive.
>
> **How do you steer? What do you do?**
>
> Well with that Interview I kind of just kept bringing it to a positive note that "oh yeah obviously it was hard but bla bla bla I'm now in college. I'm now doing this. You have to just accept it and move on" (ath20).

Advocating in the 'back-stage'

Advocating in the 'back-stage' means advocacy behaviour in non-public contexts. For example, most athletes said they advocated for social change in contexts perceived not to be open to scrutiny from a public audience (e.g., formal/informal interactions with coaches or leaders in Para sport). In these 'back-stage' contexts athletes, at times, also performed advocacy in *passive* ways when they perceived they had little power to create change themselves. For instance, to draw attention to 'prejudice' coaching and leadership (i.e., lacking in disability-specific knowledge) athletes said they utilised sarcasm, gossip or passive aggression (e.g., ignoring requests/demands). Some athletes also said that they passively deferred responsibly for advocacy to others within Para sport contexts such as more senior athletes, top tier athletes, national governing bodies or sponsors. As one top tier female Para athlete said:

> I'm sponsored by [company] and I would know the like head of all the marketing and stuff really, really well and he's always [advocating on my behalf]. So we have good people doing [advocacy] work in the background, yeah. And it's really nice to see like someone just believing in it so much (ath13).

In contrast to these passive actions, the Para athletes here also engaged in *proactive* advocacy when they perceived they had more power to create change in the 'back-stage'. For example,

some (10 to be exact) athletes in this study proactively sought formal decision-making roles within Para sport structures, such as joining athletes' commissions or serving as board members in Para sport organisations. In these formal contexts, depending on perceived power to create change, athletes adopted different styles of advocacy ranging in tone from more congenial to more confrontational (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2014). As well as formal contexts, the athletes highlighted informal contexts in which to proactively advocate from the 'back-stage'. For instance, most Para athletes in the study were concerned with negative effect of parental attitudes (e.g., overprotective parents) on the confidence of young disabled athletes, and a few athletes took proactive responsibility to challenge overprotective parents within Para sport contexts. A few athletes also spoke about being hypervigilant to discriminatory interactions within Para sport contexts. As one top tier female athlete said:

> When I was at the World's in 2015 in Qatar I was walking with three other girls, all would be of short stature, and these volunteers came over and were like "Oh look at you, you're so cute, can we take a picture?" I was just like, "No! back off! girls come on, we're going". They just wanted a picture because we're so different and I'm like "back off!" I didn't freak out or anything but I just put the foot down and I was like, "I'm not allowing this, like you're volunteering at a sports event for disabled people".
>
> **Interviewer: How do you feel after doing that?**
>
> I suppose it's like any argument you have like when you run it in your head. If it's just a general curiosity then fair enough… but we're very sensitive to this type of thing (ath16).

Theme 3: How power mediates advocacy

This theme concerns challenges to how Para athletes advocate. Presented here are paradoxical ways in which power, as relational, mediates how Para athletes act to create social change. That is the participants explained that access to power resources (e.g., forms of

social/cultural capital) can enable advocacy, and at the same time, forms of power (e.g., institutional or ideological norms) can prevent Para athletes from advocating. This theme draws on literature from cultural sport psychology that considers how different forms of power (e.g., physical, social, environmental, institutional or ideological power) operate in the lives of athletes (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Schinke, Blodgett, Ryba, Kao, & Middleton, 2019). The following four *paradoxical* ways that power mediates how Para athletes act to create social change are interpreted from the data.

The visibility paradox

The visibility paradox means Para athletes empowered with public visibility that enables them to create social change are, paradoxically, prevented from creating change by two forms of institutional power.

The participants said that top tier Para athletes with opportunities to advocate from the "front-stage" (i.e., high profile athletes with public visibility and media training) can use this power resource (i.e., social/cultural capital) to create social change (e.g., publicly challenge disrespecting stereotypes). Paradoxically, however, two forms of institutional power prevent Para athletes empowered with public visibility from creating social change. The first form of institutional power involves hegemonic ableism within mainstream media. That is media representation favours more 'able-bodied' Para athletes from more 'able-bodied' Para sports. For example, Brittain and Beacom (2016) argued that this favouritism that is interconnected to the continued 'Olympicification' of Para sport where more 'able-bodied' Para athletes access more sporting opportunities and sporting success (i.e., social/cultural capital). This means that mainstream media, with a tendency to stereotype disability (Rees et al., 2017), is 'offered' a representation of disability from Para sport that lacks heterogeneity. The second form of institutional power comes from elite Para sport organisations. This is because top tier Para athletes receive media training that requires them to advocate for the public to "see the

sporting ability and not the disability". Some Para athletes therefore tend to avoid advocating for disability issues and "stick to sport". As one top tier female Para athlete said, "like a lot of athletes do try and paint this like polished image. And sometimes that's the governing body like Paralympics Ireland, who are kind of making that happen" (ath16). Moreover, bottom tier Para athletes without access to social/cultural capital (i.e. limited public visibility and media training) struggle to challenge disrespecting attitudes in media interviews. As one bottom tier male Para athlete said:

> I think we aren't trained in the media to maybe divert them [presenters] away from [disrespecting attitudes]. Lure them in with that and then direct them away. Footballers get asked about things that they don't want to talk about all the time, but they're gonna have extensive media training. The media are gonna want to ask things that you don't wanna talk about. We just aren't as well equipped.
>
> **Interviewer: Is there a need for [bottom tier] athletes to be educated in these type of things?**
>
> Oh yeah I think there is, but that costs money. You don't get a lot of air time so the amount of money it would cost it's not probably worth doing (ath11).

The leadership paradox

The leadership paradox is the perception that 'non-disabled' leadership can both empower and, paradoxically, disempower Para sports.

The participants explained that there is an increasing trend in Ireland for Para sports to move from disability sport governance (e.g., *Irish Wheelchair Association-Sport*) to non-disability sport governance (e.g., *Table Tennis Ireland*). They said that this trend is carried out in the name of empowering disabled athletes (e.g., social inclusion). However, this move presents a challenge to advocating for leadership with improved disability-specific

knowledge, as one top tier female Para athlete highlighted, “Inclusion doesn’t have to be kind of everyone together” (ath31). By this, she meant, that there is a paradoxical perception within Para sports that ‘non-disabled’ leadership can empower Para sports in various ways (e.g., improved access to economic capital) and, at the same time, disempower Para sports in various ways (e.g., disrespectful attitudes towards Para sports). As another top tier female Para athlete said:

> I think funding will improve now that a lot of the disabled sports are connected with their able-bodied counterparts. That’s the way a lot of disability sport is going now. They’re looking for the able-bodied counterpart to be the governing body.
>
> **Interviewer: This is the advantage of being under an able-bodied governing body?? but is there a disadvantage?**
>
> Yes they still don’t support the para sections as they do the able-bodied section. They treat them worlds apart. Which I think is ridiculous because they should be treated on par with each…. Maybe disabled sports [move in this direction because they] just think there’s more [opportunity for] publicity and more people follow able-bodied sports more than they follow para sports, and maybe that’s it (ath12).

The sponsorship and funding paradox

The *sponsorship and funding paradox* means advocating for economic capital can, paradoxically, perpetuate disempowering ideologies.

The participants explained that increased access to economic capital (i.e., sponsorship and funding) can empower Para athletes. However, they said that, at times, accessing sponsorship and funding involves perpetuating disempowering stereotypes. For instance, some Para athletes spoke about their discomfort with pressure to “play the charity card” to obtain funding through *GoFundMe* pages or “shaking buckets” outside non-disabled sports

events. Some other Para athletes spoke about perpetuating the dominant medical model of disability ideology (see Smith, & Bundon, 2018) by feeling pressure to position their lives as sad, limited or tragic in order to obtain sponsorship. As one male bottom tier athlete said:

> I don't agree with the sob stories. I hate even trying to get sponsorship or whatever they're always like aw you have to sound really pitiful and sad or whatever. I'm like no. that's not me. I'm not sad. This is my life. Just because [disability is] in my life doesn't mean I'm sad…. It's a shame it has to be that way. But I think there's no other way it can be. Because even Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby team, when they lost their funding they done the whole sob story. They were like "these athletes have to go back now. They're not professional athletes anymore. They won't be able to afford to play rugby or whatever" And I was like "that's a load of crap like" (ath2).

The classification paradox

The *classification paradox* means changes to the classification system can empower Para sport generally and, paradoxically, disempower Para athletes specifically.

The participants explained that, on the one hand, advocating for changes to the classification system can improve Para sport. For instance, advocating for the addition of more impairment categories within Para sport can make Para sport generally more inclusive, competitive and popular. On the other hand, a few Para athletes avoided advocating for improved classification when they perceived a threat to 'their' power as Para athletes specifically. For example, a few athletes explained that changes to the classification system could push them out of their sport as they could not compete (see Patatas et al., 2020). As one top tier female Para athlete said:

> And the international Paralympic Committee (IPC) cut my sprint event, and they've left the distance event, and they've cut more female events than male events. And no-one is speaking about this, because they're afraid of saying something, because IPC

> can just be like “Well you can just go away”. You don’t know what IPC could do….they have so much power that you just can’t control and you don’t know what the consequences are of you speaking out….You are probably are aware of the whole issues with classification with Para swimming at the moment?? And there’s been parents that have spoken out and the parents have been getting in trouble for speaking out. Do you know [athlete]? So she would be one of America’s like golden girls and her Dad wrote an open letter and I think her Dad was like told that if he continued then his swimmer would be in danger. Something like that (ath13).

In addition, a few athletes highlighted that a change to the classification system posed a threat to their identities as Para athletes. As one top tier female Para athlete said:

> The Special Olympics one thing the Paralympics strives to disassociate itself from. And it’s getting harder because the Paralympics are starting to have ID, which is intellectual disability classification. And I agree and I disagree with this. I think if you’re bringing IDs in I think they have to have an actual physical disability that goes along with that. Because there is a whole ID section that’s been brought into Para swimming and there’s fuckin nothing wrong with them. Physically there’s nothing wrong with them. All they’re saying is that they have a low IQ. That’s every jock that you know of. Like come on. In fairness it is. That’s not a disability. It doesn’t prevent them from training. It doesn’t interfere with any physical aspect of their life. It doesn’t. So how does that justify that they get to compete in a Paralympics games? (ath12).

Critical discussion

The chapter contributes to the field of sport management offering a comprehensive heuristic to support and facilitate Para athletes to advocate for social change. I also ask of readers to consider the generalisability question (Smith, 2018) in terms of, for example, is the heuristic

or parts of it, summarised in Table 2, transferable to Para sport management in different countries and contexts? By 'thinking' from the perspective of *critical disability studies* I have drawn upon an *eclectic* range of theories from psychology and sociology to address my research aim to understand how Para athletes advocate for social change within Para sport context. Whereas previous studies have identified areas to improve Para sport contexts (e.g., policy factors), my future-forming approach (see Gergen, 2015) has identified the styles, strategies, contexts and challenges involved in creating social change within Para sport contexts. For instance, Evans et al. (2018) identified conditions within Para sport contexts that promote quality experiences (e.g., attitudes, coaching, classification). However, they argued that the 'conditions' "do not represent the types of activism needed to address the social-political roots of oppression and discrimination faced by athletes with disabilities" (Evans et al., 2018 pp88). In addition, Patatas et al. (2020) interviewed Para sport managers and identified policy factors (e.g., coaches with disability-specific knowledge) that are influential during all the phases of Para-athlete's careers. My findings, from the perspective of Para athletes, develops this line research by explaining *how* bottom tier and top tier Para athletes *act* to better develop and implement these policies and conditions.

Chapter summary

In summary, this chapter provides evidence for how Para athletes act to improve Para sport contexts. In answer to my first research question, I captured four domains within Para sport contexts where Para athletes explained why advocacy is needed to enhance well-being, performance and Para sport legacy. In answer to my second question, I showed how and why Para athletes *act* to create change in these areas, in different ways and contexts, depending on perceived power to create change. In answer to my third research question, I highlighted challenges that Para athletes face doing advocacy due to the paradoxical ways in which forms of power operate in their lives. That said, whereas most of the Para athlete group welcomed

advocacy to improve Para sport contexts for disabled people, they told a different story in relation to Para athlete activism for broader social good, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Table 2- Heuristic to support Para athletes to advocate for social change within Para sport contexts

Advocacy areas within Para sport	Visibility and Respect	Leadership and Coaching	Funding and Sponsorship	Classification and Participation
	Social change needed in these areas to empower well-being, performance and Para sport legacy.			
'Front stage' and 'back stage' advocacy	Passive and proactive forms of advocacy in public and non-public contexts.			
Power mediates advocacy	Visibly paradox	Leadership paradox	Sponsorship paradox	Classification paradox
	Power enables and prevents advocacy in paradoxical ways.			

Chapter Seven: Para athlete activism for broader social good.

Chapter overview

Building on previous chapters, this chapter will address the fourth central research question of this thesis - how do Para athletes contribute towards disability activism in wider society? The particular contribution of this chapter is an understanding of how Irish Para athletes create social change around disability in wider society. Firstly, following critical disability studies perspective (i.e., utilising an eclectic range of theories and disciplines), the field of disability sport psychology will be introduced as the theoretical framework for this chapter. After this, three themes will be presented that draw on data from the Para athlete group. The first theme addresses the research question: how, if at all, do Para athletes act to create social change around disability? This theme is termed 'Para athlete activisms' and captures many different ways of doing disability activism. The second theme addresses the research question: how should Para athletes do 'disability activism'? This theme is called 'tensions between different activist identities' and it is about the consequence of (hyper)critical discourses regarding various 'activist' identities. The third theme addresses the research question: what are the factors that prevent and enable Para athlete activism for broader social good? This theme is termed 'ableist influences on Para sport culture' and it captures contexts that enable or prevent disability activism. Taken together, the three themes provide an evidence base for Para sport cultures that wish to connect with disability activism for boarder social good. After each theme a layer of critical discussion is added where I discuss practical opportunities involving Para athlete social legacy value, identity politics and challenging ableism in Para sport. The chapter concludes by advocating for a radical theoretical shift in the direction of disability sport psychology research.

Disability sport psychology

Thinking with critical disability studies, as stressed, requires connecting with an eclectic range of theories and disciplines. Accordingly, this chapter connects, theoretically, to the field of sport psychology and in particular the sub-field of disability sport psychology. More disability sport psychology research is needed but the sub-field is burgeoning and can be divided into three theoretical approaches; a traditional cognitivist approach, a cultural sport psychology (CSP) approach and a critical approach (Martin, 2017;Smith & Perrier, 2015). This chapter will connect with each three approaches. First, disability sport psychology scholars who adopt a traditional cognitivist approach (see Jaarsma et al., 2916; Martin, 2008) assume that origins of thought and emotion reside in the individual. They seek to understand the 'universal' cognitive system through the use of an information processing metaphor. Accordantly, cognitivist scholars are likely to endorse quantitative methods and post-positivist philosophies to help understand relationships between universal psychological constructs. That said, disability scholars who adopt a cognitivist approach (e.g., Martin, 2017) are often accused of being pre-occupied with rational thought, reducing behaviour to individual psychology and promoting individual conceptualisations of disability such as the medical model of disability (see Smith & Perrier, 2015).

Disability sport psychology scholars who adopted a more emerging cultural sport psychology approach (Choi, Haslett & Smith, 2019; McGannon & Smith, 2015) challenge the assumptions of the traditional cognitivist approach in order to facilitate contextual understandings of topics and identities. CPS scholars assume that the origins of thought and emotion reside in social relations. They place a value in understating social and cultural context. Accordingly, CSP scholars are likely to endorse qualitative methods and a philosophy of social constructionism to help capture subjective meaning and relative social context. Importantly, disability sport psychology scholars who adopt a CSP approach

complement social and political conceptualisations of disability such as the UK social model or the human rights model of disability (Smith & Bundon, 2018). That said, disability sport psychology scholars that adopt a CSP approach are open to accusations of being pre-occupied with social structure, ignoring individual agency and reducing behavior to social relations. Finally, scholars that adopted a critical approach focus on participants in marginalised sport contexts. A critical approach builds on a CSP approach and, in addition, incorporates a built-in social activist and social justice component by drawing attention to inequalities. Disability sport psychology scholars who adopt a critical approach are particular concerned with drawing attention to social difference, distribution of power and a social justice. These three approaches will be drawn upon as a theoretical framework in the following sections in this chapter. The analysis resulted in a final analytic structure of three themes. These themes are theorised as novel domains of Para athlete activism. This means that themes capture the way

Critical reflection: I have a political 'dog in the fight'.

An elite Para athlete friend of mine, with much top-tier experience in Para sport, 'politely' declined to take part in this research. He clearly had no interest in the topic of the research – activism. However, we would often have long personal conversations about social change in Para sport. He would also tell me many reasons why he was not interested in disability activism or indeed research on activism. It was for these very reasons that he was exactly the type of participant that I wanted to include in my research. This, I felt is an example of how my political persuasions have shaped this research. On reflection, I feel that he perceived me, and my research to be, 'full of left-leaning socialist political agendas'. He was probably right. I am a left leaning socialist and my critical disability studies activist research is full of political agendas. I feel my political persuasions have influenced this study in two ways.

Frist, drawing from this type of experience, I feel that activist research, in a sense, 'preaches to the converted'. As I discuss in the conclusions chapter there is an assumption that activist researchers are only looking for people that share their political agendas. This inevitably excludes people with opposing political persuasions. Secondly, I feel that there is justification for this, because I was probably unconsciously bias towards, or more interested in, respondents that shared my political persuasions. I am sure that this has played out in my interpretations of the data. At the same time, participants in the study with different political persuasions would perhaps not disclose/discuss this.

participants described areas that will have important implications for understanding how Para athletes contribute towards disability activism in wider society.

Theme 1: Para athlete activisms

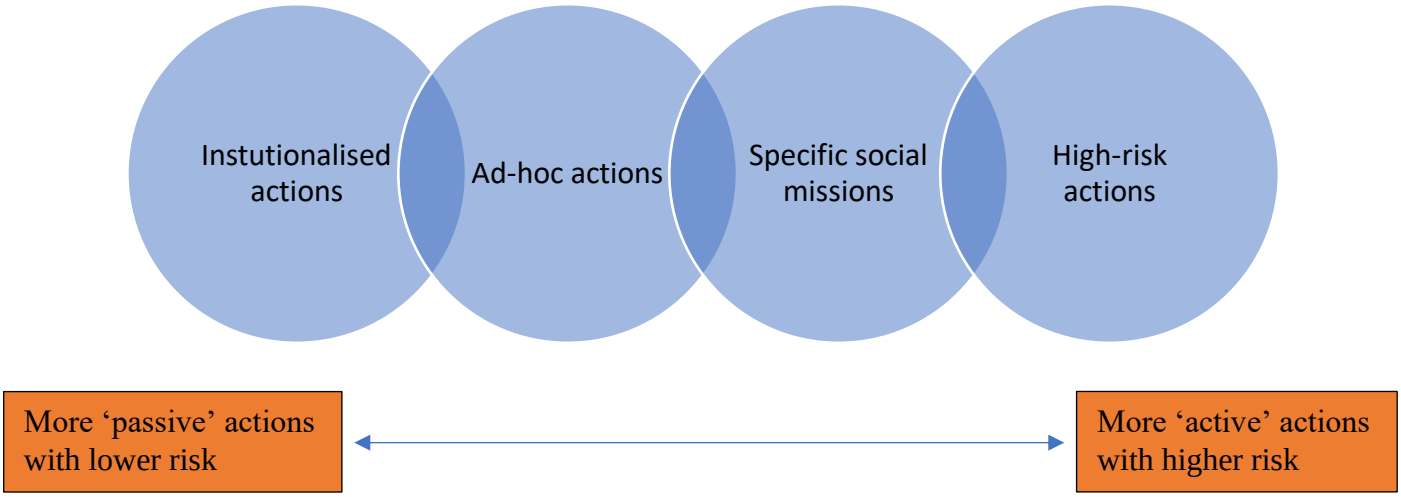

Figure 9 - Continuum of Para athlete activisms

In the data, there were different ways of doing activism that are theorised as 'Para athlete activisms'. 'Para athlete activisms' captures these many ways of doing activism as a contextually contingent continuum of actions, rather than as binary – 'I'm an activist or not an activist'. Activisms' here are defined as a *continuum of actions* (see Figure 9) towards transforming discourses, attitudes, non- verbal acts, policies, or environmental structures that socially oppress disabled people in their everyday lives (Smith et al., 2016). The Para athletes described a taxonomy of 'activisms' within this continuum and how and why they adopted different actions. These actions, taken together, contribute towards a Para athlete social legacy.

At one end of this continuum were descriptions of institutionalised actions (see Figure 9). For example, most participants felt that the institutionalised action of just being a disabled athlete in the public eye contributed, by-default, towards transforming attitudes in wider society. As Goodley (2016) says, Paralympians' sporting actions compliment disability activism because they "wonderfully confuse traditional deficit models of disability through their demonstration of elite athleticism" (p16). Also, across their lives most athletes in this study gave 'life-story' talks or interviews (e.g., podcasts, schools, workplaces, disability initiatives). Through these activities, athletes' passive and often unreflective actions were potentially transformative. For instance, they talked of 'societal trailblazing' such as being the first disabled person to attend their mainstream school, being a founder of the first disability sport club in their university, or the first wheelchair user to work in the fitness sector in Ireland. Furthermore, most participants welcomed being situated by-default as role models for disabled people in wider society because, as one male top tier Para athlete said, across the disability landscape Para athletes were "leading the way" (ath17) in terms of the relative quantity and quality of disability representation in the media. A quote from another male top tier Para athlete exemplifies how most athletes saw their institutionalised contribution to disability activism:

> The societal perception of disability is that it's a negative. So, if you look at the Paralympic athletes. They're out there. They're doing things that everybody else is doing, and they're doing it independently. They're doing it positively. They're achieving. And that, as a message to the rest of society is very powerful. So that gives society the role models and sight of what can be done. So that to me is where sport for people with disabilities really comes into its own. Because from an attitudinal societal point of view that's really where it's powerful (ath32).

For disability sport psychology scholars that adopt a traditional cognitivist approach, role modelling plays an important function in behaviour change. For example, some scholars (e.g., Martin, 2008) have used social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) to show how role modelling effects disabled people attitudes and self-efficacy and subsequent behaviour.

Moving along the continuum of 'activisms' were descriptions of ad-hoc actions (see Figure 9). Most Para athletes described occasional conscious decisions to take actions towards challenging the social oppression of disabled people. For example, a few of the athletes in the sample attended disability rights protest marches and some athletes 'lent their profile' to one-off disability awareness campaigns, but as one top tier female Para athlete said, "I don't go looking for them" (ath31). In addition, most athletes, at times, challenged discrimination in their day-to-day lives or posted 'statements' online. As one younger top tier female Para athlete said, "our generation is so involved in social media even just if you're re-tweeting [about a disability issue] you kind of feel like you're giving a little" (ath7). Athletes did ad-hoc actions for different reasons such as to show solidarity with the wider disability community or as a result of experiencing/witnessing forms of disablism (the social, political or psycho-emotional exclusion of people with imparments, Reeve, 2014). For instance, athletes explained how involvement in Para sport had broadened their political perspective on disability through cross-cultural experiences (e.g., traveling to compete) or cross-carnal comparisons (e.g., witness to multiple forms of disability experiences). Deciding to do an ad-hoc action was influenced by context. For example, contexts that prevented actions involved the social expectations of remaining passive while being 'unintentionally' patronised or the fear of being viewed as 'problematic' when highlighting inaccessibility. As one female Para athlete said "you just can't go around with a big angry head every day"(ath31). Goodley (2016) explains this experience, from a critical psychology approach, as maintaining emotional labour. By this he means regulating anger for fear of being positioned as resentful,

ungrateful or unhinged can be psychologically exhausting in a 'demanding' able-bodied world. However, contexts that provided opportunities for humour and creativity facilitated ad-hoc actions. As one bottom tier male Para athlete said:

> Sport is a great opportunity to open people's eyes up to disability rights. Like a few months ago, in the gym where I work, the door that I use is the wheelchair access door. But there [is constantly] a car parked in front of it. We kept just saying to the owner "you can't park there, it's wheelchair access". And then one day I discussed this with some people and my boss, and we made a [humorous] video of me crawling into the gym saying "this is what it's come to, this is how our coach has to get into the gym because of people's obnoxiousness and all this"…. *laughs*…. yeah it blew up on Facebook. It got 2000 shares or something. I think it's had 200,000 views or something like that. It was ridiculous. That kind of opened a lot of people's eyes. They heard me talking and they were like "aw I never would have realised that". So, I found it good that way just using my own platform. I'm an elite athlete but I'm not that well known. But even just there like, it seemed to open a lot of people's eyes (ath2).

Moving further along the continuum were descriptions of 'activisms' in the form of specific social missions (see Figure 9). Here a few athletes explained why they utilised their platforms strategically and actively to develop a focus on specific areas of social change. One specific social mission focused on mental health. This involved athletes' frequently and publicly (e.g., talks, seminars) disclosing how they used psychological coping skills developed through sport (e.g., goal setting, confidence) to deal with mental distress connected to the experience of their impairment (e.g., low self-esteem, physique anxiety).

The focus on mental health, as a social mission, was however discussed through two key narratives. The first narrative involved athletes placing the source of mental distress at

the level of biological adversity (e.g., an acquired impairment leads to mental distress). This narrative is embedded in a traditional cognitivist approach and medical model of disability that has dominated much of Western thought, viewing disability as a 'loss' that can be 'fixed' through psychological intervention (Smith & Perrier, 2015; Wood, Turnner & Barker, 2019). The second narrative involved athletes placing the source of mental distress at the level of social adversity. For example, they highlighted how discriminatory societal attitudes from non-disabled public led to mental distress and poor performance in sport. This narrative supports a critical psychology approach and the concept of psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve, 2014) that connects the material context of social inequality with psychological wellbeing, rather than locating it in the individual.

Another specific social mission focused on environmental barriers. This social mission involved developing projects aimed at breaking down barriers in specific structural areas such as transport, employment or public access. For this social mission two narratives were interpreted across the data. The first narrative involved athletes working 'outside systems' to transform policy or environmental structure. For example, public displays of rights-based political rhetoric, and co-orientating with politicians and disability activists outside sport. The social model or human rights model of disability provide a conceptual framework for this narrative, viewing disabled people as socially oppressed (Smith & Bundon, 2018). The second narrative related to social missions focused on environmental barriers, involved athletes working on projects 'within systems', such as being employed in disability organisations or carrying out research projects on disabling barriers (e.g., town planning, employment discrimination).

Athletes also explained that they were motivated to engage in these specific social missions for different reasons. For example, athletes described 'utilising their platform' to benefit their career ambitions (e.g., politics, media, academia). Being involved in dual careers

had benefits such as enhanced future employment opportunities (EU guidelines on dual careers of athletes, 2012). Athletes were also motivated by a sense of responsibly to contribute to an ongoing social legacy while a few athletes explained how their social missions had been instigated from an ad-hoc action, as one top tier female Para athlete said:

> I've had so many opportunities in my life that I wouldn't have had if it wasn't for Paralympic sport and I think now it's my time to give back. When I'm gone there is another generation coming up and you just have to make sure that they are okay. Like [physique anxiety] affects people's mental health as well, so like it probably affected me a lot more than I realised when I was younger. My insecurity and that might have transferred to the pool and I mightn't have been as good as I was.
>
> **Interviewer: How did your social mission develop?**
>
> [the TV channel] were interviewing people in the lead up to Rio [Paralympic Games] and during my interview the reporter asked was I ever insecure [with my body]. I was like "oh yeah, of course" and I'd never really said it out loud before but I was like "but swimming kind of gave me the confidence, because all I had was my hat, my goggles and my swimsuit. There's nowhere to hide". And people just ate that up, they just loved it and they just wanted to hear more and more about it. And that where all the opportunities I get came from (ath13).

Bundon et al (2018) explained how Para athletes use opportunities and events like this provided during their sport careers to prepare for post sport careers, and how this experience is an important part of preparing for their life after sport as 'disabled people', rather than 'athletes with a disability'.

At the other end of the continuum of 'activisms' were high-risk actions (see Figure 9). These were actions that risked the withdrawal of emotional (e.g., trust), tangible (e.g.,

sponsorship), and informational (e.g., advice) social support (Smith et al., 2016). Public statements by disabled athletes that implied people (e.g., politicians, journalists) or organisations (e.g., media, sport bodies) were not doing their jobs correctly was an example of this activism. Bundon and Hurd Clarke (2014) explained how Para athletes use different forms of advocacy in different situations depending on the power/status they have within a sports organisation. For example, athletes in this study described how the risk in 'speaking out' was mitigated through having multiple identities (e.g., dual careers) or a high social status (e.g., sporting success). As one top tier male Para athlete said:

> See for me, my career [outside sport] was always very important and if [sport organisation] weren't happy with me I was willing to say that's fine. This is not meant in a big-headed way but on my first races I won world championships and after that I had a couple of run-ins with [sport organisation] and I said to them listen if you're not happy don't select me. It is much easier for someone like me than someone who is new. But some athletes are coming in you know at a younger age. They haven't proved themselves at results and they're finding it harder. So, in those circumstances they will not speak out as much (ath29).

Critical discussion

For Para sport cultures that wish to connect with disability activism, this theme, capturing the many ways of doing Para athlete activism, provides evidence for a Para athlete social legacy value. Paralympic sport is often promoted in terms of individual health legacy value by highlighting the psychological and physical health contributions of participation (Mascarinas & Blauwet, 2018). However, this theme promotes a *Para athlete social legacy* value by highlighting the many societal and political contributions of Para athlete activism. A Para athlete social legacy value is becoming more important in Para sport contexts that a) increasingly distinguishes disability awareness from disability equality in relation to athlete

wellbeing (see Duty of care in sport review, 2017) and b) recognise that social legacy value (e.g., advocating for increased participation in Para sport) is becoming an increasingly important criterion in the allocation of their funding (see www.uksport.gov.uk). The central theoretical contribution of this theme is an interpretation of Para athlete activism as a contextually informed continuum of behaviour change.

Theme 2: Tensions between different activist identities

The second theme 'tensions between different activist identities' captures tensions between various disability activist identities as well as the consequences of these tensions. There were many different opinions regarding how Para athletes should advocate for social change in wider society termed '*tensions between different activist identities'.* This refers to the tensions, contradictions and paradoxes of disability activist identities. Through (hyper)critical discourses about how platforms should (not) be used for wider social change, participants described how and when their activist identities were pulled in different directions, as well as, the consequences of these tensions. These tensions, taken together, highlight a concern for identity politics (Moran, 2018).

Most athletes explained how they were, at times, pulled towards adopting an affirmative disability identity. An affirmation model of disability is a non-tragic view of disability that encompasses positive social identities (Swain & French, 2000). For example, a few participants expressed concern at a perceived rise in high-profile disabled athletes using their platform to misrepresent disability as a tragic or negative experience. In reaction to such tensions, athletes used their profile to create images of pride in their disability experience. This involved actions such as highlighting the benefits of the disability and describing positive luck in life *because of* disability rather than *despite* disability. Or as one bottom tier male athlete said, "embracing disability":

> But what I'm saying is they [some top tier Paralympians] don't embrace disability at all. Why would you not embrace disability? You could be helping so many different kids. I did a [television] ad campaign and the amount of [positive] messages I was getting off mothers of people with disabilities. I was bawling my eyes out. The ad was shot in my house and the director says, "I want you sitting on your bed". And I was like "yeah yeah that's no bother". So, I jumped on my bed. They were shooting and he went to take my wheelchair away, and I was like "no no no, you're not taking my wheelchair away. He was like "why?" I said that I wanna highlight that I'm a wheelchair user and I'm proud of it. He said, "that's fantastic, I'm so sorry, I didn't even think of that, yes we'll keep the wheelchair in". That chair wasn't going anywhere and I was consciously, absolutely consciously, embracing [disability]. There's gonna be kids out there with physical disabilities. There's not enough [embracing disability] in Ireland (ath5).

Adopting an affirmative disability identity can mobilise people towards disability activism by restoring pride in disability (Mallet & Runswick Cole, 2014). However, many athletes also described a tension with this form of identity politics because it could re-enforce problematic categories of us (the disabled) versus them (the non-disabled) (Mallet & Runswick Cole, 2014). As one top tier male Para athlete said:

> Sometimes disability activists say "we're different, we're like a sub group and we're going to celebrate and be proud of it, look at us, we're here, we're disabled, we're going to march for it"… I hate that, I absolutely despise it" (ath17).

This type of tension also connects with work by Purdue and Howe (2012) about how Para athletes have to simultaneously perform 'ability' to be seen as athletes and to perform 'disability' to demonstrate solidarity with disability communities and disability politics.

Concerns for being stereotyped as self-centred also pulled athletes' activist identities in different directions. In reaction to the tension of being stereotyped as self-centred when highlighting inaccessibly environments, a few athletes explained the benefit of stressing that they were using their platform as a voice for others. As one top tier male Para athlete said:

> [Disability activist] is a friend of mine but when I heard him on [the TV channel talking about inaccessible transport] it drove me nuts… and a lot of people said to that the interview made him sound like an asshole because it was like he is the only one affected by this [inaccessibility issue], and he's not…if it's about you fine, but if you're going to go out publicly about it, don't make it about you because it's not about you specifically… you have a platform to go "yes it affects me but how many others does it affect…?"… [that's why] I kept saying when I did my interviews, this issue wasn't just about me, not about me, not about me, it's how it affects everybody else (ath30).

While a few athletes used strategies like this (i.e., using their platform as a voice for others) to highlight wider structural inequalities in society, the tension of being stereotyped as either complaining, angry or passive for highlighting inaccessibility pulled some athletes away from acting to transform environmental structures and towards acting to transform attitudes. For example, one female Para athlete said, "I got invited to a disability [activist] meeting and it was just loads of disabled people complaining about inaccessibility…. a lot of people with disabilities just complain too much…. whenever you see a happy disabled person it's kind of shock" (ath13). Her criticism connects with how the social model of disability, often adopted as the theoretical backdrop to disability activism, has been critiqued largely for a preoccupation with explaining disability in terms of inaccessible environments (Smith & Bundon, 2018).

Despite this preference towards transforming attitudes, most athletes had a deep understanding about how environmental forces can influence behaviour, such as disabled people internalising discrimination and placing self-imposed limitations on what they feel they can become (Reeve, 2014). This understanding connects with emerging critical and cultural sport psychology research (e.g., McGannon & Smith, 2015; Schinke et al., 2019) that promotes interventions at a socio-political level in order change behaviour amongst marginalised populations (e.g., advocating for policy change to create social diversity). Paradoxically however, most athletes favoured using their platform for intervention directed at the behavioural level, thus connecting with a dominant cognitivist sport psychology approach that promotes interventions for social adversity at a behavioural level (Smith & Perrier, 2015). For example, athletes explained that public declarations about how they changed their own attitude to disability were popular and likely to receive more support (e.g., from sport organisations) and positive feedback (e.g., marketing opportunities). As the same female athlete went on to say "you could never face backlash for telling someone to be happy. Whereas if you're pointing out that people are doing their jobs wrong, then you can face backlash for that" (ath13). Moreover, athletes described how context counts. As one female (bottom tier Para athlete) wheelchair user said:

> You'll never see me march down [main street in Dublin protesting about disability rights]. But you might see some of my teammates do it. That's brilliant. That's happy days. That's a confidence that they have. I mightn't have that type of confidence to do that. But I'm confident enough to tell someone "you've got a step into your pub". There's different ways of raising awareness (ath26).

Furthermore, in line with findings from Beachy, Brewer, Van Raalte, and Cornelis's (2018) cognitivist psychological research, a few athletes highlighted that performing a disability

activist identity (e.g., acting to create socio-political change) could be incompatible for some Para athletes with a strong athletic identity (e.g., focused on sport).

The consequence of these tensions and paradoxes are many reasons for avoiding disability activism altogether and co-orientated action. But this situation also provided athletes with opportunities to be strategic. For example, at times athletes described contexts where they utilised negative disability stereotypes (e.g., tragic, inspirational) to build their platforms (e.g., sponsorship, fund-raising, accident awareness campaigns). One bottom tier female Para athlete said:

> I'm not comfortable with a lot of stuff I do when I think about it too long. But actually, I weigh up whether it's gonna help somebody else or not. I kind of put my ego aside and I'm like alright fine if you [e.g., media company] want to show that [e.g., tragedy stereotype], I can live with that. I'm just very conscious [of being stereotyped] (ath4).

In other contexts, athletes were critical of how other athletes utilised disability stereotypes. As one top tier male Para athlete said:

> She seems to use her life changing injury to build her profile. I don't agree with that. You're there to compete at the highest level, and up on the screen it's coming up 'how she thought she was gonna die' and all this. I don't see a need for it. Certainly, if [sports organisation] had asked me to do that I'd refuse. I wouldn't want to (ath1).

Then for younger athletes, the conflicting narratives described in this theme provided a diversity of activist styles to connect or disconnect from, or as one athlete said, "find their own way". For example, a few younger athletes described how they were becoming attracted to disability activists who used their platform to primarily "normalise" (ath1) disability and secondarily to highlight oppression in the right context. As one younger female Para athlete

responded to the question: is using your platform to create social change something you would like to go on and do, in the future?

> Yeah, I think so, I think it is important but I think it's important as well to do it in the right way and in the right kind of circumstances. Like, I am following [Irish disability activist] on Instagram and Twitter and I always see her doing stuff that I think is really cool. She makes her points [e.g., highlights oppression] but she is just doing all this cool stuff too. I just think like she is definitely kind of at the forefront of [disability activism]. Because she has the unique angle- like she wants like diversity in fashion. Which is interesting, and which is not something that you would even think. And I think [Irish female Paralympian] definitely has a rising platform at the moment. I suppose they just represent disabled people as people who happen to be disabled doing things that are completely unrelated to their disability. Which I think is the way that it should be represented. Whereas disabled people being disabled and just wanting things because they're disabled…[sighs] you know? (ath7).

Critical discussion

For Para sport contexts that wish to connect to disability activism, this theme, capturing 'tensions between different activist identities' highlights a concern for identity politics. Disabled identity has become a major factor in disability activism in terms of promoting shared oppression and political mobilisation (Mallet & Runswick Cole, 2014). However, the use of identity politics in disability activism has been problematised in several ways. For example, many disabled people do not consider themselves disabled and others consider biological impairment, not social oppression, to be their political point of departure (Hughes, 2009). In addition, the idea of social identity itself leans towards essentialism (e.g. a shared constitutive feature of a social group), in doing so, identity politics can reduce, stereotype, other and homogenise disability (Moran, 2018). Likewise, the Marxist, materialist origins of

disability studies (e.g., preoccupied with disabling barriers) have given little attention to how disability intersects with other minority groups causing factionalism within disability activism (Mallet & Runswick Cole, 2014). Moreover, the use of identity politics produces an inclination to downplay difference in order to surmount paradoxical arguments involved in advocating for equality (implying sameness), and at the same time, diversity/inclusion (implying difference). In addition, identity politics can reduce, stereotype, other and homogenise disability (Moran, 2018). Despite these limitations, scholars have offered ways to resolve 'the trouble' of identity politics.

One way is to promote a regard for disability identity as non-essentialist (e.g., changeable, able to be decided upon, contextual) is by connecting with cultural sport psychology approaches. This can help challenge persisting older philosophical meanings of identity (e.g., fixed, permanent, innate) often embedded in traditional cognitivist approaches. Another way to address problems of identity politics can be resolved by promoting intersectionality because the multiplicity (e.g., shifting interconnecting identities such as gender, race, class, religion) of lived experience of oppression is not always reflected in disability activism (Mallet & Runswick Cole, 2014). A further way is to trouble the very existence of identity categories (e.g., us and them). For instance, some scholars argue for a new ethics of the body (e.g., the Dismodern subject), that starts with disability and values dependency, interdependency and inter-subjectivity over modernist values of autonomy, independence and subjectivity (Mallet & Runswick Cole, 2014). Finally, as Moran (2018) explained, there is a value in reserving identity politics as a term to refer only to politics that mobilise *specifically* and *meaningfully* around the concept of identity. For example, there are contexts where disability activism deploys around conceptualisations of justice, equity or equality - and not identity. Whilst there are tensions between different identities, and these

tensions have consequences, the next theme addresses the question about contexts that enable and prevent activism.

Theme 3: Ableist influences on Para sport culture

The third theme 'Ableist influences on Para sport culture' captures the social, cultural and political contexts that enable and prevent the performance of disability activism. There were many environmental forces influencing Para athlete activism termed 'Ableist influences on Para sport culture'. This here is defined as the social, cultural and political influences of activist performance in a fluctuating ableist world. Ableism refers to a cultural favouritism for certain traits and characteristics found within social institutions (e.g., families, workplaces, disability sports organisations) such as walking, talking, independence, maleness and homonormativity (Campbell, 2008). Ableism can fuel and quell disability activism. The impact of ableism on behaviour connects with critical approaches to disability sport psychology research. The participants described how sociocultural changes in sport and society impact ableism, enabling or limiting the performance of activism.

At the time of data collection, Ireland was undergoing a significant period of progressive political change with recent major legislative reforms in the areas of LGBTQ rights (e.g., same sex marriage in 2015), gender equality (e.g., legalised abortion in 2018) and disability rights (e.g., ratification of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2018). Athletes described how this political change can limit activist performance. For example, younger athletes described how ableism was being increasingly eroded in the context of their increasingly inclusive institutions (schools, universities, sports clubs). As one younger bottom tier male Para athlete said:

> Places like… take the school here. They've done nothing but been accepting of me. You know there's never been students or anything kind of pointing like. Obviously you do get one or two people who kind of stare at you for a second. But they're not

> staring at me going “oh he’s disabled”. They’re staring at me for stupid things, like I used to run around on the pitches in PE. So, you would see the class maybe turning their heads and kind of going “what the hell”, but in awe rather than “oh God he’s disabled” you know? I think nowadays especially people don’t sit there and go “oh well you’re disabled and we don’t want you here”. There is a much better attitude towards [difference]. Definitely (ath21).

At the same time, athletes described how political change also provided an intersectional discourse that enabled activist performance. Intersectionality considers how markers of difference (e.g., gender, sex, race, disability, class) support the constitution of one another, and how challenging an ableist society connects activism associated with these multiple markers (Goodley, 2016). When performing activism, athletes found it helpful to position disability and social change within the context of these wider political movements. For instance, this was done by expressing frustration that disability is often ‘left off the diversity train’ and explaining how disability activism is less attractive or popular than other forms of activism (e.g., LGBTQ activism), or contrasting disablism (often covert) with racism or homophobia (often overt). In the context of Para sport, a few athletes highlighted the irony of disability sport organisations embracing some forms of social activism (e.g., gay pride, gender equality) but rejecting disability activism. As one bottom tier male Para athlete said “I found it ridiculous when Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby got behind the gay pride thing, with the rainbow laces campaign. They got behind that! They did their own version with rainbow headbands, but yet they’ve never done anything about disability rights!” (ath2).

Although some athletes supported formally promoting disability activism initiatives through Paralympic sport contexts (e.g., initiatives, statements, policies), most athletes described how the degrees of disability activism will be influenced by sociocultural changes within Paralympic sport. As Paralympic sport become more popular and professional,

increased disability representation will enable more contexts of different forms of activism. However, athletes explained how the direction of representation can also limit activist performance. This is because increasingly, representation favours more 'able-bodied' disabled athletes from more 'able-bodied' disability sports (e.g., Para athletics, Para swimming, Para cycling) who are less likely to directly experience forms of disablism. Silva and Howe (2018) explain how disability representation in Para sport is directional towards 'the able' because, against the hegemonic power of ableism, only highly functioning athletes will be seen as presenting elite sporting prowess. One experienced top tier female Para athlete explained how direction of representation has developed:

> I don't think [low-functioning] athletes are represented well…it is kind of only the 'sexy athletes', the athletes that look kind of normal, kind of like everyone else. You know, I'm sure loads of people could name the likes of X and Y. But they don't know the boccia players. Like multi-medal winning boccia players, no-one knows about them. I think people want to look at someone who looks like them on television, you know. I suppose being well-articulated as well like…Y looks like everyone else you know. I think Z would probably be the most you know severely disabled that you'd see in the public eye. You don't really see most of the other athletes on telly. They might be in a chair but they're very low para, so they're moving and functioning kind of as any other able-bodied person would…It's interesting the way it has developed, you have to be presentable and with more of a minimal disability (ath31).

Likewise, whilst recognising a marked improvement in recent years, most athletes explained how discourses surrounding Paralympic sport continue to objectify disabled people and lower the bar on disability sport. The Paralympic Paradox (Purdue & Howe, 2012) is the perceived organisational pressure to market Para athletes towards the perceived desires of a non-disabled audience at the expense of the desires of a disabled audience. For example, one

way this has been done is by promoting inspiring stories of 'superhumans' overcoming adversity through sport or promoting the 'awe' of disabled bodies participating in sport. Accordingly, some athletes felt their primary social role was to challenge misrepresenting discourse by advocating for people to "see the sport not the disability". Athletes explained that introducing disability activism (e.g., rights-based rhetoric), although theoretically progressive, could add more confusion to an able-bodied audience that still struggles to separate 'disability' from Paralympic sport and still views disability predominantly though a lens of medicine and/or charity.

That said, sub-cultural differences about disability activism within the wider Irish Para sport landscape were identified. By this I mean that I identified some Para sport contexts (e.g., clubs) that organised around affirmative discourses that conflict with disability activism such as, "[in our club] we leave our disability on the side of the pitch" (ath18) or "[in our club] we're about the ability not the disability" (ath2), thus positioning disability as negative by inferring that disability is the opposite of ability. In contrast, other clubs actively communicated their shared values towards disability activism through sport. One bottom tier male Para athlete inferred this might be to do with disabled people in positions of influence in sport contexts; he said:

> **Interviewer: But some Para sport organisations don't want anything to do with disability politics?**
>
> Male athlete: I would say that [our] club is not afraid to espouse views on what's generally taken as the right thing to say.
>
> **Interviewer: Why is that?**
>
> Male athlete: Well I suppose myself and X set it up and we invited people on to it. And although you have to be able to play the sport, we invited people who are

positive thinkers I think. That wasn't a prerequisite. We didn't do interviews. But we did bring in people who are very positive and really good role models for disability…subconsciously.

Interviewer: What do you mean by positive role models?

Male athlete: …everybody kind of embraces their disability, is proud of their disability, is proud of the club that they're associated with, is proud of how we advocate for ourselves, and proud of how we conduct ourselves on and off the court. So, we've good positive role models in so far as people aren't afraid of their disability. They don't hide it. They embrace it. We've done exhibitions. And like I said, that [disability activist] initiative about the wheelchair parking campaign. So, we involve ourselves in those things (ath3).

Critical discussion

This theme provides practical insights for Para sport cultures that wish to connect with activism. As demonstrated in this theme, Para sport contexts are by no-means immune to the influence of an ableist ideology. Silva and Howe (2018) urge Para sport cultures to reflect on the multiple ways they fail to challenge ableism, or worse, reinforce ableism. One way to challenge ableism in Para sport is by replicating the heterogeneity of Para sport at all levels of governance and practice (e.g., coaching, management). As Mallet and Runswick Cole (2014) say "organisations *for* disabled people aim to provide services and support to meet the needs that professionals have identified and defined, whereas organisations *of* disabled people aim to provide services and support to meet the needs that their members themselves have identified" (p.91).

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored how elite Irish Para athletes engage in disability activism through Paralympic sport for broader social good. The three themes contribute to the field of

disability sport psychology by offering new meaning to Para athlete activism. This data from an Irish sociocultural and Para sport context support findings from the limited previous UK based research by Smith et al. (2016) and Braye (2016) in some ways. For example, most Para athletes in this study also confirmed a preference *towards acting to create change* within sport contexts (e.g., advocating for increased participation in Para sport, see chapter six) in contrast to *creating changes* in wider society. In addition, most athletes in this study also did not explicitly *identify as* disability activists but felt that their *actions contributed towards* disability activism. In contrast though to the UK based research, most participants in this study felt that in the context of Ireland disabled people are largely treated unequally and disrespectfully in society. Critically, the three themes provide an analytical distinction between three areas of athlete activism, and highlight the importance of context in influencing why, how and when Para athletes do activism. Therefore, the central theoretical contribution of this chapter is an interpretation of Para athlete activism as a contextually informed continuum of behaviour change.

In answer to the first research question about how Para athletes act to create social change around disability, theorising 'activisms' as a continuum means that some actions will be more 'passive' and some will be more 'active'. Accordingly, because there are many different ways of doing activism, some stories of activism will connect with some people and disconnect with others. This disconnect played out in the second theme in the form of tensions and paradoxes, evident through (hyper)critical discourses about different activist identities. Therefore, answering the second question about how athletes *should do* activism, I argue that researchers that seek to find out how athletes *should do* activism are in danger of producing a dichotomy. For example, in contrast to previous work by Smith et al. (2016) and Powis (2018) this data questions a direct connection between preference for identity first language and a political activist identity (e.g., "I'm a disabled athlete" in contrast to "I'm an

athlete with a disability"). Therefore, I challenge research that characterises athlete activism by a dichotomy (e.g., this athlete either *is* or *is not* a political activist). Answering the third question about what are the factors that prevent and enable Para athlete activism I argue for the important influences of ableism on Para sport cultures and the performance of disability activism. Importantly moreover, viewing Para athlete activism through a lens of critical disability studies, as I have, illuminates eclectic ways of doing activism. This eclecticism in turn can have profound implications.

One potential implication of this diversity of actions is that it limits a collective story required to make strong social change. For example, conflicting narratives can be confusing making disability activism less likely to be taken seriously or more likely to be ignored. However, this diversity can also create a transformative space in which a more useful future-forming research (Gergen, 2016) question is how athletes *might do* activism. For instance, the many narratives offer athletes opportunities to do activism in different ways in different places at different times to different degrees. Furthermore, novel insights around social legacy value, identity and challenging ableism for Para sport contexts that wish to engage with disability activism through support, research, policy or action were offered.

Finally, this data and analysis provides further evidence in support of a radical theoretical shift in the direction of disability sport psychology research. Whilst there has been a growing amount of disability sport psychology research, such work often unquestionably views disability from a bio-medical lens. For example, traditional cognitivist approaches like rational emotive behaviour therapy (REMT) research that assumes psychological challenges (e.g., lack of autonomy, compromised self-identity, diminished self-worth, depression) are linked to specific biological 'conditions', such as visual impairment (e.g., Wood, Barker, Turner, & Thomson, 2018; Wood, Barker, Turner, & Sheffield, 2018). Problematically, such an approach can, either implicitly or explicitly, suggest that social oppression is an

individual's responsibility to overcome and that adopting a disability activist identity is not compatible with an athlete identity (e.g., it can distract from performance). However, Para athletes' understanding and responses to psycho-emotional disablism in this data (and data in chapter four) supports what disability activists have been saying about the psychology of adversity for the last half-century (see Goodley, 2016). Therefore, I challenge research that eschews a disability activist identity from an athlete identity. I provide evidence to suggest that future disability sport psychology research should connect with critical disability studies to understand socio-historical-economic-political forces that construct, produce and institutionalise psychological adversity (Smith & Perrier, 2015).

Chapter Eight: Promoting Para athlete activism

Chapter overview

As discussed in Chapter two, in 2019 the International Paralympic Committee produced a new strategy (IPC, 2019). One key part of this strategy is to promote Para athletes as disability rights activists. Promoting Para athlete activism, as discussed in chapter two, is also supported by recent academic literature. However, there is little empirical evidence to help understand what this aim actually means to key Para sport and disability rights stakeholders. This chapter will address the fifth and final central research question of this thesis - what does 'promoting Para athlete activism' mean to key Para sport and disability rights stakeholders. The particular contribution of this chapter is thus an understanding of what promoting disability activism through Para sport means to key stakeholders within one national socio-political and Para sport context - Ireland. Firstly, following a critical disability studies perspective (i.e., utilising an eclectic range of theories and disciplines), a narrative theory of power is introduced as the theoretical framework for this chapter. After this, three themes will be presented that draw on the voice of three groups of Irish stakeholders. The first and second group of key stakeholders are Irish top tier Para athletes (referred to in this chapter as the *top tier Para athlete group*) and National Paralympic Committee (NPC) influencers (referred to in this chapter as the *National Paralympic Committee group*), and are included here because, for example, the International Paralympic Committees vision might not be realised without their support at a national level (I decided only to include data from the 14 top tier Para athletes in this chapter as the IPC policy is about the 'platform' of elite Para athletes). The third group of key stakeholders are Irish disability activists (referred to in this chapter as the *disability activist group*), and are included here because, for example,

critical insights from this group can help evaluate what promoting disability through Para sport means.

The first theme addresses the research question: do Para athletes and Para sport organisations have a responsibility to engage in disability activism? This theme is called *'social responsibility'* and is about the responsibility to engage in disability activism. The second theme addresses the research question how, if at all, should disability activism be performed from a Para sport context? This theme is called *'identity performance'* and it captures the relationship between disability activism and different identities. The third theme addresses the research question - is Para sport a suitable context to promote disability activism? This third theme is called *'Paralympic discourse'* and concerns how Para sport is talked about and communicated. As captured within each theme, participants from each of the three groups presented arguments to act with various activist discourses in different ways. 'Arguments' here are theorised as a form of discourse that involves the development of position taking, typically from a present time perspective (Smith & Sparkes, 2012). Activist discourses are fragile, says Plummer (2019), and discourses gain or lose power through how they are argued about. In the themes, there are some argumentative tensions both within and between groups. Following the results as connected to each theme, I will add a layer of critical discussion. In these, I will highlight how each theme collectively poses significant challenges for promoting disability activism through Para sport.

This chapter contributes to knowledge by highlighting how these critical insights from key stakeholders pose significant challenges to promoting Para athlete activism. Challenges are discussed drawing on narrative theory in relation to power. In particular I discuss stories of activism in relation to narrative states, narrative credibility and narrative empowerment. The chapter concludes with a discussion of narrative sustainability and care. Finally, I will provide a summary of nine activist discourses drawn upon by key stakeholders to argue for

and against promoting activism through Para sport. I suggest how arguments like these could have important practical implications for promoting Para athlete activism in other socio-political and Para sport contexts.

Theoretical backdrop: Narrative theory of power

As noted, thinking with critical disability studies requires connecting with an eclectic range of theories and disciplines. Accordingly, this chapter connects, theoretically, to the narrative theory and in particular a narrative theory of power. According to Plummer (2019) and others (e.g., Smith et al., 2016) narratives (how stories are told) are the "beating heart" of social activism because humans are thinkers about the power of activist stories, feel them in their bodies, and are affected by them. Narratives have power, says Plummer, because humans act in different ways to activist stories that we value or disvalue. By this he means subordinated groups, like disabled people, dwell in a vast infrastructure of ever-changing global, national and everyday stories of inequality and socio-political change. Accordingly, disabled people respond to stories of inequality in very different ways and act to create socio-political change in very different ways. As captured within the following three themes, participants from each of the three groups discussed reasons to act with stories of activism (e.g., stories of socio-political change) in different ways. In each theme it will be discussed how these reasons and actions pose challenges to promoting disability through Para sport. Narrative power can help explain challenges for promoting disability activism though Para sport (Plummer, 2019).

Theme 1: Social Responsibility

This theme is about People's views about whether they should take responsibility to help create socio-political change.

Top tier Para athlete group

The Para athlete group drew on the activist discourse "more than sport" to argue for and against promoting activism. By this they meant that Para sport is often associated with social

responsibility missions, such as social inclusion. Consequently, this group argued for reasons why Para athletes could choose to act with this discourse. For example, in addition to self-serving reasons such as sponsorship and profiling opportunities, they argued for socially responsible reasons to act with this "more than sport" discourse. For instance, when Para athletes choose to utilise their platforms to "give back to society" by advocating for change in disability sport or wider society in various ways (e.g., public talks, newspaper articles, social media posts).

However, indicating the fragility of this "more than sport" discourse, this group also explained the following reasons to resist responsibility to take action to create socio-political change. Arguments this Para athlete group gave to resist taking action to create socio-political change included lack of time (e.g., due to sport and work commitments) and political persuasion (e.g., a preference for individual responsibility to change). Another position taken to resist social responsivity were perceived negative consequences of engaging activism, such as stress and criticism. A further argument to resist taking action, this group said, was discomfort with the assumption that disabled people *should or even want* to be activist. For example, whilst most of this group felt that disability rights issues are important, they said that Para athletes should not themselves be responsible for advocating disability rights just because they are disabled. One female Paralympian explained:

> I don't think it should be a responsibility to [advocate for disability rights], but I think that it is definitely like something that is really important. And that if the opportunity is there, and we're able to take it, we should. But then again, like I said, there is no reason that people should have to [advocate] just because they are disabled. Like going back to the example of just because you're in the LGBT community doesn't mean that you have to advocate for those rights. Like, everyone is more than entitled to just live a normal life and I would say a lot of Para athletes would prefer that

because they just want to get on with things. And then some Para athletes just wouldn't be interested in [disability activism] (ath7).

Finally, this group highlighted arguments involving the Irish cultural context for resisting social responsibility. For instance, a few of this group highlighted how there is a present 'social norm' for Northern Irish based athletes (i.e., United Kingdom) who represent the Republic of Ireland to avoid political statements, views and actions altogether. Furthermore, the Para athlete group argued that, at the present time, there is a lack of national pressure to advocate for disability rights explicitly. As one female Paralympian said: "they already have disability activists who are working on these things….and I'll rarely bring up disability rights myself…. I'm never going to start that conversation because I'm not trying to be an activist" (ath16).

National Paralympic Committee Group

In comparison to the Para athlete group, the NPC group drew on the activist discourse "mixing sport with politics" to argue for and against promoting activism. By this they meant, on the one hand, there are self-serving reasons and contexts to act with the story of "mixing sport with politics". For example, they said that as an organisation, if their athletes either experience disablism (i.e., social, political or psycho-emotional exclusion, Reeve, 2014) or choose to use their platforms to advocate for disability rights, they have a responsibility to provide support for these athletes under lifestyle advice, mental health provision or post career planning. This NPC group also said they have a social responsibility to facilitate fully accessible sports events by working with local and national government. Forming these relationships, they argued, helps to influence socio-political change "from the inside" (e.g., show politicians hard data about disability inequality). Finally, the NPC group said that because Para athletes have unique powerful life stories there is a current value (e.g., marketing, profiling) in encouraging their Para athletes to act as "positive role models" to

inspire young disabled people in society to think differently about possibilities in life. However, indicting the fragility of activist discourses, this group also explained the following reasons to resist "mixing Para sport with politics".

This NPC group argued that because *Paralympics Ireland* is currently a small organisation with no specific expertise in disability rights they were not structurally or ideologically equipped to "mix sport and politics" by, for example, formally supporting wider social responsibly missions (Schinke et al., 2015). They also said they are presently responsible to stick to their "remit", which they argued, is focused not on disability rights or wider socio-political change, but solely on athlete's well-being and performance targets (e.g., medals). As one male participant from the NPC group said:

> Paralympics Ireland is a sports organisation. It's not our job to roll in on the societal issues. It's not our Job. And it's not somewhere that you want to be because you are moving into a whole different territory. We're here to do elite high-level sport, performance sport for people with disabilities. And then if we do that well and that story can be used as an example to change other things, that's brilliant. But our job is to cater for our athletes first (npc5).

This quote shows how Paralympic sport has gradually moved towards an elite 'Olympic' sport model serving to further undermine the legacy-based foundations of the IPC (i.e., a movement to change non-disabled attitudes towards disability) (see Brittain & Beacom, 2016). In addition, the NPC group highlighted arguments involving cultural context to resist "mixing sport with politics". For example, whereas members of this group currently felt national pressure to formally challenge gender inequality in Para sport (e.g., implement positive gender discrimination policies) they felt little cultural pressure to take an official position on disability inequality. At the time of this study, for instance, the Irish sport sector were taking significant steps to incentivise sport organisations (e.g., funding opportunities

and national media initiatives) to reduce gender gaps in areas such as participation, coaching, leadership and media representation (see www.20x20.ie). Finally, this group argued that highlighting disability inequality specifically at Para sports events (e.g., an overt form of protest from an individual athlete) was problematic because sports events are a source of national pride and there is currently pressure to be publicly grateful to Irish politicians (e.g., for state funding), rather than to be critical of them for not doing more to support the human rights of disabled people.

Critical reflection: Important gatekeepers

My early interactions with some of the NPC group significantly shaped the direction of this research, I believe. I was privileged to interview some key decision makers in Paralympics Ireland. However, originally, my ambition was to carry-out this research *with* Paralympics Ireland (PI). That is, I originally aimed to do this PhD as a project in collaboration with a National Paralympic Committee. For instance, I initially invited PI to sign a MoU setting out a joint research plan with several research phases, methods and deadlines. I wanted to able to could go back and forth to participants and NPC members to refine questions and research goals, but unfortunately this did not turn out to be the case. Although PI were incredibly helpful as gatekeepers in recruiting participants for this project, I got the impression early on that Para athlete activism research was not 'high-up' on their agenda. For example, it took many months for Paralympics Ireland to send my recruitment to their 'top-tier' Para athletes. On top of this, as my PhD was self-funded, I came to see this very much as independent research supported by my university rather than a collaborative project with/for a third party. This experience influenced the direction of my project in two important ways.

First, I avoided re-interviewing some participants because I felt that I was lucky enough to be given the access that I was. That is, I got the sense that Paralympics Ireland were politely paying 'lip-service' to this research, and I respected this. Secondly, because I was not doing research for, or with, a third party this gave me the 'freedom' to choose my own direction. For instance, I did not feel any pressure to frame any parts of my research findings in line any strategic agendas of an NPC.

Disability activist group

In comparison to the Para athlete group and the NPC group, the disability activist group argued *for* promoting activism by drawing on the activist discourse "disability is always political". By this they meant Para sport organisations, like all disability organisations, have a

social responsibly to become less "medical minded and recognise that disability is always political" (act5). They argued, for example, that Para sport organisations now have a responsibility to evaluate the social impact of their activities on the lives of disabled people (e.g., access to employment, housing or transport) in contrast to only highlighting the individual health impact of sport (e.g., physical and psychological benefits). Furthermore, most of this group argued that Para sport organisations should now consider how their sports events can be used to highlight forms of disablism such as social, political or psycho-emotional exclusion (Reeve, 2014). This disability activist group reasoned that due to the diversity of disability experiences among Para athletes, sport is a 'good context' to learn about political models of disability (e.g., how people with impairment are disabled by society). For instance, a few of this group said that Para athletes have a responsibly to undergo disability equality training (not simply disability awareness training) in addition to Para sport staff (Duty of care in sport review, 2017). Importantly, this group took the position that while Para athletes should not feel obligated to speak publicly on a political issue just because they are disabled they supported athletes who *do* choose use their platform for activism because, "nothing changes from silence" (act5), "if you have a platform you should use it" (act1) and "disability activism made Paralympic sport what it is" (act8). That said, indicating the fragility of the "disability is always political" discourse, this group also talked about the following arguments to resist promoting activism through Para sport.

This disability activist group drew on the common disability activist discourse "nothing about us without us" to argue *against* promoting disability activism through Para sport. By this they meant that they are always concerned about disability activist initiatives that are not developed and led by disabled people themselves. This group reasoned that "forcing" Para athletes to advocate for disability rights could result in "the wrong" forms of activism, such as athletes only highlighting social barriers that effect Para athletes rather than

highlighting the everyday oppression disabled people face in society, outside of sport. This group also warned that activist initiatives led by "able-bodied" Para sport organisations could result in "the wrong" forms of activism. For example, a few of this disability activist group were concerned that that "non-politicised" Para sport organisations will frame disability awareness initiatives (e.g., motivational speaking) as disability rights campaigns. As one female disability activist said, "there's only so many motivational speakers you need in the world, you know what I mean??" (act2). Another argument was that Para sport organisations would take an empowerment approach to promoting disability activism (e.g., unambiguous jargon) at the expense of a more favoured emancipatory approach that foregrounds oppression, power struggles and the politicising of young disabled people. As one male disability activist highlighted:

> Somehow along the line people [have started to] talk about disabled people needing to be empowered. I totally disagree with empowerment. People are emancipated. We should have an emancipatory approach whereby we enable people to understand the power that they have. A passive approach is an empowerment approach because we're telling people that they have power (act7).

A few of this group also warned of the mental health implications of holding Para athletes responsible for disability activism. As one female disability activist highlighted:

> I think it's another stereotype that either you're a Paralympian or you're an activist. You know and if you're disabled you have to talk about these issues, and you know you have to be involved. I got caught up in that for two or three years where you know I felt obligated to speak on these issues. I don't want to say I was pressured into it because that isn't fair, but I was encouraged to speak about my experiences and to be in the news about things and go to the press and all that kind of thing. And in the end now I'm on, I'm going to call it an extended sabbatical from activism, because it

> gets to the point where it gets in your head and you forget that you're a person outside every issue. I've sacrificed a lot of time and a lot of mental wellbeing for activism (act5).

Critical discussion

This first theme addresses the responsibility of Para athletes and Para sport organisations to act to create socio-political change. Critical insights from the three key stakeholders captured four activist discourses that can be used to argue for and against taking social responsibility. Taken together, these discourses pose two significant challenges to promoting disability activism through Para sport. The first challenge involves the arguments "more than sport" (top tier Para athlete group) and "mixing sport and political" (NPC group). These discourses connect with Plummer's (2019) concept of *narrative states* that is about how global activist stories (e.g., the IPC's strategy to promote disability activism) are acted upon at a national level. Findings from previous studies support how these arguments pose a challenge to promoting activism.

On the one hand, studies with non-disabled (see Cooper et al., 2017; Kaufman, 2018) and disabled athletes (see Braye, 2016; Bundon & Clarke, 2014) have suggested that activism comes in many different forms and can have many positive consequences (e.g., sense of purpose, vocational skills, dual careers). On the other hand, however, Para athlete activism research has shown how para athletes eschew disability activism for culturally contextual reasons (see Choi, Haslett & Smith, 2019). Likewise, Jarvie's (2017) research on how high-profile Scottish athletes faced criticism for using the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games to "take sides" in the *2014 Scottish Independence Referendum* debate is an example of how divisive political contexts (e.g., nationalism) can influence how athletes do/do not engage in activism.

The second challenge involves activist arguments “disability is always political”/“nothing about us without us” (disability activist group) and connects with Plummer's (2019) hierarchy of *narrative credibility*. Narrative credibility concerns what voices (e.g., the IPC, academics, Para athletes or distality activists) are assigned legitimacy and credibility (Plummer, 2019). For example, ideas that are perceived to be led by powerful sports organisations or academic institutions can be assigned legitimacy drawing on “disability is always political” discourse but, at the same time, challenged by drawing on the “nothing about us without us” discourse. It can also be argued that the IPC’s vision to promote Para athlete activism conflicts with the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) ‘Olympic Charter’ that aims to supress pollical activism through sport (Næss, 2018). This is problematic as the Paralympic movement and Olympic movement are becoming increasingly intertwined (Brittain, 2016), for instance, through the merging of national level IPC and IOC committees such as the newly formed United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee.

Theme 2: Identity Performance

This theme is about the relationship between socio-political change and performing different identities.

Top tier Para athlete group

The Para athlete group drew on the activist discourse of Para athletes as “positive role models” to argue for and against promoting activism. By this they meant that because Para sport currently makes disability visible in society and athletes have an inherent positive social power, their social identities as “positive role models” are often linked to socio-political change (e.g., inspiring inclusion and diversity). This group talked about how Para athlete’s often act with this “positive role model” discourse to contribute to socio-political change by consciously and publicly performing an affirmative disability identity. An affirmative model disability is a non-tragic view of disability which encompasses positive social identities

(Cameron, 2014; Swain & French, 2000). Performing an affirmative identity supports socio-political change because it challenges presumptions of tragedy, dependency and abnormality. For example, some of this Para athlete group explained how language plays an important role in performing an affirmative identity, such as emphasising a difference between talking about achievements in life *because of* disability (e.g. affirmative) in contrast to *in spite of* disability (e.g., negative). This group argued for socially-orientated reasons to perform "positive role models" identities such as being able to inspire young disabled people to think differently about possibilities in life (see Coates & Vickerman, 2016). They also argued that because the "positive role model" discourse is non-threatening (e.g., currently culturally popular), when Para athletes perform an affirmative identity they are contributing to socio-political change without fear of any public criticism. However, indicating tensions between different identities, this group talked about the following reasons to resist performing a disability activist identity.

For the Para athlete group, performing a disability activist identity meant consciously and publicly identifying as disabled, oppressed or politically informed (e.g., knowledgeable about disability politics). Identifying as disabled, as one male Paralympian argued in the following quote, can create a tension because for some Para athletes a 'disability identity' is deemed incompatible with an 'athlete identity':

> I'm comfortable enough with [identifying as disabled], but for some, in particular the American athletes, if they were called disabled it would not go down well at all. I know there's just certain athletes that would be quite vocal on social media saying "I don't have a disability. I have the ability to do whatever". So the word disability to them is just a place that people shouldn't go. I suppose in the sport you don't want to be seen to have a disability. So these [rights] issues have to be circulated but I think

> the big thing with a lot of Paralympic athletes, they wanna be seen as the athlete and not someone with a disability, and you hear that from so many (ath1).

Identifying as oppressed was problematic for most of the Para athlete group because they argued they did not feel socially disadvantaged. Most of this group, for example, talked about how they did not experience social exclusion because they were relatively "lucky in life" (e.g., social support, financial support, minimal physical support needs). In addition, a few of this Para athlete group said they resisted performing a disability activist identity because they were not politically informed about disability rights and, moreover, they were concerned about being "used" to advocate on behalf of a social or political issue that they had little knowledge of, or interest in. Finally, this group talked about cultural reasons to resist performing a disability activist identity. They explained how compared to the United Kingdom, at the present time, although Ireland is undergoing a significant period of progressive social change, it has yet to "fully embrace disability" in sport or society. For instance, some of this Para athlete group said that a disability activist identity in Ireland is currently unattractive and unpopular (i.e., in comparison to other social movements like LGBT activism) and, in addition, they were concerned about public criticism for "whining and complaining". In other words, they said there was currently a tension between performing a "negative" disability activist identity and a "positive role model" affirmative identity.

National Paralympic Committee group

In comparison to the Para athlete group, the NPC group argued against promoting activism by drawing on discourse around "protecting Para athletes' identities". By this they meant that they were concerned about the consequences of Para athletes performing disability activist identities in some contexts. For example, they argued that Para athletes who are reaching retirement could benefit from developing multiple identities such as an activist identity. They

talked about the benefits of Para athletes "utilising their platforms" to enhance future employment opportunities in areas like politics, academia, media or disability sport (Bundonet al., 2018; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). However, in line with findings from Beachy et al. (2018), some of this group believed that performing a disability activist identity (i.e., acting to create socio-political change) could be incompatible for athletes with a strong athletic identity. As one male participant from this group argued, "athletes by their nature are very self-centred, and they have to be. I won't say selfish, but they're self-centred. They have to focus on themselves and what they're achieving" (npc5). This group were also concerned about unforeseen mental health consequences of Para athletes who performed a disability activist identity (e.g., as a consequence of public criticism) when an organisation was not well equipped to support them doing activism. Also, they argued that some Para athletes were too focused on coping with "their own" psycho-emotional disablism (damaged self-esteem and confidence as result of direct or indirect attitudinal or structural barriers, Reeve (2014)) to perform a disability activist identity. Finally, the NPC group talked about how they wanted to protect their Para athlete's hard-fought athletic identity. As a female participant from the NPC group argued:

> Para athletes want to be seen as athletes you know and treated as athletes because they just wanna play sport like every other Olympic athlete. So they want to use that platform to play sport. They've already fought just to be seen as an athlete. So then if you bring in the disability [activism] aspect of it then you're fighting two different sides of the coin. Because then you want to be included as an athlete but now you're fighting for disability rights….well it's exhausting and it is confusing for some people (npc4).

Disability activist group

In comparison to the Para athlete group and the NPC group, the disability activist group drew on "disability activist identity" discourse to argue against promoting activism. First, this group argued that they did not currently envisage disability activist identities being performed by Irish Para athletes. By "disability activist identity" performance this group meant publicly resisting disability inequality by identifying with socio-political aspects of disability as explained by a human rights model (e.g., identifying with a sense of political disadvantage) or UK social model (e.g., identifying as disabled by society) of disability (Smith & Bundon, 2018). This group argued that seeing disability activist identities being performed by Para athletes was an important part of socio-political change because this demonstrates resistance and solidarity with the wider disability community. As one female activist said:

> I don't expect it and I'm not gonna put pressure on them. But I would really love to see Irish Paralympians identify the struggles and realise that they are perceived as differently and admit that and actually say there are 13% of the population that face daily issues. If we could see Paralympians saying what you see on the track is not disability. It is people. It is sport. It is people competing. Yes, they have impairments that make their participation in sport different or whatever. But disability is every day. It is the ramp. It is the attitude. It is the respect. It is making sure people aren't incarcerated due to their disability (act2).

One reason this disability activist group did not envisage activist identities being performed by Para athletes was due to what they termed a "mainstreaming effect", where impairments become 'invisible' in increasingly inclusive spaces such as schools or Para sport. Another reason for their scepticism was that they felt Para athletes are under social pressure to identify with an individual model of disability (Smith & Bundon, 2018). By this

they meant that the current marketing and media that surrounds Para sport often contextualises Para athlete's experience of disability as an individual adversity to be overcome (Smith & Bundon, 2018). The Paralympic paradox (Purdue & Howe, 2012) explains the practice of marketing Para athletes to benefit the perceived desires of an able-bodied audience (e.g., stories of overcoming disability) at the cost of the desires of a disabled audience.

Second, the disability activist group warned that performing a disability activist identity could incur a cost to Para athlete's mental health. For example, most participants in this group said that, at present, the disability activism landscape in Ireland can be divisive and 'activist' Paralympians may receive criticism for being "too self-orientated", "too feminist", "too focused on independence", "too whinny", "too intimidating to able-bodied people", "too privileged", "too inspirational" or "too politically correct". The language is a minefield, they said, and there is a "cancel culture" where one public "mistake" means other activists may disassociate.

Critical discussion

This second theme, addressing how should, if at all, disability activism be performed from a Para sport context, I located a number of tensions between performing different identities. These tensions pose a challenge to promoting disability activism through Para sport because, for some, these performances are deemed incompatible (e.g., a 'positive role model' affirmative identity and a 'negative' disability activist identity). Plummer (2019) explains that tensions like these arise because of differences in *narrative empowerment*. Narrative empowerment captures how subordinate groups respond to stories of inequality in very different ways, as Plummer (2019) said:

> What we find here then is a vast world of infra politics: a world of adjustments, tinkering skills and 'resistances through ritual' that allow people to live in the

> dominant world while not believing in it. Though there could never be one pattern or essential trajectory for all, a spectrum of narrative responses can be teased out, from complete acquiescence to bloody revolution, from brokenness to resilience (Plummer, 2019, pp. 75-76).

For example, the top tier Para athlete group's preference for performing a "positive role model" affirmative identity connects with what Plummer (2019) calls a *negotiated narrative* by challenging inequality in non-threatening ways. The NPC groups preference for "protecting Para athletes' identities" echo what Plummer (2019) calls a *collaborative narrative* (e.g., avoiding challenging inequality). The disability activist group's preference for performing a "disability activist identity" connects with what Plummer (2019) calls a *counter narrative*; meaning challenging inequality in more rebellious and radical ways.

Theme 3 Paralympic discourse

The relationship between socio-political change and how Para athletes and Para sports are talked about and communicated.

Top tier Para athlete group

The Para athlete group drew on the "direction of Paralympic discourse" to argue for and against promoting activism. On the one hand they highlighted the story of the "ever-increasing Paralympic platform". By this they meant that Para athletes and Para sports are increasingly being talked about and communicated (e.g., increased media coverage). They then argued for various reasons why Para athletes can act with this story to create social change. The participants first reasoned that *all* Paralympic discourses in the media can contribute to disability equality because disability is underrepresented in Irish media. By this they meant, at times, Para athletes are talked about and communicated using patronising 'inspirational porn' discourse (Grue, 2016). That is most of this group objected to being contextualised in the media as *inspirational for able-bodied people* because it sends an

unhelpful message to young disabled people (Grue, 2016). However, participants also argued, because this 'inspirational porn' discourse is popular in the media it provides them with a platform to represent disability. They also argued that changing media (e.g., new social media platforms) gives Para athletes control of how they represent disability (French & Le Clair, 2018). But, indicating the fragility of Paralympic discourse, this Para athlete group spoke about the following reasons to resist a "new discourse" of Para athletes being talked about as disability activists.

This Para athlete group argued how promoting disability activist discourse through Para sport could be problematic. By this they meant that Paralympic discourse is progressively (albeit at times slowly) moving away from what they call "inspirational discourse" towards a "sports discourse". For example, most of this group connected to the Paralympic paradox (Purdue & Howe, 2012) by explaining how sports journalists "these days" have positively moved away from talking about Para athletes as inspirational people overcoming tragedy to *merely participate in sport* towards stories about elite *athletes who perform in high-level sport.* An "inspirational discourse", that is underpinned by individual models of disability, is theoretically different to an "activist discourse", that is underpinned by political models of disability (Smith & Bundon, 2018). However, this group were concerned that this difference is complex and may go unnoticed in an Irish cultural context that currently overlooks disability as a rights issue and tends to individualise political and physical adversity. One male Paralympian explained the resistance to disability activist discourse:

> It's a very delicate kind of balance because half the story to promote disability sport has been the "inspiration [discourse]". So it will take a great strategy by PR people or media people to try and get the ["activist discourse"] right so that it doesn't go all the way back to the "pat on the head", all the way back to the "poor old devil, look at

> him", so that the story is not "all about adversity" again. Yes, Para athletes deal with adversity, but the story should be: "look at that athlete, look at the training he does, look at the phenomenal work he puts in, look at the time he puts in, how far ahead he is against his competitors". So I think the "inspirational [discourse]" had a benefit in getting the initial attention. But if it goes too far [i.e., towards the "activist discourse"], it will just start doing so much damage and it'll bring us back to square one (ath17).

National Paralympic Committee group

In comparison to the Para athlete group, the NPC group drew on the activist discourse "see the athletic ability not the disability" to give reasons to resist communicating Para athletes as disability activists. This group argued that communicating Para athletes as disability activists is problematic for three reasons. First, the NPC group argued that promoting a disability activist discourse is problematic because it conflicts with their current marketing vision to "see the athletic ability not the disability". This vision resulted from a tension between how their Para athletes wish to be talked about (e.g., in terms of athletic ability) and how they are sometimes communicated (e.g., in terms of disability). For example, they said sometimes media and sponsors wish to communicate Para athletes as "overcoming their disabilities" or narrate Para sport in terms of "inclusivity and diversity" rather than "high performance sport". Again, the Paralympic paradox (Purdue & Howe, 2012) explains this tension as arising from the practice of marketing Para athletes to benefit the perceived desires of an able-bodied audience (e.g., stories of overcoming disability) at the cost of the desires of a disabled audience (e.g., stories of sport). One male participant from the NPC group explained this tension in response to the question: Do you have a position about how disability is represented when you 'market' your Para athletes?

> We are quite careful on this because our athletes want to be represented in a specific way. They do not want the story to be about their disability. They feel that telling that emotional story is not doing justice to what they are doing on a day-to-day basis and the work that they are putting in….The problem is this is what is interesting about them - what they have overcome. So, you butt heads all the time on this kind of thing because elite athletes are resistant to, not in every case but in quite a few cases, that type of emotional story telling. But it's the most effective, so you are trying to strike a very fine balance between the emotive thing, the inspiration thing and just wanting to be seen as athletes. So, we have been working on that. In order to get past the "inspirational athlete overcoming all the odds", we need repetition of what they have done in sport [e.g., focus on stories of sport]. But does that do justice the rest of the disabled population of our country?? maybe and maybe not (npc6).

The second reason the NPC group gave for resisting promoting disability activist discourses through Para sport is that most of this group expressed discomfort over using terms like 'disability rights', 'disability activism' and 'athlete activism'. As Armstrong, Butryn, Andrews, and Masucci (2018) explained, leadership and language matters for decisions about promoting athlete activism though sport. The third reason this group gave to argue against promoting activism was that they felt that the IPCs recent and increasing shift towards disability activism discourse was counter to the wishes of many Para athletes, globally (i.e., the wish to keep Paralympic discourse to stories about sport).

Disability activist group

In comparison to the Para athlete group and the NPC group, the disability activist group drew on "ableist language" discourse to argue against promoting activism through Para sport. For most of this group, in terms of creating social change, language really matters. They argued how current Paralympic discourse is often underpinned by "ableist language" that can invite

oppression rather than challenge it. Ableist language, often used inadvertently, is language that devalues disabled people by perpetuating a cultural favouritism for able-bodied people (Campbell, 2008). For example, most of this group highlighted ableist language as media depictions of Para athletes as "superhumans", marketing Para athletes as "overcoming the odds to participate in sport", policy statements like "see the athletic ability not the disability", or the Paralympic values like "inspiration" and "courage". As one female activist explained after the interviewer presented a picture of Paralympic values next to the Olympic Values:

> I hate when people say "courage" and "inspiration". Especially when you see the Olympic values, they're "friendship", that's very community based and "respect" and "excellence". It feels like the Paralympic values are much lower. And that's quite common. It's quite common for the bars to be set so much lower for people with disabilities. This is why I don't want disability seen as a bad thing. Because when you do that you're setting the bar for people. First of all, I think if you set the bar so low for people, you're just setting them up to be miserable because they've got nothing to smile for…setting the bar low is a really big problem because it's like we have all these expectations for an able-bodied person, and we expect them to go out and have a job and to do this and do that and the other. And if we don't have the same expectations for a person with a disability, we're saying "you're not normal, you're not at the same level as everybody else". There's an inherent discrimination and inferiority in being disabled if you have that (act4)

The disabled activist group argued that ableist Paralympic discourse is problematic for promoting activism through Para sport for three reasons. The first reason is that ableist language reproduces inequality within the disability community by positioning Para athletes (who are often privileged and independent) as somehow better at 'doing' disability than disabled people who do not play sport. Importantly also, because of classification rules, many

disabled people do not have the physical ability to participate in Para sports, even at a recreational level (Howe & Silva, 2016).The second reason is that ableist language perpetuates an individual model understanding of disability where social adversity is seen as an individual's responsibility at the expense of political models were disability is explained as a rightful part of human diversity (Smith & Bundon, 2018). Finally, the disability activists argued that the dominance of ablest language prevents any nuance in disability representation. By this they meant that when Paralympic discourse is focused on stories of "overcoming adversity" or "inspirational discourse" there is no space for stories about day-to-day realities of living with impairment (e.g., daily disabling social barriers). As one female disability activist said; "it's problematic to have people who don't have disabilities representing people with disabilities, you don't get the same nuances and you don't get the same depth" (act4).

Critical discussion

In my third theme, addressing my question about whether Para sport is a suitable context to promote disability activism, I described the impact of 'Paralympic discourse' on socio-political change. Activist discourses are fragile, says Plummer (2019), and discourses gain or lose power through how they are communicated or talked about. Through three activist discourses, "the direction of Para sport discourse", "see the sporting ability not the disability" and "ableist language" the stakeholders critical insights demonstrate how Para sport is talked about is problematic in terms of creating socio-political change.

The IPC, for example, want to "cultivate a generation of Para athletes to act as advocates for disability rights" through education programmes based on the Paralympic values (see Proud Paralympian Programme www.paralympic.org). However, as evident in this theme and supported by previous research (see McNamee, 2017) these values can be interpreted as an "ableist language" (disability activist group). In another example, the IPC's

new strategy has explicitly engaged with a language of disability politics. However, as suggested in this study, disability activist discourse conflicts with how some stakeholders would like to see the "direction of Paralympic discourse" (the top teir Para athlete group) or "see the athletic ability not the disability" (the NPC group). Indeed, I found 'fragile' discourse to be a limitation to carrying out research in this area. For example, whilst academics are comfortable with terms like athlete activism and disability activist some people avoid this type of research because they find this discourse politically loaded and off-putting (Armstrong et al., 2018).

Chapter Summary

This chapter attempts to understand what promoting disability activism means to three groups of key stakeholders in a national-level socio-political and Para sport context- Ireland. It contributes to the field of sport sociology by highlighting nine activist discourses that pose challenges to promoting disability activism through an Irish Para sport context. To facilitate readership, I have summarised these nine activist discourses in Table 3.

Table 3- Activist discourses drawn upon by key stakeholders to argue for and against promoting activism through Para sport

	Para athlete group	NPC group	Disability activist group
Theme: Social responsibility	**"More than sport"** Activism is part of the Para sport story but not a responsibility for all Para athletes.	**"Mixing sport and politics"** There are contexts to mix, and not to mix, Para sport and activism.	**"Disability is always political"/ "nothing about us without us"** Disability rights slogans used to argue for social responsibility.
Theme: Identity performance	**"Positive role model"** Performing an affirmative identity that connects with an negotiated narrative towards challenging inequality.	**"Protecting athletes identities"** Arguments to eschew activism that connects with a collaborative narrative, avoiding challenging inequality.	**"disability activist identity"** Challenging inequality in more 'rebellious' ways by performing a counter narrative that connects with political models of disability.
Theme: Paralympic discourse	**"The direction of Paralympic discourse"** Para sport is progressively moving away from an 'inspirational discourse' towards a 'sport discourse'.	**"See the sporting ability not the disability"** Marketing discourse resulting from the Paralympic Paradox that can be drawn upon to resist promoting activism.	**"Ableist language"** Para sport is still communicated in ways that re-produces disability as a negative.

Chapter Nine: Conclusions

Chapter overview

In this thesis, 'thinking' with critical disability studies and drawing on a qualitatively rich and rigorously developed data set, I provided an in-depth analysis of Para athlete activism in Ireland. In doing so, I have made a number of novel contributions to research. In addition to exploring Para athletes' thoughts about social change (chapter four) and capturing an understanding of the Irish landscape of disability activism (chapter five), this is the first study to explore how Irish Para athletes advocate for social change to improve Para sport contexts (chapter six). This is also the first study to explore how elite Irish Para athletes engage in disability activism through Paralympic sport for wider social good (chapter seven). Moreover, to my knowledge, this is the first study to attempt to understand what promoting disability activism means to three groups of key stakeholders in a national-level socio-political and Para sport context (chapter eight). Throughout the chapters I have identified activist ideas, opinions, styles, philosophies, strategies, contexts and challenges. I also demonstrated the value of qualitative methods and future-forming approaches to research (see Gergen, 2015; 2016). I argued for shifts in theoretical directions, such as by proposing that disability sport psychologists should seriously consider engaging with a critical disability studies perspective. In addition, I provided several heuristics and frameworks for those who want to facilitate or promote Para athlete activism.

But what does all of this 'novelty' mean for research and practice? In this chapter I address the "so what" question ("so what is the point of this research?") by discussing the empirical, theoretical, practical and methodological implications of my thesis, as well as some concluding ideas for future directions.

Empirical implications

This thesis provided empirical evidence to contribute to a number of areas of research, such as the fields of disability activism, sport management, sport and exercise psychology, and the sociology of sport. I will discuss the empirical implications of each chapter in turn.

The original contribution of chapter four is evidence to understand Para athletes' ideas and opinions about disability in society and social change. The empirical implications of this are threefold. First, this chapter extends knowledge about 'general' athlete activism research (i.e., disabled and non-disabled athlete activism empirical studies). This is because most 'general' athlete activism research focused on how athletes 'do' activism, or the consequences of such actions, such as the media coverage (e.g., Sanderson, Frederick & Stocz, 2016) or commercial endorsements of athletes who are deemed to be activist (e.g., Cunningham & Regan Jr, 2011). This chapter, in contrast, focused on what athletes think about inequality and social change. This distinction is important for the direction of general athlete activism research because social activism scholars such as Corning and Myers (2002) emphasised the *activism intention-behaviour gap*; while people can have lots of thoughts, ideas and opinions about inequality and social change this does not necessarily transfer into action to create social change (i.e., 'do' activism).

Second, chapter four makes a significant contribution to Para athlete activism research, specifically (Braye 2016; Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2014; Choi, Haslett & Smith, 2019; Powis, 2018; Smith et al., 2016). Historically, that is, most athlete activism research focused on non-disabled athletes and issues like race and gender (e.g., Cooper et al., 2019). In comparison there has been very little empirical evidence focused on what Para athletes think about issues around disability. Third, this chapter makes a contribution to the wider disability activism research (see Berghs, Chataika, El-Lahib & Dube, 2020). Research on disability activism has historically ignored Para sport as a context to explore disability activism

(Goodley, 2016). However, I argue that the empirical evidence offered in this chapter shows that disability activism researchers should start to take seriously Para athletes' different and nuanced thoughts about disability in society and social change.

Chapter five's original contribution is an interpretation of the landscape of disability activism in Ireland. There are two important empirical implications of this finding. First, the evidence captured in chapter five makes a contribution to research focused on the experience of disability activism in Ireland (Conroy, 2018). While there is research highlighting disability and social inequality in Ireland (Flynn, 2017) there is a dearth of research focused on contemporary Irish disability activists' views about disability activism itself. In this chapter I contributed evidence to help evaluate disability activism in Ireland by highlighting the influences of important socio-cultural events, philosophical and strategic tensions, as well as new areas to watch.

Second, chapter five provided important evidence for those who aim to promote Para athlete activism. For instance, as noted, part of the International Paralympic Committee Strategic Plan 2019 to 2022 (IPC, 2019) aims to promote disability activism through Para sport at national levels (i.e., though National Paralympic Committees such as *Paralympics Ireland*). Understanding the national-level landscape of disability activism will thus have important implications for the success or failure of such plans. Moreover, as I develop below in *practical implications*, this chapter offered researchers and practitioners a tool to evaluate Para athlete activism by highlighting the importance of, for instance, socio-cultural events (e.g., Covid-19 or Black Lives Matters), strategic tensions and new engaging disability activist narratives.

In chapter six, I specifically captured how Para athletes to advocate for social change to improve Para sport contexts. There are two important empirical implications of this chapter. First, this chapter provided a contribution to a very limited about of research focused

on Para sport in Ireland (e.g., Haslett et al., 2017). For instance, evidence was offered to show differences between top-tier and bottom-tier Para athletes in relation to advocacy and the ways this can help to improve Para sport in Ireland. Second, this chapter provided empirical evidence to extend Para sport management research (Evans et al., 2018; Patatas et al., 2018; 2019; 2020; Misener, Dracy, Legg & Gilbert, 2013). For instance, I provided evidence to support a heuristic to facilitate Para athletes to advocate for social change within sport contexts. In this chapter I identified the areas that are needed to advocate for social change within Para sport, as well, the styles, contexts and challenges involved in advocacy. As sport management research is becoming increasingly interested in social justice issues (see Cunningham, Dixon, Singer, Oshiro, Ahn, & Weems, 2019) it is important that the next generation of sport management professionals are familiar with how Para athletes advocate to improve Para sport.

The contribution of chapter seven is evidence to understand how Para athletes advocate for social change to improve wider society for disabled people. In this chapter, I empirically demonstrated how Para athletes contribute to disability activism in diverse ways. There are two key empirical implications of this chapter. First, this chapter provided evidence in support of the IPC's ambitions to promote Para athletes as disability activists (IPC, 2019). Critically, in this chapter I provided an analytical distinction between three areas of Para athlete activism and I argued for the importance of context in influencing why, how and when Para athletes do activism. Second, the empirical evidence for this chapter has implications for the field of disability sport psychology (Martin, 2017; Smith & Perrier, 2015; Wood et al., 2018). For example, in this chapter I provided evidence in support of a theoretical shift in the direction of disability sport psychology research (discussed further below in theoretical implications). Then in chapter eight I provided empirical evidence to challenge the International Paralympic Committee's vision to promote Para athletes as

disability activists (IPC, 2019). For example, in this chapter I showed - through the critical insights of Para athletes, National Paralympic Committee members and Irish disability activists - that there are many culturally contextual arguments to resist, or (re)interpret the IPC's vision at a national level due to different institutionalised cultural values and political interests.

Finally, the published empirical evidence from this thesis (Haslett & Smith, 2020a; Haslett, Choi & Smith, 2020; Haslett, Monforte, Choi & Smith, 2020) along with other recent empirical evidence from different socio-cultural contexts (Choi, Haslett & Smith, 2019; Choi, Haslett, Monforte & Smith, in press) means, going forward, Para athlete activism will hopefully be included in the 'general' athlete activism literature. To give an example, the editors for the upcoming handbook *Contemporary Perspectives on Athlete Activism* have accepted my abstract to contribute a chapter focused specifically on Para athlete activism. The practical implications of these empirical findings are discussed below, but before this I will discuss some theoretical implications of thesis.

Theoretical implications

This thesis also contains several theoretical implications for research. Importantly, the PhD advances a critical disability studies (CDS) perspective in Para sport research (Goodley, 2018; Peers, 2012). As Kerr and Howe (2017) argued: "All too often scholars working in the broad field of Olympic studies who are exploring issues related to the Paralympics have paid only lip service to the fact that disability activism and its related academic field of disability studies have something to offer" (p.11). As I highlighted throughout the thesis, thinking with CDS involves drawing on an eclectic range of theories and lines of inquiry. I will now discuss the theoretical implications of this type of 'thinking' with reference to examples from three different chapters (chapters four, six and seven).

In this thesis, I advanced the use of the social relational model (SRM) of disability in Para sport research. As I explained in chapter four, Para sport scholars are increasingly utilising the SRM to capture the lived experience of disability in research, because it is a conceptually progressive way to analyse, explain and frame disability in sport (Allan, Evans, Latimer-Cheung & Côté, 2019; Patatas et al., 2020 Haslett et al., 2017; Martin, 2013; Townsend et al, 2017). In particular, the SRM has been used to illuminate the experience and consequences of various forms of psycho-emotional disablism among athletes in disability sport contexts (Smith & Perrier, 2015). However, one underused application of the SRM is how it can facilitate an understanding of the effects of positive social relationships, such as the experience of enabling discourse and structures on psycho-emotional wellbeing and subsequent 'ways of becoming' (see Townsend et al, 2017). As Haslett et al. (2017) said "although the SRM foregrounds disability as an experience, more weight is given to how negative interactions (social and structural) can damage psychology (e.g., self-esteem and confidence) than how positive interactions can have psychological benefits" (p.76). In chapter four I advanced the SRM in disability sport research, theoretically, by arguing for the concept that I term *psycho-emotional enable-ism*; meaning increased self-esteem and confidence as a result of 'positive' enabling social relations (e.g., disability gains, geographical affects, inclusive environments). This contribution adds more theoretical weight to the argument that the SRM (and the psycho-emotional register of disability) is progressive because it seeks to consider what disabled people can *be* rather than simply what disabled people can *do* (Goodley, 2016; Smith & Bundon, 2018; Smith & Perrier, 2015). That said, the social relational model of disability is clearly complex and for some, this complexity is a limitation and serves only to overcomplicate an already complicated understanding of disability (see Shakespeare & Watson, 2010). This is because, in part, there are now numerous models to help understand and explain disability (see Haslett & Smith, 2020b).

This recognised, as hopefully I have shown, the SRM can be useful in identifying the damage that disabling interactions and environments can have as well as the affirmative experiences that can be generated with social relationships for disabled people. In so doing, and aligned with CDS, it provides opportunities to view and live with disability in different ways, as neither simply 'bad'/'oppressive' *or* 'good'/liberated'.

In chapter six, I drew upon a number of different theoretical approaches to illuminate how Para athletes advocate to improve sport contexts. In this chapter I attempted to bring together different theories from sociology, such as Bourdieuan ideas about social practice (Bourdieu, 1986; Brittian et al., 2019) and Goffman inspired work (Roderick, & Allen-Collinson, 2020) on social performances, with cultural sport psychology, such as understanding power as relational (see McGannon & Smith, 2015). For me, this chapter is good example of 'thinking' with critical disability studies because I draw on an eclectic range of theories. However, this chapter is also a good example of how the eclecticism of a critical disability studies perspective could be considered a limitation for theory (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009). One implication of a CDS approach is that I can be accused of sacrificing theoretical depth for 'eclectic' breath. Moreover, some scholars might question 'theoretical coherence' based on approaches that seem philosophically incongruent. Another theoretical implication of this CDS approach is that findings can seem 'messy'; for some scholars the richness and value of the data could get lost in this 'theoretical messiness'.

That said, Para sport researchers *are* starting to bring together different theories to attempt to explain behaviour in Para sport. For example, Brittain et al. (2019) proposed a framework to help understand barriers to participation in sport for disabled people by bringing together theories of ableism, social practice and self-determination. For me, their framework is good example of 'thinking' with critical disability studies because the authors drew on theories from psychology such as self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000),

sociology such as Bordieuan ideas about social practice (Bourdieu, 1986), and disability studies such as theories of internalised ableism (Campbell, 2008). However, some scholars could argue that this framework implies philosophical incongruence. For example, self-determination theory is underpinned by an assumption of fundamental human needs that are located within the individual (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Whereas for Bourdieu (1984), "social practices should be viewed as the main site of inquiry for social scientists in analysing social reality" (p.72).

In chapter seven, I argued strongly that disability sport psychology researchers should connect with critical disability studies so that they can engage with socio-historical-economic-political forces that construct, produce and institutionalise psychological adversity. There are a number of theoretical implications for this argument. The main concern is for what I will term – *disability sport psychologisation.* By this I mean the psychological manufacturing of a 'valued' athlete as result of dominant post-positivist perspectives in sport psychology (Goodley, 2014; 2016). For example, dominant cognitivist approaches within sport psychology, with a favouritism for certain 'universal' traits like autonomy and self-determination, have created an idea of an average, normal, self-contained 'athlete' (Goodley, 2016); an athlete against which all other athletes, such as Para athletes, are marked and judged. However, as Smith and Perrier (2015) claimed, historically, sport psychology research on disability has, "either knowingly or unknowingly, often been framed by a medical model understanding of disabled people" (p.95). For example, whilst recently there has been a growing amount of sport psychology research focused on Para sport, often this work unquestionably views disability from a medical lens as an adversity that can be overcome through psychological intervention. For me, *disability sport psychologisation*, is enhanced, for example, by recent therapeutic intervention research (i.e., medical lens) that assumes psychological challenges for disabled people (e.g., lack of autonomy, compromised

self-identity, diminished self-worth, body-image issues, and depression) are linked to specific physical conditions such as visual impairment (e.g., Wood et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2018).

By viewing disability in sport from a critical lens of human diversity in contrast to a medical lens of biological adversity, as I have suggested in chapter seven, advanced understandings of oppression that disabled people experience are illuminated. In doing so, *disability sport psychologization* is challenged. For instance, the psycho-emotional dimensions of disability, internalised ableism and emotional labour from disablement, as described in this chapter, provide evidence to support the value of critical approaches to disability sport psychology. For example, the Para athletes' responses to disablism and explaining the role of ableism in mental health or performance in sport provide evidence to suggest that 'future-forming' sport psychology researchers should engage theoretically with both social structure (order) and social agency (action). Researchers, I argued, should consider social relations and socio-cultural forces that construct *disability* in sport. Importantly, this can help shift the discourse away from bio-physical assumptions of normality or neo-liberal health assumptions of individual responsibly for disability (Smith & Perrier, 2015). I likewise argue that moving towards a research landscape that can distinguish how athletes *do* sport from how athletes *do* disability can help to challenge conditions of disablsim in sport and society. To give an example, one theoretical implication of this thinking is to reject research that has argued that an athletic identity is incompatible with an activist identity (Beachy et al., 2018). The methodological implications involved in developing this knowledge are discussed below, but before this I will discuss some practical implications of thesis.

Practical implications

This research also contains several practical implications for Para sport practitioners (e.g., sport psychologists), Para sport managers (e.g., National Paralympic Committees) and Para

sport policy makers (e.g., the International Paralympic Committee). I will discuss these implications in relation to chapters six, seven and eight.

In chapter six I offered a heuristic to help support Para athletes who wish to advocate to improve Para sport (see table 2) and argued that this heuristic is possibly transferable to help improve Para sport contexts in different cultures. Therefore, the interpretations in this chapter might have practical implications for National Paralympic Committees who wish to facilitate advocacy to improve sport. Whereas previous studies have identified policy areas and conditions to improve Para sport contexts, the findings in this chapter from the perspective of Para athletes, explained *how* athletes *act* to better develop and implement these policies (e.g., participation, classification issues). For example, Evans et al. (2018) identified conditions within Para sport contexts to promote quality experiences (e.g., attitudes, coaching, classification). In addition, Patatas et al. (2020) interviewed Para sport managers and identified policy factors (e.g., coaches with disability-specific knowledge) that are influential during all the phases of Para-athletes' careers. In chapter six I identified advocacy styles, contexts and challenges to complement Para sport management research that identified the conditions and policy factors needed to improve Para sport. This chapter thus has practical implications because it captured the types of activism that are needed for people and organisations to address the social-political roots of oppression within Para sport contexts.

Chapter seven contains practical implications for Para sport organisations who wish to engage in disability activism for broader social legacy. Paralympic legacy research primarily focused on attempts to evaluate the extent to which sporting mega-events ignite social change. For example, the impact that the London 2012 Paralympic Games had on increasing Para sport participation in the UK (Pappous & Brown, 2018). In addition, disability sport is often promoted in terms of individual health value by highlighting the physical and psychological benefits of participation in sport (Mascarinas & Blauwet, 2018). However, in

this chapter I highlighted a *Para athlete social legacy* value by showing the diverse ways that Para athletes themselves contribute to social change for disabled people in wider society. The practical implication of this chapter is that National Paralympic Committees, such as *Paralympics Ireland,* can use this as evidence to claim *Para athlete social legacy*. Para athlete social legacy is important as we move towards a sporting landscape that is becoming less preoccupied with medal success and more concerned with the socio-pollical environment of athletes such as mental health, safety and social justice (see Duty of care in sport review, 2017). For example, this chapter linked Para athlete *activisms* to wider government disability rights agendas around transport, mental health, employment. That said, practitioners (e.g., coaches, sport psychologists) should be aware of the following implications of facilitating Para athlete activism.

First, 'societal trailblasing' Para athletes, such the societal 'firsts' I discussed in chapter seven, can be - and indeed should be - publicly hailed for defying social expectations. However, practitioners should be aware that defying low expectations is *not* the same as challenging systems of power, which is important for facilitating change also. Second, activism focused on inspirational stories of athletes overcoming adversity can reproduce disability in terms of an 'abnormal' stereotype because 'overcoming' connects with a medical model of disability (Smith & Bundon, 2018). Third, activism linked to charitable initiatives can reproduce disability in terms of an 'unfortunate' or 'pity' stereotype (Mallet & Runswick-Cole, 2014). Fourth, activism targeting only individual agency (i.e., behaviour change at the level of disabled people themselves) such as through 'motivational speaking' connects with a neoliberal approach; this can imply that disabled people have individual responsibly for their oppression (Smith & Perrier, 2015). Fifth, practitioners need to be aware that mental health advocacy should distinguish mental distress as a consequence of impairment (e.g., pain/loss from an acquired disability) from distress as a consequence of

disablement (e.g., psycho-emotional disablism as a result of oppression). Finally, facilitating role model advocacy is important because this increases disability representation and can inspire people (e.g., young disabled people and their parents) to think differently about possibilities in life. However, role model advocacy is limited towards wider social change due to trickle-down assumptions involved in behaviour change theories, and the - often overlooked - requirement for perceived proximity to role models to create behaviour change (Boardley, 2013). By this I mean that practitioners should be aware of the difference between promoting a blind Para athlete as a role model for young blind athletes, or for *all* disabled people everywhere.

Chapter eight contains more practical implications for Para sport organisations who wish promote Para athlete activism. Taken together, critical insights from the stakeholders in this chapter raise important questions about whether the International Paralympic Committee strategy (IPC, 2019) can be realised at all in an Irish context. For example, if Irish key stakeholders are actively arguing against promoting activism, it cannot be assumed that the IPC strategy will simply be absorbed at other national levels. Global sports policy diffusion research (e.g., Lindsey & Bitugu, 2018) is useful here in explaining how global "activist discourses" (e.g., the IPC strategy) can be acted with, resisted or (re)interpreted at a national level due to different political systems (e.g., democratic, authoritarian), institutionalised cultural values and political interests. What then does this mean for the IPC strategy? What work is then needed with key stakeholders at national levels for the IPC strategy to be realised? Table 3 outlines nine activist arguments that Para sport organisations can use practically to promote and evaluate Para athlete activism. To help in this regard, Plummer (2019) proposes a strategy of *narrative care and sustainably to* "re-work" the fragility of activist stories. This means looking critically and globally at how 'past' activist discourses, such as in Table 3, can be reworked for the needs of the 'present' and have the ability to be

taken forward by ‘future’ generations. For example, Para sport organisations across different contexts might observe that the discursive argument “see the sporting ability not the disability” becomes less relevant in some contexts while the discursive argument “nothing about us without us” becomes more relevant in other contexts. That said, before Para sport organisations that would like to take practical steps to promote activism might first want to work on *being* the change they what to *see* (Silva and Howe, 2018).

In this regard, there are practical implications for Para sport organisations who wish to challenge ableism within Para sport suggested throughout the chapters. Silva and Howe (2018) argued that a pre-condition for Para sport cultures to promote positive social change for disabled people will involve embracing an ‘acceptance of difference’. For example, they urged Para sport cultures to reflect on the multiple ways they fail to challenge ableism, or worse, reinforce ableism. Central to this is, they argued, for organisations to work towards exposing the relational nature of difference. That means a shift from viewing difference in absolute terms towards promoting difference as value neutral, fluid, nuanced, continuous and (culturally and historically) contingent, contextual and in continuous dialogue with ‘the other’. In practical terms, they argued that recognising, accepting and valuing difference involves three considerations (Silva & Howe, 2018). The first consideration is to recognise the role of ableism in how some Para sports have become ‘top tier’ such as Para athletics, Para swimming and Para cycling, and respond to this by promoting bottom-tier sports such as wheelchair rugby, boccia, goalball. In addition, work towards creating new sports involving interaction between differently embodied participants (e.g., new mixed gender and mixed ability team sports) is needed. Second, it is important to pay attention to how disabling barriers to sport are inextricably linked to how disability intersects with other categories of difference (gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, etc). Third, it is important to work towards replicating the heterogeneity of Para sport at all levels of governance and

practice (e.g., coaching, management). This is because, despite being well-intentioned, Para sports organisations that are governed *for* disabled people (rather than governed *of* disabled people) will continue to respond to questions of disability (e.g., social inclusion) by attempting to answer the question - what can *we* do for *them*? (i.e., the disabled Other).

Practical recommendations

As critical disability studies require us to go beyond the academic sphere, I must make some practical recommendations too. What follows are some examples of practical recommendations to National Paralympic Committees (NPCs) and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC). My first recommendation is that at an international level, the IPC should develop an advocacy policy to help create a global movement/campaign about disability rights. I recommend that such a policy consider the following points. First, they must understand that while stories and performances of Para athletes help challenge attitudes towards disability, truly changing attitudes requires creating opportunities for disabled people at a structural level in areas like employment, education, housing and the built environment. Secondly, the movement should be co-produced with global disability rights originations who share their drive for social inclusion. But, importantly, these originations should led by disabled people for disabled people. Thirdly, we should seek disability rights commitments by national governments and global businesses. Finally, the IPC should be fully aware of the limitations of promoting 'top down' global disability rights movements. For instance, movements centred on identity politics (e.g., creating a shared sense of identity) can be problematic because not all disabilities are represented in Para sport. I thus recommend that the IPC should be explicitly modest about their claims in relation to wider social change or they will accused of only being activist for themselves.

My second main recommendation to the IPC is that they should seek to contextualise their disability activism within wider contemporary athlete activism debates. For example,

increasingly ubiquitous global activist movements, such as Black Lives Matter, have re-ignited a debate surrounding the Olympic charter rule 50 that states - "no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas." (Næss, 2018). However, as noted, the IPC - who are committed to the Olympic charter rule 50 - plan to use the increasingly powerful platform of Para sport and Para athletes to highlight disability discrimination. I recommend that the IPC engage with, and clarify, this paradoxical position to suppress some forms of activism but promote others. For example, at the Tokyo Games, will Para athletes be encouraged to wear disability rights symbolism but discouraged from wearing Black Lives Matter symbolism?

My third and final recommendation is that NPCs should develop national disability rights policies. For example, NPC South Korea have produced a new strategic plan for 2021–2025 to promote disability rights in sport and society. Some aspects of this policy are to call for departments of human rights in all disability sport organisations in South Korea (Objective 7.3); and establish mandatory courses on disability rights for all key stakeholders such as coaches, athletes, physiologists and referees (Objective 7.4). However, as evident in this PhD, I recommend that national level contexts must be taken into account such as how people feel about disability in society and social change (Chapter 4), the national landscape of disability activism (Chapter 5), and the degree of development of Para sport within counties. To help with these types of decisions, I have developed the following five 'Para athlete narratives for social change'. These narratives that can be used by, for example, NPCs to make decisions (e.g., editorial, communication, sponsorship or marketing decisions) about using Para sport to challenge discrimination in wider societies. Narratives can function to communicate complex knowledge about disability and stigma in ways that are highly accessible to different audiences. Thus narratives about disability, within and around Para sport stories and representations of Para athletes, are powerful tools to challenge stigma in

relation to disability. Para sport narratives can affect what people think, how people behave, and what people imagine as possible. Therefore, Para sport stories can be powerful motivators of social change and social action (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

National elite sport narratives

These narratives encompass stories that centre on the medal success of National Para athletes and are underpinned by visual content that features Para athletes training and competing. This narrative helps position Paralympic sport as elite, promotes feelings of national pride in audiences, and can challenge the underlying assumption that disability limits physical ability. This narrative plays an important role in the longer-term development and promotion of Para sport. It has been associated with increased grassroot participation in Para sport, promoting Para athletes role models, and attracting sponsorship and marketing opportunities. The National elite sport narrative may also function to promote the value and uptake of assistive technology (AT) by aligning AT with ideas of increased ability and success. In addition, narratives that focus on Para athletes as elite high performing athletes challenge the underlying assumption within some societies that non-disabled sport is superior and of greater importance

Inspirational overcoming narratives

Inspirational narratives of Para athletes who have overcome physical and structural barriers to succeed in elite sport and other areas of civic life (education, employment etc) can be very effective in engaging and educating audiences on disability related issues. Paralympic audience data conducted in the Global North has demonstrated the power of this narrative in challenging audience perceptions of disability dependence and vulnerability and promoting role models. Importantly, this narrative provides a template to promote the personal stories of disability and the role of social support networks (family, community, peers) in Paralympic success. It is a narrative that, used effectively, can counteract disability narratives of public shame, embarrassment, and isolation. However, an overemphasis on this narrative at the

expense of others can be counterproductive if it promotes the idea that discrimination can be overcome though engagement in Para spot alone and without wider social and structural change to support people with disabilities.

Positive role model narrative

Narratives that depict Para athletes as positive role models are powerful because they can inspire people with disabilities (and their families) to think differently about possibilities in life. For example, narratives of proud positive visible Para athletes play an important role challenging ableism that could be internalised by young people with disabilities (Swain, & French, 2000). However, an overemphasis on this type of narrative, at the expense of others, can imply that social change requires individuals with disabilities to change their behaviour; it shifts the responsibility for stigma away from wider society.

Health and well-being narratives

The many health and well-being narratives that surround Para sport can also help promote social change and challenge ableism. For example, Para athletes often promote the meaning and satisfaction they, as people with disabilities, derive from participating in Para sport. In addition to many physical benefits and developing a sense of athletic identity, Para athletes talk about how participation in Para sport impacts on their autonomy and psychological well-being. This type of narrative can be affective by highlighting how participation in inclusive sport can promote independence, and a sense of belonging and acceptance in society (Papathomas and Smith, 2019). Also, from a public health perspective, making sport more inclusive and developing more accessible community environments benefits the whole population, and not just persons with disabilities. However, an overemphasis on health narratives can imply that participation in Para sport is a form of rehabilitation rather than elite sport. This emphasis could distract from narratives that seek to promote Para athletes as elite high performing sports people and not merely people who patriciate in recreational sport.

Disability rights and social justice narratives

Stories of Para athletes who have overcome discriminatory barriers (e.g., excluded from education, buildings, transport, employment) to thrive and succeed in Para sport can help to promote disability rights and social justice. For example, the growing platform of increasingly popular Para athletes can be used highlight social barriers that are disabling people with impairment in wider society (See Chapter 9). While social justice sport narratives are becoming popular, these stories also connect with national and international agendas that seek to address stigma at a structural level (in comparison to the level of individual behavior). For instance, Article 30 of the UNCRPD recognises physical activity and sport as important parts of any person's citizenship. However, an overemphasis on disability rights narratives can also distract from elite sport narratives. In addition, amplifying stories of Para athletes who overcome low expectations and oppressive social barriers to 'break glass ceilings' is important in terms of promoting social change, but is not always the same as challenging systems of power which can be fundamental in terms of addressing ableism.

Methodological implications

The future-forming approach that I took to studying Para athlete activism has methodological implications for research in the sport and exercise sciences. A future-forming inquiry involves a shift from traditional modes of inquiry, such as a focus on universal or predictive 'truths', towards societally focused research (Gergen, 2015; 2016). For example, my PhD was stimulated by social problems and issues, such as disability inequality and social activism. Thus, one epistemological concern that I held throughout was to ask and think about "what should be?" in contrast to research that only asks – "what is?". One methodological implication of this future-forming approach is that the values of social activism become important in research questions and designs. For example, the sampling of participants and development of research questions in this study were driven by values of activism such as equality, rights, empowerment or challenging disablism/ableism. Another

methodological implication concerns research methods. For example, the methods of data collection and analysis that I adopted were appropriate for a future-forming inquiry because interviews are a *responded dominant method*. As Gergen (2016) explained:

> Qualitative methods are respondent dominant. Such methods may be optimally suited for a rapid world of change. Rather than testing an idea rooted in previous observations, such qualitative methods can function as culturally sensitive weathervanes. They are maximally open to the emerging discourses within the culture, enabling the results to make their way into the culture's dialogue (p.9).

My methodological approach to work towards understanding Para athlete activism was not without limitations, however. First, as discussed by Armstrong et al. (2018), the language in which athlete activism research is framed and discussed can be, paradoxically, a limitation to studying activism. While academics are comfortable with terms like social activism, disability activism and 'future-forming' approaches to research (e.g., research that aims to challenge disablism and ableism), I found that these 'loaded' terms and 'political' approaches are capable of eliciting negative responses from participants - in particular from some participants in the Para athlete group and the National Paralympic Committee group. Especially this is when linked to politically emotive concepts around social inequality, nationalism and political responsibility. On top of this, the language of disability politics can be, as one participant said, "a minefield". In addition, I found that participants can be put off this type of research by the perception that academics hold predetermined ideas about how Para athletes and Para sport organisations *should* use their platforms for socio-political purposes.

Second, I believe that the methodology adopted in this thesis can be accused of contributing to a 'McDonaldization' of qualitative research. Byrman and Beardsworth (2006) asked if qualitative research is becoming 'McDonaldized' because researchers increasingly

choose predictable methods. Once off 'snapshot' interviews combined with a thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2019) is becoming an increasingly predictable methodological approach in the sport and exercise sciences. Future research could (and should) adopt methodological approaches to deal with the contemporary challenge of rapid technological and socio-political change (Gergen, 2016). This is because we now live in a world of unprecedented social change (COVID-19, Climate emergency, Black Lives Matter, Artificial Intelligence) in which activist movements can rapidly mobilise, expand or disappear. My methodological approach to studying Para athlete activism could be enhanced by more methodological variation such as by incorporating quantitative methods (see Choi, Haslett & Smith, 2019) or innovative qualitative methods. For example, the tradition of action inquiry (i.e., research that leads to social change), with a collaborative and participatory emphasis, can help researchers that pursue social justice (Gergen, 2016). Action inquiry donates an interdisciplinary approach (as I have adopted in this thesis), but it also means conducting research *with* participants as opposed to *on* them (as I have arguably done in this thesis). This methodological enhancement could be more 'future-forming' by actively incorporating the ideas and values from Para athletes, for example, with regards how to amplify results appropriately. Now that I have discussed implications I will finish with some closing ideas.

Closing thoughts and future directions

In this chapter, I discussed the empirical, theoretical, practical and methodological implications of my thesis. I will now conclude with some thoughts and suggestions for future research directions.

First, future research should develop knowledge in the different areas highlighted in this thesis. For example, in chapter six, I showed how Para athletes described four advocacy areas within Para sport contexts. Research could develop knowledge in each of these areas;

for example, by seeking to understand how Para athletes challenge various media (mis)representations of disability in Para sport. Although there is increasing research that problematises the media (mis)representation of Para athletes (see Ress et al., 2017) there is little knowledge from the perspective of Para athletes. Future Para sport management research should consider the advocacy voice of Para athletes (Culver & Werthner, 2017) as a policy factor influencing the development of Para sport. That said, future Para sport management research should also consider who promotes, advocacy within Para sport contexts. For example, it could be argued that this happening already in some areas of Para sport. Funded Para athletes in the UK I believe are under contract to contribute towards London 2012 legacy agendas. This is not the case in Ireland to my knowledge but there is an athletes' commission to advocate on behalf of athletes.

Second, future research should consider how to promote Para athlete activism, such as by amplifying stories of Para athlete activism (Smith et al., 2016) or designing Para athlete activism workshops (Mac Intosh & Martin, 2018). Future-forming research could, for example, evaluate activist discourses (e.g., in chapter eight) for their vibrancy, diversity, longevity and resilience across different socio-political and Para sport contexts (Plummer, 2019). For example, research can examine how key stakeholders in different contexts draw upon different cultural activist discourses to argue for or against promoting activism. Likewise, research can examine the ways how national level activist discourses influence and shape global activist discourses. Also, as the IPC strategy was only being realised at the time of the research (IPC, 2019) future research will need to understand what stakeholders, as well as researchers, explicitly think of this strategy over time. For example, by asking does the IPC's recent philosophical shift towards activism (i.e., social model of disability) provide a counter narrative to the "inspirational individual courageously overcoming low social expectations" (medical model of disability)? Should disability activism be incorporated into

Para sport policy? Should National Paralympic Committees be penalised for not challenging ableism (e.g., removal of places at the Paralympic Games), or be rewarded when they do? Researchers could amplify stories of activism in more impactful ways than journal articles or conference papers such as creative non-fiction (Smith, McGannon & Williams, 2016) to reach wider audiences. In addition, future Para athlete activism research should go beyond disability activism to understand how Para athletes advocate for other causes (e.g., Black Lives Matter) and how these causes intersect with disability activism.

In summary, because most non-disabled people learn about disability through culture (e.g., media) and not through individual interactions with disabled people, culture should be at the forefront of disability activism. Paralympic sport is an influential cultural context within a wider disability landscape. In addition, understanding disability in society and sport is increasingly shifting away from that of individual medical adversity towards one of human social diversity. This shift, coupled with the rise in sports activism, provide Para sport cultures with an opportunity to think differently about disability and disability activism. This thesis illuminated the ways that Para athletes become politicised and their valuable contributions towards a social legacy in sport and society. Critical disability studies (CDS) is a transformative theoretical landscape that can help to re-imagine disability in Paralympic sport. However, scholars must be aware of the limitations of critical theory such as – when you are perceived to be in opposition to something it can make the fight worse (e.g., provoke unquestioned resistance). As Para athlete activism becomes a regular feature of Paralympic sport, the more understanding researchers have of different perspectives will be important (e.g. sports media, sports marketing, able-bodied athletes, recreational level para athletes). Importantly, as social change happens over time researchers must track this change by constantly critiquing the question - “are we better today than yesterday?”

I hope this thesis has encouraged scholars to think more *critically* about Para athlete activism.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: Para athlete group participant information sheet

Thank you for taking the time to consider participation in this research.

We do hope that you will get involved and contribute your valuable experiences and ideas to this important venture.

Should you agree to take part, we will ask you to continue to the informed Consent Form on the following page

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION
(for Para athlete group)

You are being invited to participate in this research interview. Before you take part, it is important to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will entail. Please take time to digest the following information carefully. Please contact us using the details at the end of this information page, if there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like further information.

Who is doing this research?

Professor Brett Smith and Damian Haslett (PhD student) from the School of Sport, Exercise, and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Birmingham.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to expand understanding in the area of disability, sport and social activism.

The aim is to speak to elite-level athletes with physical disabilities regarding sport and social activism (aimed at improving the lives of people with disabilities).

The objective is to gather information about participants experiences and/or opinions about social activism in elite sport contexts.

We are also seeking to understand the perceptions of key stakeholders in disability and sporting organisations regarding social activism in sport contexts.

Using the data collected form the above groups, it is expected that this research will provide a more comprehensive understanding about disability, sport and social activism. For example, the findings from the study can be used to developing preliminary recommendations in this area.

Do I have to take part? Can I change my mind once I have started?

Taking part in this research programme is entirely voluntary. You may decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to complete an *Informed Consent Form*. You are free to withdraw from the study up to the anticipated commencement of data analysis (Phase 2: 01.07.2018; Phase 3: 01.10.2018**;** Phase 4: 01.02.2019) and do not have to give a reason. If you do wish to withdraw please let us know by using the contact details at the end of this information page. In this instance, any data that you may have already provided will be destroyed.

What will happen if I choose to take part? What do I need to do and when?

If you are under 18 and/or have an intellectual disability, unfortunately you will not be able to participate in the study - please notify the researcher. If you are over 18 (and without intellectual disability), you will first complete the *Informed Consent Form* and then we will ask you to partake in a recorded interview. The interview will be conducted at a time and place convenient to you, will likely last around two hours. If you would like, you are welcome to have someone else present with you at the interviews. It is possible that you could be asked questions regarding your own disability.

Will my taking part in this study be anonymous and will my data be kept confidential?

As the research team will know your contact details, taking part in this study will not be anonymous. However, your data will be kept strictly confidential. The interview will take place in private. Your name will be replaced with participant number (e.g. participant no. 5), and the data will be presented in a manner in which you will not be identifiable. Everything you say will be kept confidential to the research team, and will not be shared with anyone.

For public or prominent participants, the risk of implicit disclosure will be managed by avoiding presenting specific information about participants in publications that result from this study. For example, specific location of participants, length played in a particular sport, affiliation with specific organisation, specific professional title.

All data will be stored in accordance with the procedures outlined by University of Birmingham Ethical Review Committee and in line with the UK Data Protection Act 1998. Taped interview recordings will be uploaded to password-protected computers belonging to the research team, and hard copy recordings (e.g. overservational field notes) will be stored in locked filing cabinets in the University of Birmingham. All data will be stored for ten years before being destroyed.

What will happen to the information collected throughout the research programme?

It is expected that the information of research will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between disability, sport and social activism. This has potential to be used to improve the lives of people with physical disabilities. In addition, it is also anticipated that findings will be published in academic journals, and presented at academic and other stakeholder conferences and events. In any instance, names or any other identifying feature of individual students, training providers, employers, or clients will not be revealed.

Are there any risks in participating?

There are no known risks to either physical or psychological health associated with taking part in this study.

What if I have any questions or I am not happy with how the research was conducted? What if I want to see the results?

If you wish to discuss or complain about any aspect of the research, please contact a member of the research team. If you would like to know the results of the research, a summary report of the findings can be made available to you, on completion of the research project. Please note that details specific to yourself/individualised feedback cannot be provided. Please let one on the research team know if you would like to see the findings.

Further information and contact details

Professor Brett Smith
Email: smithbs@bham.ac.uk

Mr Damian Haslett
Email: DXH607@bham.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to consider participation in this research.

We do hope that you will get involved and contribute your valuable experiences and ideas to this important venture.

Should you agree to take part, we will ask you to continue to the informed Consent Form on the following page

APPENDIX B: NPC group participant information sheet

Thank you for taking the time to consider participation in this research.

We do hope that you will get involved and contribute your valuable experiences and ideas to this important venture.

Should you agree to take part, we will ask you to continue to the informed Consent Form on the following page

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION
(NPC group)

You are being invited to participate in this research interview. Before you take part, it is important to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will entail. Please take time to digest the following information carefully. Please contact us using the details at the end of this information page, if there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like further information.

Who is doing this research?

Professor Brett Smith and Damian Haslett (PhD student) from the School of Sport, Exercise, and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Birmingham.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to expand understanding in the area of disability, sport and social activism.

The aim is to speak to staff and board members of disability sport organisations regarding sport and social activism (aimed at improving the lives of people with disabilities).

The objective is to gather information about participants experiences and/or opinions about social activism in elite sport contexts.

We are also seeking to understand the perceptions of elite Para athletes and key stakeholders in disability organisations regarding social activism in sport contexts.

Using the data collected form the above groups, it is expected that this research will provide a more comprehensive understanding about disability, sport and social activism. For example, the findings from the study can be used to developing preliminary recommendations in this area.

Do I have to take part? Can I change my mind once I have started?

Taking part in this research programme is entirely voluntary. You may decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to complete an *Informed Consent*

Form. You are free to withdraw from the study up to the anticipated commencement of data analysis (Phase 2: 01.07.2018; Phase 3: 01.10.2018**;** Phase 4: 01.02.2019) and do not have to give a reason. If you do wish to withdraw please let us know by using the contact details at the end of this information page. In this instance, any data that you may have already provided will be destroyed.

What will happen if I choose to take part? What do I need to do and when?

If you are under 18 and/or have an intellectual disability, unfortunately you will not be able to participate in the study - please notify the researcher. If you are over 18 (and without intellectual disability), you will first complete the *Informed Consent Form* and then we will ask you to partake in a recorded interview. The interview will be conducted at a time and place convenient to you, will likely last around two hours. If you would like, you are welcome to have someone else present with you at the interviews. It is possible that you could be asked questions regarding your own disability.

Will my taking part in this study be anonymous and will my data be kept confidential?

As the research team will know your contact details, taking part in this study will not be anonymous. However, your data will be kept strictly confidential. The interview will take place in private. Your name will be replaced with participant number (e.g. participant no. 5), and the data will be presented in a manner in which you will not be identifiable. Everything you say will be kept confidential to the research team, and will not be shared with anyone.

For public or prominent participants, the risk of implicit disclosure will be managed by avoiding presenting specific information about participants in publications that result from this study. For example, specific location of participants, length played in a particular sport, affiliation with specific organisation, specific professional title.

All data will be stored in accordance with the procedures outlined by University of Birmingham Ethical Review Committee and in line with the UK Data Protection Act 1998. Taped interview recordings will be uploaded to password-protected computers belonging to the research team, and hard copy recordings (e.g. overservational field notes) will be stored in locked filing cabinets in the University of Birmingham. All data will be stored for ten years before being destroyed.

What will happen to the information collected throughout the research programme?

It is expected that the information of research will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between disability, sport and social activism. This has potential to be used to improve the lives of people with physical disabilities. In addition, it is also anticipated that findings will be published in academic journals, and presented at academic and other stakeholder conferences and events. In any instance, names or any other identifying feature of individual students, training providers, employers, or clients will not be revealed.

Are there any risks in participating?

There are no known risks to either physical or psychological health associated with taking part in this study.

What if I have any questions or I am not happy with how the research was conducted? What if I want to see the results?

If you wish to discuss or complain about any aspect of the research, please contact a member of the research team. If you would like to know the results of the research, a summary report of the findings can be made available to you, on completion of the research project. Please note that details specific to yourself/individualised feedback cannot be provided. Please let one on the research team know if you would like to see the findings.

Further information and contact details

Professor Brett Smith
Email: smithbs@bham.ac.uk

Mr Damian Haslett
Email: DXH607@bham.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to consider participation in this research.

We do hope that you will get involved and contribute your valuable experiences and ideas to this important venture.

Should you agree to take part, we will ask you to continue to the informed Consent Form on the following page

APPENDIX C: Disability activist group participant information sheet

Thank you for taking the time to consider participation in this research.

We do hope that you will get involved and contribute your valuable experiences and ideas to this important venture.

Should you agree to take part, we will ask you to continue to the informed Consent Form on the following page

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION
(for disability activist group)

You are being invited to participate in this research interview. Before you take part, it is important to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will entail. Please take time to digest the following information carefully. Please contact us using the details at the end of this information page, if there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like further information.

Who is doing this research?

Professor Brett Smith and Damian Haslett (PhD student) from the School of Sport, Exercise, and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Birmingham.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to expand understanding in the area of disability, sport and social activism.

The aim is to speak to disability activists regarding sport and social activism (aimed at improving the lives of people with disabilities).

The objective is to gather information about participants experiences and/or opinions about social activism in elite sport contexts.

We are also seeking to understand the perceptions of key stakeholders in disability sport organisations regarding social activism in sport contexts.

Using the data collected form the above groups, it is expected that this research will provide a more comprehensive understanding about disability, sport and social activism. For example, the findings from the study can be used to developing preliminary recommendations in this area.

Do I have to take part? Can I change my mind once I have started?

Taking part in this research programme is entirely voluntary. You may decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to complete an *Informed Consent Form*. You are free to withdraw from the study up to the anticipated commencement of data

analysis (Phase 2: 01.07.2018; Phase 3: 01.10.2018**;** Phase 4: 01.02.2019) and do not have to give a reason. If you do wish to withdraw please let us know by using the contact details at the end of this information page. In this instance, any data that you may have already provided will be destroyed.

What will happen if I choose to take part? What do I need to do and when?

If you are under 18 and/or have an intellectual disability, unfortunately you will not be able to participate in the study - please notify the researcher. If you are over 18 (and without intellectual disability), you will first complete the *Informed Consent Form* and then we will ask you to partake in a recorded interview. The interview will be conducted at a time and place convenient to you, will likely last around two hours. If you would like, you are welcome to have someone else present with you at the interviews. It is possible that you could be asked questions regarding your own disability.

Will my taking part in this study be anonymous and will my data be kept confidential?

As the research team will know your contact details, taking part in this study will not be anonymous. However, your data will be kept strictly confidential. The interview will take place in private. Your name will be replaced with participant number (e.g. participant no. 5), and the data will be presented in a manner in which you will not be identifiable. Everything you say will be kept confidential to the research team, and will not be shared with anyone.

For public or prominent participants, the risk of implicit disclosure will be managed by avoiding presenting specific information about participants in publications that result from this study. For example, specific location of participants, length played in a particular sport, affiliation with specific organisation, specific professional title.

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What will happen to the information collected throughout the research programme?

It is expected that the information of research will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between disability, sport and social activism. This has potential to be used to improve the lives of people with physical disabilities. In addition, it is also anticipated that findings will be published in academic journals, and presented at academic and other stakeholder conferences and events. In any instance, names or any other identifying feature of individual students, training providers, employers, or clients will not be revealed.

Are there any risks in participating?

There are no known risks to either physical or psychological health associated with taking part in this study.

What if I have any questions or I am not happy with how the research was conducted? What if I want to see the results?

If you wish to discuss or complain about any aspect of the research, please contact a member of the research team. If you would like to know the results of the research, a summary report of the findings can be made available to you, on completion of the research project. Please note that details specific to yourself/individualised feedback cannot be provided. Please let one on the research team know if you would like to see the findings.

Further information and contact details

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Thank you for taking the time to consider participation in this research.

We do hope that you will get involved and contribute your valuable experiences and ideas to this important venture.

Should you agree to take part, we will ask you to continue to the informed Consent Form on the following page

APPENDIX D: Recruitment letter

e-mail to recruit key stakeholders

Dear XXXX

I am writing to request an interview for a research project.
My name is XXX. I'm a PhD researcher at the School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Birmingham. Our research team is conducting a study on disability, sport and social activism. As part of our study, we are seeking to speak with key stakeholders in disability and sport organisations/movements.
As a key stakeholder in an organisation aimed and improving the lives of people with disabilities, would like your insights about disability, sport and social activism
Would you be willing to take part in a recorded interview and a time and location convenient for you? The whole process should take no more than three hours. And all information you provide will be kept strictly confidential.
If you have any questions, or would like more details about our study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you kindly for your time.

Kind regards,
XXX

APPENDIX E: Informed consent form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
(Interview)

- ☐ The purpose and details of this study have been explained to me - I have read and understood everything on the *Participant Information letter*
- ☐ I understand that this study is designed to gather information regarding disability, sport and social activism
- ☐ I understand that my interview will be audio recorded to make a typed transcript for later analysis and reference
- ☐ I understand that all research procedures have been approved by the University of Birmingham Ethical Review Committee
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions about my participation, and understand that I can do so at any time throughout the programme by emailing the Research Team
- ☐ I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in the study
- ☐ I would like to receive a summary of the results at the end of the project
- ☐ I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study until (Phase 2: 01.07.2018; Phase 3: 01.10.2018; Phase 4: 01.02.2019) for any reason, without penalty, and that I will not be required to explain my reasons for withdrawing. I can do so by contacting the Research Team
- ☐ I understand that the Research Team will keep the information I provide confidential
- ☐ I understand the information I provide could be used in academic publications/conference presentations.
- ☐ I agree to participate in this study

By entering your full name into the box below, this will indicate to us that you consent to participating in this research

Date _____

Email address_____

APPENDIX F: Para athlete group interview guide

1. Introduction (not recorded)

Hi, my name is XXXX and I'm part of the research team at the University of Birmingham. Thank you for saying you are happy to help out with our research by participating in this interview. The purpose of this study is to expand understanding in the area of disability, sport and social activism and to identify how disability sport contexts can be utilised to enable social justice missions. The idea of this interview is to allow you to share your experiences, opinions, and perceptions of social activism

There are no right or wrong answers, different people often hold different points of view. All points of view, including both positive and negative comments, are important. Of course, what to say, how to say it, and how much you want to say, is up to you. You should not worry about what you are expected to say, or whether you are giving the 'right' answers. Feel free to answer however you wish. Try to be honest but if there is anything you don't wish to talk about, then you don't have to, and please let us know if this is the case.

I would like to audio record our discussion so that I do not miss any of your comments if that is okay with you. I would like to remind you that everything you say will remain completely confidential and the information will only be used by the Research Team. Any published research that might result from such discussions will not contain your name.

The interview will last for approximately 1 to 2 hours. During this time, I would like to explore a number of issues on this topic. If you have any questions about the research project, I will be more than happy to answer these at the end of the session. Do you have any question about the interview itself?

[turn on audio recorders]

2. Personal details

- Name
- Gender
- Type of sports
- Email address
- Age
- Nationality
- Disability

3. Questions

- Can you tell me why you play sport?
- How do you feel about disability rights groups?
- What does social activism mean to you?
- Have you experienced barrier participating in activism? If you so, could you please give example?
- Do you identify as disability activist?
- What type of social activism have you engaged in?
- Can you provide some examples of when you engaged in social activism?
- What resources do you use to engage in social activism? (e.g. twitter)
- Why don't you identify as an activist?
- How does your interaction with sports staff (i.e. coach) / competitors and peers (i.e. teammates) s upport your activist identity?
- How does engaging in activism impact athletic identity and sport performance?

4. Summary

During this discussion, we were aiming to find out about your experiences and perception of activism. Considering the purpose of this research was to look at disability, sport and social activism, is anything else you would like to add?

Thank you very much for participating in today's discussion. It has been really interesting and extremely useful. I would also like to remind you that anything that you said here will stay completely confidential and for our research purposes only.

APPENDIX G: NPC group interview guide

5. Introduction (not recorded)

Hi, my name is XXXX and I'm part of the research team at the University of Birmingham. Thank you for saying you are happy to help out with our research by participating in this interview. The purpose of this study is to expand understanding in the area of disability, sport and social activism and to identify how disability sport contexts can be utilised to enable social justice missions. The idea of this interview is to allow you to share your experiences, opinions, and perceptions of social activism.
There are no right or wrong answers, different people often hold different points of view. All points of view, including both positive and negative comments, are important. Of course, what to say, how to say it, and how much you want to say, is up to you. You should not worry about what you are expected to say, or whether you are giving the 'right' answers. Feel free to answer however you wish. Try to be honest but if there is anything you don't wish to talk about, then you don't have to, and please let us know if this is the case.
I would like to audio record our discussion so that I do not miss any of your comments if that is okay with you. I would like to remind you that everything you say will remain completely confidential and the information will only be used by the Research Team. Any published research that might result from such discussions will not contain your name.
The interview will last for approximately 1 to 2 hours. During this time, I would like to explore a number of issues on this topic. If you have any questions about the research project, I will be more than happy to answer these at the end of the session. Do you have any question about the interview itself?
[turn on audio recorders]

6. Personal details

- Name
- Gender
- Type of sports
- Email address
- Age
- Nationality
- Disability
- Occupation

7. Questions

8. How do you feel about disability rights?
9. How do you or your organisation aim to improve the lives of people with disabilities
10. How do you feel about elite para athletes engaging in social activism?
11. How do you feel the Paralympic movement impacts the lives of people with disabilities?
12. How would Para-athlete activism fit with your (or your organizations) ideology?
13. How do you feel elite para athlete activism can contribute to the disability rights movement?
14. Are there any dangers of promoting in activism within your organisation?

15. Summary

During this discussion, we were aiming to find out about your experiences and perception of activism.
Considering the purpose of this research was to look at disability, sport and social activism, is anything else you would like to add?
Thank you very much for participating in today's discussion. It has been really interesting and extremely useful.
I would also like to remind you that anything that you said here will stay completely confidential and for our research purposes only.

APPENDIX H: Disability activist group interview guide

16. Introduction (not recorded)

Hi, my name is XXXX and I'm part of the research team at the University of Birmingham. Thank you for saying you are happy to help out with our research by participating in this interview. The purpose of this study is to expand understanding in the area of disability, sport and social activism and to identify how disability sport contexts can be utilised to enable social justice missions. The idea of this interview is to allow you to share your experiences, opinions, and perceptions of social activism

There are no right or wrong answers, different people often hold different points of view. All points of view, including both positive and negative comments, are important. Of course, what to say, how to say it, and how much you want to say, is up to you. You should not worry about what you are expected to say, or whether you are giving the 'right' answers. Feel free to answer however you wish. Try to be honest but if there is anything you don't wish to talk about, then you don't have to, and please let us know if this is the case.

I would like to audio record our discussion so that I do not miss any of your comments if that is okay with you. I would like to remind you that everything you say will remain completely confidential, and the information will only be used by the Research Team. Any published research that might result from such discussions will not contain your name.

The interview will last for approximately 1 to 2 hours. During this time, I would like to explore a number of issues on this topic. If you have any questions about the research project, I will be more than happy to answer these at the end of the session. Do you have any question about the interview itself?

[turn on audio recorders]

17. Personal details

- Name
- Gender
- Type of sports
- Email address
- Age
- Nationality
- Disability
- Occupation

18. Questions

- Do you identify as a disability activist? if yes, what type of activism do you engage in?
- Can you give us a short overview your perspective about disability in your society in [Canada, Irel and, South Korea, UK]? (i.e. how serious of a problem is disablism?)
- How do you feel about disability sport or Paralympic as domains to highlight inequalities?
- Do you feel elite disabled athletes contribute towards disability empowerment and equality?
- How/when are elite disable athlete's role models for people with disabilities and disability society?
- How / when does the media portrayal of elite disabled athletes help progression towards disability equality? And could you give practical example?
- How / when does the media portrayal of elite disabled athletes hinder progression towards disabili ty equality? And could you give practical example?
- Can you give your perspective about role of disable sport or elite disable athletes in future? (i.e. im plication, change)

19. Summary

During this discussion, we were aiming to find out about your experiences and perception of activism.

Considering the purpose of this research was to look at disability, sport and social activism, is anything else you would like to add?

Thank you very much for participating in today's discussion. It has been really interesting and extremely useful.

I would also like to remind you that anything that you said here will stay completely confidential and for our research purposes only.

APPENDIX I: Qualtrics survey Interview

INT Firstly, Can you tell me a bit about your life as an athlete? For example, what have the high-points of your career been? what is the most rewarding part of being involved in disability sport?)

INT Can you tell me what to think about disability inequality in Ireland at the moment? For example, do you have views about public access, or employment opportunities for people with disability (or any other areas you wish to discuss)

INT Can you give me an example of any discrimination experiences that you have faced, or witnessed others face, due to living with a disability?

INT This is a picture of Irish Disability Activists protesting for the government to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

INT Can you tell me any views you have about the disability rights movement in Ireland? (e.g. groups who advocate for social and political change for people with disabilities)

INT Can you tell me what you think about the Olympic and Paralympic values. For example, should they be different? why should these values be different? Do you agree with the Paralympic values?

INT Can you tell me what you think about inequality in elite-sport for people with disabilities

INT How do you advocate for change in sport or society? (and with who?)

INT How does it feel to advocate for change in sport and society?

INT Can you tell me how do you feel disability sport contributes to social change around disability in Ireland?

INT Can you tell me about how you feel about disability sport events (e.g. Paralympic Games) being used as an opportunity to raise awareness about disability rights.

INT Can you tell what you feel about Para athletes being described as role model for other disabled people?