

Identity Negotiating: Redefining Stigmatized Identities through Adaptive Sports and Recreation Participation among Individuals with a Disability

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the meanings and outcomes of adaptive sport and recreation participation among individuals with disabilities. In-depth open-ended interviews were conducted with 17 individuals. Analysis of the data followed qualitative data analysis and classical grounded theory utilizing line by line coding, identification of emergent themes, and identification of a core category grounded in the data. Results indicated that participants felt stigmatized and stereotyped, but their adaptive sports and recreation participation provided them with opportunities to build social networks, experience freedom and success, positively compare themselves with others without disabilities, and feel a sense of normalcy. The core variable identified adaptive sports and recreation participation as an opportunity structure that facilitated the identity negotiating process.

KEYWORDS: Adaptive sports and recreation participation, grounded theory, identity, negotiating identity, disability

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As a professional providing recreation services for individuals with disabilities in a community-based adaptive sports setting, I would occasionally hear comments such as, "this is the best thing I have ever done for myself," or, "participating in this program has changed my life." For a professional working in this area, hearing these types of participant comments creates both a sense of excitement and wonder. These statements quickly elicit other questions such as, how exactly does a "change of life" take place, and what is it about a community-based adaptive sport and recreation setting that might facilitate such changes for an individual with a disability?

In seeking to answer these basic questions, the current literature lacked research empirically identifying the meanings individuals associated with their participation in a community-based adaptive sports and recreation program, or the outcomes related to their involvement in such programs. While there is a growing body of research looking at sports and recreation participation for individuals with disabilities in various settings including elite level competitive sports (Brittain, 2004; Huang & Brittain, 2006) and inclusive recreation programs (Devine, 2004; Devine & Lashua, 2002; Devine & Parr, 2008), there has been little investigation into the adaptive sport and recreation environment (Groff & Kleiber, 2001). Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to qualitatively investigate the most meaningful aspects of participation in adaptive sports and recreation and identify the primary outcomes associated with participation. Our intent was to better understand how individual transformation might be facilitated through involvement in these types of programs.

Because the literature is sparse in attempting to answer this question, an exploratory approach was necessary. In an attempt to further specify this broad research question, a preliminary literature review was conducted and subsequent research sub-questions were identified.

Adaptive Sports and Recreation Participation for People with Disabilities

The term adaptive sports and recreation refers simply to any modification of a given sport or recreation activity to accommodate the varying ability levels of an individual with a disability. As an example, the participants in this study were most commonly involved in adaptive skiing and cycling. Adaptive skiing includes modifying downhill ski equipment, so a person with paraplegia or quadriplegia can ski from a seated position using handheld outriggers instead of ski poles. Cycling modifications would be similar, allowing someone to cycle from a seated position, pedaling with his or her arms or using a bicycle with three wheels to provide more stability. A key feature of adaptive sports and recreation is the provision of specialized equipment, which facilitates as much independent participation as possible for the individual with a disability.

The concept of community-based services was another important feature of the setting investigated in this study. While adaptive sports and recreation programming occurs in a variety of settings, programs are most typically available as either a therapeutic service associated with a rehabilitation hospital or through an independently operated agency existing within the community. The community-based concept infers that opportunities to participate are not institutionalized, but

open to all members of the community, and that participation occurs in public settings. Community-based adaptive sports and recreation services not only have the primary purpose of serving individuals with disabilities but are also open to other members of the community who are interested in mutually participating.

A common purpose of community-based adaptive sports and recreation programs is to improve the quality of life, health, confidence, and community integration of individuals with disabilities through the provision of recreational experiences. The focus of these services is on the development of skills for the individual with a disability, while at the same time providing opportunities for friends, family, and other interested individuals to mutually participate.

Most adaptive sports and recreation centers provide activities and programs at varying levels of involvement including: recreational, competitive, and elite. Recreational participation allows an individual to be involved on his or her own terms with the primary purpose being healthy and fun. Competitive participation provides a comparative standard to other participants as well as social affiliation due to team membership. Participation in elite competition requires high levels of skill and commitment, typically occurring at regional or national levels (Pensgaard & Sorenson, 2002).

Limited research has suggested adaptive sports and recreation participation among individuals with disabilities has the potential to create positive mental images and may also provide opportunities to challenge negative cultural norms regarding disability (Groff & Kleiber, 2001). Research has also indicated adaptive sports participation has provided a forum for individuals with disabilities to challenge negative attitudes and promote empowerment (Ashton-Shaeffer, Gibson, Autry, & Hansen, 2001). For athletes involved in elite level adaptive sports, participation provided opportunities to combat traditional views of disability and redefine themselves as both competent and social (Brittain, 2004; Huang & Brittain, 2006). From a community-based adaptive sports perspective, individuals with disabilities perceived that their involvement had positive effects on their overall health, general quality of life, the quality of their family life, and the quality of their social life (Zabriskie, Lundberg, & Groff, 2005).

As recommended by Glaser (1978) this brief review of the literature was intended to sensitize the researchers to the general meanings and outcomes associated with adaptive sport and recreation participation, while at the same time leaving them relatively unbiased in investigating and interpreting the emerging data. In summary, this brief literature review suggested additional research sub-questions to consider including: (a) how does participation in an adaptive sports and recreation program affect the way individuals with disabilities view themselves and, potentially, the way others view them, (b) besides self-perception, what are the other ways in which adaptive sports and recreation participation might make life noticeably different for an individual with a disability, and (c) what are the most significant or meaningful aspects of participation in adaptive sports and recreation? Utilizing these sub-questions, it was hoped the meanings and outcomes of participation, as well as the transformative potential of adaptive sports and recreation, could be more fully understood.

Methods

Due to limited research regarding the effects of adaptive sports and recreation participation in community-based settings, a qualitative investigation was undertaken. In-depth open-ended interviews were conducted with 17 individuals who had participated in adaptive sports and recreation programs at the National Ability Center (NAC) in Park City, Utah. The NAC is a community-based organization, which offers a wide variety of activities and programs for individuals with disabilities and their families and friends. Examples of these activities and programs included alpine and cross-country skiing, snowboarding, swimming, cycling, waterskiing, horseback riding, rafting, camping trips, and challenge course activities (National Ability Center, 2010). Participants were selected based on a purposive sample using the following criteria: (a) had participated in at least one recreation or sports program at the NAC within the past year, (b) were over 13 years of age, and (c) had a disability. Thirteen dyadic interviews and four in-depth phone interviews were conducted by the principle investigator. Interviews covered a wide variety of topics focusing on the impact of adaptive sports and recreation activities in areas such as overall health, personal relationships, view of one's self, and quality of life. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. A written interview guide was developed based on three sources: (a) a brief literature review of sports participation among individuals with disabilities, (b) a document review of participants' statements regarding the benefit of participating in a community-based adaptive sports program, and (c) discussion with practitioners providing adaptive sports and recreation programs in community-based settings. From these three sources of information, an open-ended interview guide was created containing 39 questions including topics ranging from the perceived benefit of participation, effects on overall health, effects on personal and family relationships, view of one's self, and general impact on quality of life (see Table 1). As initial data were collected, the interview guide was modified in order to gather information on themes most pertinent to the individuals involved in the study. Likewise, questions were eliminated that were repetitive and not providing additional information. Interviews were recorded verbatim, transcribed, and then coded thematically using NVivo software to organize the data.

Analysis

The principal intent of this research was to determine if the data supported the development of a grounded theory with explanatory value. Therefore, the analysis of the collected data was conducted using qualitative data analysis (QDA) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and Classical Grounded Theory (GT) (Glaser, 1978) methods. Although Strauss and Corbin advocate for a push beyond description, QDA lends itself to creating an insightful description of what the researchers are empirically gathering. Using QDA methods allowed the researchers to understand the literature related to the purpose of this study. QDA also gave researchers a starting point to analyze the data by identifying patterns and repeated participant behaviors and perceptions. GT methods forced researchers to constantly compare themes and patterns with perceptions and then frame results in a theoretical mod-

Table 1

Sample Interview Questions

1. Has your participation changed the way you view yourself or the way others view you?
2. Do you think participating in sports and recreation has done anything for you or to you?
3. Has participating in sports and recreation made your life any different?
4. How has your participation affected your overall health?
5. How has your experience affected other aspects of your life?
6. What are the most significant things sports and recreation activities have done for you?
7. What kind of importance does sports and recreation participation play in your life?
8. What role did sports and recreation play in becoming who you are today?
9. Is there anything else you would like to mention about your sports and rec. participation?

el grounded in the data (see Figure 1). The development of such a model has the potential to make a theoretical contribution (Whetten, 1989).

Analysis of the data was conducted in three distinct layers by the principal investigator and the co-investigators, as recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Initially, analysis was conducted as transcripts were read and coded line by line. Secondly, analysis of initial coding was conducted to identify consistent themes

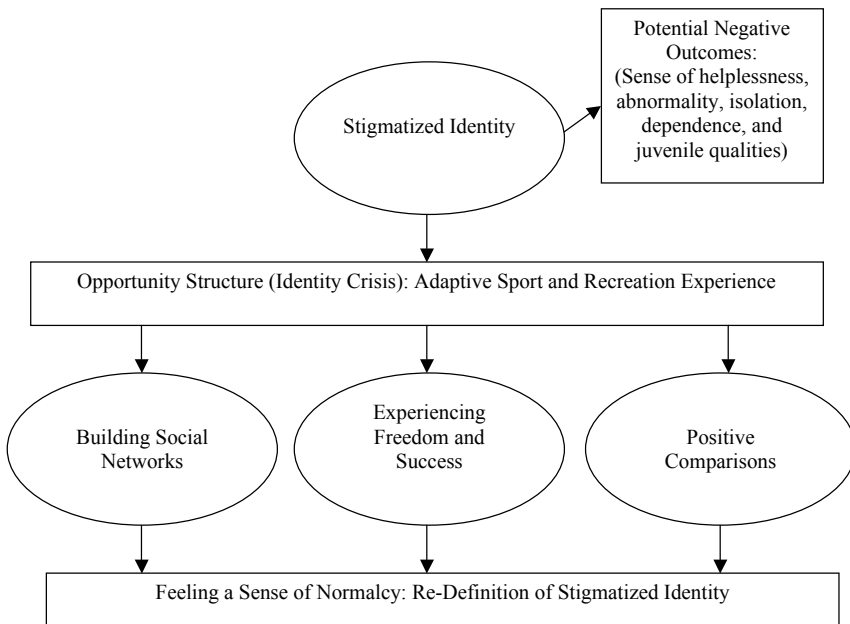


Figure 1. Identity Negotiating Model: Redefining Stigmatized Identities

emerging from various subjects. The final level of analysis identified relationships and interactions between emerging themes in order to more fully understand the data and develop a core category grounded in the data (Glaser, 1978). This core category or variable became the focus of our explanation regarding what was happening with our participants.

From an analytic standpoint, the researchers recognized the potential bias that exists as data are gathered, recorded and interpreted. In order to deal with this potential bias, a process of reflexivity was utilized acknowledging the reasons for conducting the research study, the investigators' roles in gathering data, and their engagement with participants. Also recognizing the potential impact of the researches on the data being gathered, the principle of trustworthiness was applied to data analysis.

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is conceptually related to reliability and validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Several trustworthiness procedures were employed in this study to establish reliability and validity in the qualitative data. Credibility, which is the qualitative equivalent of internal validity, involves the extent to which the interpretations that have resulted from data analysis are credible to the participants. Accuracy of the data was sought as the concepts emerging from the data were identified and reviewed with co-investigators and study participants. All levels of coding were reviewed and discussed by the principal investigator and one other co-investigator to check for accuracy and reliability until consensus regarding the data was achieved. Credibility was also established using member checking via repeated phone calls and email solicitation. Dependability and confirmability, the qualitative equivalent of reliability, were achieved through the use of an inquiry audit, where another researcher, not originally affiliated with the study, was used to examine and confirm the qualitative data analysis process and the codes and categories that were produced (Guba & Lincoln). With this triangulation of the researchers' interpretations, the study participants' checks, and an outside researcher's feedback, the resulting analysis was agreed upon.

Phenomenological Analysis

The study of experiences depends on the individual's perception of the experiences he or she has had or is currently having. The experiential underpinnings of knowledge are represented in the relationship between perceptions of the experience and the experience itself (Husserl, 1970). Schulz (1964) argued that social scientists must recognize the subjective point of view to understand social reality and the meaningfulness of experiences.

Individuals approach their experiences with stocks of knowledge that are composed of commonsense constructs and categories derived from social associations (Schutz, 1970). These stocks of knowledge are comprised of an individual's ideas, values, theories, images, and attitudes that are applied to experiences, this application is what gives experiences meaning. Stocks of knowledge are the resources from which interpretations of an experience are made and they help make the world a familiar place (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

This familiarity of shared experiences is a categorization of stocks of knowledge and allows for typifications. Typifications make it possible to recognize ex-

periences as a particular type and produce categories that allow interpretive application to specific experiences (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Typifications are also adaptable and indeterminate (Holstein & Gubrium).

The researchers found typifications that were identified in the data and labeled them as attributes of the core variable. Attempts to identify the stocks of knowledge that are common and frequently shared amongst the participants of this study were accomplished through interviews between the researcher and the individual participants. The characteristics that appeared to be common for the experiences were analyzed in conjunction with the stocks of knowledge identified in order to form typifications. These typifications were then identified as the characteristics that this research proposes as the attributes of the core variable.

Results

Sample

Individuals participating in this study ranged in age from 14 to 50 years of age ($m = 29$) and were all Caucasian. The sample included seven females and 10 males, with disabilities including spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, amputation, visual impairment, and rheumatoid arthritis. The average length of time the sample had been involved in recreational sports participation was 8.7 years (see Table 2). Readers should be aware that this particular sample of individuals with disabilities was relatively active, had participated in recreational sports for multiple years, was homogeneous in race and ethnicity, and for the most part, had been living with their disability for extended periods of time. These factors suggest that the sample was most likely well adjusted to their disability.

Table 2

Information on Study Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Disability	Use of Wheelchair	Yrs of Participation
Mike	31	M	Paraplegia, T-12	Y	8
Jamie	14	F	Cerebral Palsy	Y	10
Kris	30	F	Rheumatoid Arthritis	N	6
Dave	32	M	Spinal Melinitus, T-12	Y	3
Jon	27	M	Below Knee Amputation	N	2
April	31	F	Paraplegia T-6	Y	15
Courtney	19	F	Spina Bifida	Y	10
Nichole	16	F	Cerebral Palsy	N	13
Mark	14	M	Spina Bifida	N	10
Brian	26	M	Cerebral Palsy	N	2
Doug	29	M	Spinal Cerebral Ataxia	Y	6
Max	44	M	Paraplegia, T-12	Y	11
Steve	50	M	Macular Degeneration	N	12
Nick	29	F	Paraplegia, T-12	Y	8
Scott	41	M	Spina Bifida	N	3
Clay	41	M	Paraplegia, T-10	Y	15
Cindy	19	F	Spina Bifida	Y	14

Self-Perception

Having acknowledged the characteristics of the sample, the primary purpose of this study was to investigate both the meanings and outcomes of adaptive sports and recreation participation in order to better understand the transformational potential of these types of experiences. Sub-questions were identified to further specify the research. The first sub-question sought to gather information on the way in which adaptive sports and recreation participation potentially influences self-perception. Opportunities to influence self-perceptions were present through adaptive sport and recreation participation because individuals in this sample unanimously felt stigmatized and stereotyped due to having a disability. They also felt, however, that their adaptive sports and recreation participation facilitated personal outcomes which allowed them to challenge negative perceptions through building social networks, experiencing freedom and success, positively comparing themselves with others without disabilities, and feeling a sense of normalcy. In answering a portion of the first sub-question, the data clearly indicated that individuals with disabilities continue to experience a variety of challenges associated with the way in which individuals without disabilities perceive them, as illustrated in the following theme.

“People expect less of you physically and mentally.” Research indicates individuals with disabilities are regularly stereotyped, negatively labeled and stigmatized (Goodwin, Thurmeir & Gustafon, 2004). All 17 participants articulated the fact that living with a disability was associated with being devalued and labeled as incompetent. Steve, an older male participant with a visual impairment commented on being stereotyped, “We’re sort of, you know again, stereotyped. We’re stereotyped and people are sort of afraid to, or maybe they are unsure about how to treat a person with a disability...How do you talk with [a person with a disability]?” April, a female participant who used a wheelchair, put it this way, “That’s the hardest, most frustrating thing. For people that don’t know me, when I come rolling into a room, the first thing that starts popping into their minds is what I can’t do.” Amy, a female participant in her late 20s, said, “People automatically think I can’t do anything,” and Dave, a male participant in his early 30s commented similarly: “People expect less of you physically and mentally, yah, you are 50 percent dumber. Oh, it is so true, people are condescending.”

In addition to the concept of dealing with stigma and negative stereotypes, several participants specifically commented on the difficulty of dealing with their disability in the social setting. Max indicated, “I was pretty depressed for a couple of years. I did not want to go out. I felt like everyone was staring at me.” Amy agreed, stating: “I used to go home in tears thinking that someone was staring at me.” For the individuals in this sample, it appears that living with a disability requires continually dealing with issues related to stigma and negative stereotyping.

Outcomes of Participation

The second research sub-question was intended to illicit information related to what participants considered important outcomes of participation in adaptive sports and recreation. The intent of this sub-question was represented in various interview questions asking how participation had made life different, what chang-

es they had experienced, and if participation had made a difference in their health or other areas they considered important (see Table 1, questions 2-5). Participants reported important outcomes such as building social networks, experiencing a sense of freedom and success, and being able to positively compare themselves with others without disabilities. The following themes illustrate these outcomes.

“You are not the only one in this situation.” Although the individuals in this study felt stigmatized and stereotyped, they also took comfort in knowing they were not the only ones going through this type of situation. They talked in detail about the development of peer groups and social support as an important component of their adaptive sports and recreation participation. Jon, a male participant in his late 20s had this to say about finding a support system:

I think it has given me the knowledge that, hey you are not the only one in this situation. There are others in this situation, perhaps even worse than you, or better than you, but there are others experiencing this challenge in life along with you. The support system is huge! And just knowing that there are others out there that you can lean on is a great thing.

Amy suggested, “It’s almost like your own little society. I don’t know how to say that, but it was like I was a member of it when I went up skiing because I was like them.” She went on to say, “There are some difficult things, and they knew those difficult things, so you kind of had a bonding just even knowing that they dealt with the same things.” Mike also addressed this issue when he said, “It all really boils down to making friends in the same situation, meeting people with the same situation.”

“Freedom.” Another theme that emerged from the data was that adaptive sports and recreation participation provided a sense of freedom. During the interviews, 14 participants discussed the issue of freedom, addressing it as both freedom from the negative aspects of disability, as well as freedom to participate more fully in new activities (Bergha, 1991). With deep emotion, Amy discussed her experience skiing as a time in life where she no longer had to be defined by the use of her wheelchair. She said, “It made me feel whole again, like I’m free. It’s like I am skiing away from my wheelchair, that part of my life that makes me feel trapped.” In contrast, others expressed the idea of freedom in being able to experience something new and have more options. Scott said, “First of all being able to [ski] ... it’s just kind of real free, independent kind of a feeling that I can’t get any other way.” He went on to say, “There really isn’t a boundary like there used to be. And now when I look at snow, I think, whoa fun, instead of oh, I can’t get around.” Steve also commented: “Just freedom, the freedom of movement ... you don’t get a lot of movement in your life, you know, you’re just kind of slow moving.”

“Seeing success.” Just as each individual talked about the negative labeling which had occurred based on having a disability, they also spoke about having opportunities for success as a key outcome within the adaptive sport and recreation environment. Nichole, a younger female participant with cerebral palsy said, “You are seeing success. You are accomplishing goals. You are doing something, so your confidence level is increasing.” April had similar ideas regarding the sense of suc-

cess that came as a result of her participation, "...that is what sports have taught me that I have these skills, and when put to the test, I can do. I've learned that I am a survivor and that I am a success." She went on to say,

It's only been through my disability and perhaps my participation in sports and recreation as a disabled person that I gained true self-confidence...I had to come to learn that I am not my body, I'm not my physical body, there is more to me than that.

Mike, another male participant who used a wheelchair, said, "I found something that I might be good at. I always have been semi-good at about everything I do, but here is something that I could actually be really good at."

"I'm their equal." As a part of having opportunities for success, participants also talked about the importance of being competent in comparison to other individuals without disabilities. In this quote, Scott, a male participant with spina bifida, affirmed the importance of competence in reference to positive comparisons:

Just being able to find something that I can do well and that I can do with other people on an athletic level has made a huge difference for me. When I am skiing with able-bodied people, I'm their equal. So it levels the playing field and then like I said, there're a lot of times when I can actually do better than them. I get sort of a sick sense of satisfaction with the fact that I can do something better than a lot of able-bodied people can do.

Brian, a male participant with cerebral palsy commented: "It gave me a belief that I could do anything I wanted and that I could get on the level with my able-bodied counter parts and that whatever I put my mind to, I could do." Brian later commented that he felt his participation boosted his self-esteem because, "I am able to do stuff that people without disabilities can do and I don't feel any different 'cause I can do a lot of stuff just as well as they can."

Not only did the positive comparison appear to affect the individual with the disability, it also appears to have had some effect on the peers without disabilities as well. Steve, the participant with a visual impairment, explained it this way, "You know when I talk about my skiing or my cycling with friends and with acquaintances or who ever, you know you've just risen up a couple notches in their estimation." Amy also commented on the effect of her sports participation on others around her. She said, "I started to realize that people aren't staring, they're admiring; and there is a difference. That's really cool that they can admire what I can do...I'm just being me and they're impressed with that."

Meaningfulness of Participation

The third research sub-question sought to gather information on those aspects of participation which were considered most significant or meaningful. Specific

interview questions focused on this idea by asking the importance or significance of sports and recreation activities to the individual, what it had done for them in their lives, and if or how it had made a difference (see Table 1, questions 6-8). While many outcomes were discussed as both meaningful and significant, the concept of normalcy seemed paramount, particularly in juxtaposition to the concept of stigma and negative stereotyping.

“Feeling normal.” Another theme connected to the ideas of having success and being competent in comparison to others was the concept of normalcy. Eighty-six percent of the study’s participants reported that when they participated in recreational sports such as skiing or hand-cycling, the experience provided them with a sense of normalcy. Scott commented on feeling normal through his participation in this way,

I think the main thing is [my participation] gave me just a sense of confidence that I couldn’t have gotten any other way. And you know, a sense of feeling normal that I didn’t have before, and realizing that hey, I can do this just as much as anybody else. I may do things differently, but I can pretty much do anything anybody else can do. And I can do some things that not a lot of other people can, or won’t even try.

Mark, a younger male participant with spina bifida, said, “I think that is what skiing does for me, is it brings a sense of normalcy, and I can be with my friends, and go out with other people, and sometimes I can do more than other people.” Amy commented, “It helped me to get over the fact that I was in a chair and realize that I’m just as normal sitting as someone is normal standing, or without sight, or anything.”

Some participants did not directly talk about their participation as creating a sense of normalcy; instead they describe it as a way of not feeling abnormal or different. April expressed her feelings like this: “I am a participant instead of a spectator. You can still participate and be involved and not feel so different.” Mark later said, “I can actually do it, like with my disability I can’t do everything my friends can do, but with skiing, I can go out and hang out with everybody else.” Amy talked about how people treat her when she is participating in her favorite recreational sport: “They treat me the same. In fact, they look at me as ‘Wow, you are just awesome up there.’ They don’t treat me any different...”

Discussion

According to this sample of individuals with disabilities, the meanings and outcomes of their community-based adaptive sports and recreation participation can be thematically understood first and foremost in the context of being negatively stereotyped and stigmatized due to having a disability. Recognizing the existence of this social context, the individuals’ participation in community-based adaptive sports and recreation facilitated outcomes such as opportunities to build social networks, experience freedom and success, positively compare themselves with others without disabilities, and feel a sense of normalcy. As these emerging

themes were analyzed to further understand the data and develop a core category (Glaser, 1978), the concept of identity-negotiating became the focus of our explanation, particularly in light of the larger social environment, which had assigned negative labels and stereotypes to the individuals with disabilities participating in this study.

People with Disabilities, Negative Labeling and Stereotypes

The concept of disability has been recognized not only for its basis in impairment, but also as a socially constructed category based on what society deems as defective (Higgins, 1992). Recognizing the socially constructed perspective on disability, the relationship between disability, negative labels, and stereotypes can be further understood. Negative labeling and stereotyping arises as society perceives an individuals' biological or functional composition falling below an accepted standard, leading to perceptions of inferiority and exclusion (Goodwin et al., 2004; Devine, 1997). Individuals in this sample repeatedly commented on being treated as incompetent and inferior, and they regularly dealt with perceptions based on what others thought they could not do as opposed to what they could do.

Researchers have also clarified it is not solely society's labeling that negatively impacts individuals with disabilities, but also the degree to which the individual with a disability internalizes negative views regarding his or her impairment (Link & Phelan, 2001). Internalized negative labels and stereotypes may result in an individual's disability becoming their master status or primary identity, leading to social isolation (Brittain, 2004) and limited opportunities in a wide variety of life domains (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). A negative disability identity includes characteristics such as helplessness, abnormality, isolation, dependence, and juvenile qualities (Ashton-Shaeffer et al., 2001; Fine & Asch, 1988; Taub, McLorg, Fanflik, 2004).

As all of the participants in this study commented on being negatively labeled and stereotyped, it is clear a socially constructed view of disability continues to be demeaning and isolating as was represented by the theme, "People Expect Less of You Physically and Mentally." In addition, several participants specifically commented on the difficulty of dealing with their disability in the social setting. While it is difficult to determine to what extent the individuals in this study internalized a negative disability identity, it is clear, based on their responses, they each were exposed to the negative labels and stereotypes typically assigned to individuals with disabilities.

Social Constructionism

Considering the social construction of disability and the influence of the social environment in the development of identity, social construction theory (Bergner & Luckmann, 1967) was used as a theoretical starting point to better understand the social context surrounding disability, identity, and the adaptive sports and recreation experience, as discussed by the participants in this study. Social construction theory suggests the reality in which we live is created by our social and cultural surroundings, and our associations and conversations with others,

particularly significant others, shapes our self-identities and the world in which we live (Berger & Luckmann).

A social constructionist perspective has been used to observe interactions between individuals with disabilities and individuals without disabilities in community-based inclusive recreation settings. One of the commonly understood purposes of inclusive recreation programming is to facilitate mutual recreation participation with the intent of fostering enhanced social acceptance, understanding, and equality between individuals with disabilities and individuals without disabilities (Smith, Austin, Kennedy, Lee, & Hutchinson, 2005). Inclusive recreation programs typically do this by accommodating an individual with a disability through a personal aide, specialized equipment, or a more accessible physical setting, so that participation in the recreation program or activity is as attainable for an individual with a disability as anyone else.

Inclusive recreation programs have shown success, observing higher levels of social acceptance related to the frequency and satisfaction of mutual recreation participation (Devine & Dattilo, 2001). However, other important findings have also been identified including: (a) in some inclusive recreation programming, individuals with observable disabilities did not feel accepted by peers without disabilities due to their inability to execute physical tasks, although educating others about their disability and demonstrating some level of competence did appear to improve their social acceptance (Devine & Lashua, 2002), and (b) there continues to be a lack of reciprocity between individuals with disabilities and individuals without disabilities in the recreation setting, even to the point that some inclusive contexts may accentuate differences and exclusion of individuals with disabilities (Devine & Parr, 2008).

In contrast to the previous research findings using a social constructionist perspective (Devine & Dattilo, 2001; Devine & Lashua, 2002; Devine & Parr, 2008, Devine & Wilhite, 1999), the individuals in this sample commented on how their adaptive sports and recreation experience provided them with opportunities to “participate on an equal playing field” and come to the realization that “I may do things differently, but I can pretty much do anything anybody else can do.” The adaptive sports and recreation setting also afforded participants with an opportunity to escape or overcome some of the negativity associated with their disability (Devine & Wilhite). For Amy, as an example, living with her disability and participating in adaptive sports and recreation was a stark contrast. In one sense, she felt trapped by her wheelchair and limited by her disability, while on the other hand, when involved in sports and recreation, she was in her words, “whole” and “free.”

Identity

While the social constructionist perspective provides a useful starting point to understand the relationship between disability and identity, additional insights can be gained by looking more specifically at the concepts of identity theory and the process of identity negotiation. Research on the development of identity traces its roots back to Erikson (1959, 1963) and his psychosocial growth model. Erikson conceptualized human development as a journey through stages, each with unique crises, tasks, and potential outcomes. In the most basic sense, identity

is self-perception (Groff & Kleiber, 2001; Marcia, 1993; Mitchell, 1992; Rangell, 1994), which changes over time and contexts and facilitates both integration with and differentiation from society (Erikson; Lavoie, 1994; Marcia, 1994; Mitchell; Weiss, 2001).

A person's identity is developed by experiences that foster opportunities to express one's individuality and receive feedback and validation from others (Erickson, 1959, 1963). Some have suggested that opportunities for new experiences, feedback from society, skill acquisition, and social development can facilitate identity development (Kivel, 1998; Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1990). Further, organized activities appear to provide an ideal context for the development of identity (Kleiber & Kirshnit; Munson & Widmer, 1997; Shaw, Kleiber, & Caldwell, 1995).

The inherent qualities of recreation make it a particularly effective context to influence identity development (Haggard & Williams, 1991; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Recreation provides opportunities for exploration, commitment, interrelatedness, and feedback; all of which serve essential identity development functions (Mannell & Kleiber). Groff and Kleiber (2001) found that individuals participating in an adapted sports program began to focus less on their disabilities and more on the identity development process, and Hanson, Larson, and Dworkin (2003) found sport participation was an ideal context for identity and emotional development.

In the case of the adaptive sports and recreation participants in this study, they clearly felt that demonstrating their sports and recreation skill was important to them, particularly in comparison to others without disabilities. The positive feedback individuals received from others as a result of their participation contrasted starkly with the negative labels and stereotyping they had previously been exposed to (Goodwin et al., 2004).

Another critical concept in identity development is the identity crisis (Erickson, 1970). An identity crisis is the particular situation and time when a person explores and analyzes the different ways of looking at oneself (Erickson). While this identity crisis is commonly associated with adolescence, individuals with a disability may find themselves in a similar crisis due to negative labeling and stereotyping. The crisis brings about a period of either discovering or re-discovering the subjective self and the awareness of place and worth (Erickson).

As individuals with disabilities are frequently assigned devalued and inferior labels (Link & Phelan, 2001), participation in adaptive sports and recreation has the potential to bring about an opportunity for identity crisis as a process of discovering or rediscovering the self (Brittain, 2004; Huang & Brittain, 2006). Individuals participating in this study frequently made comments related to what they "learned" or what their participation helped them "realize" or "start thinking." One participant commented that, "you start to look at things a little different." These statements infer that a discovery or rediscovery process was taking place as part of their participation in adaptive sport and recreation. Marcia (1980) refers to this crisis, or discovery process, as a balancing act between an individual's view of him or herself and new information which is not entirely consistent with that self-view. Balance is achieved when the person negotiates, or comes to a consensus between these two views. Swann (1987) refers to this process as identity negotiation.

Identity-Negotiation

The historical foundations of identity negotiation are based on the writings and work of social scientists who observed the interaction between the individual and the environment in shaping behavior (Goffman, 1959; Lewin, 1951; Skinner, 1974). These views were further extended and applied to understand the processes of interaction between individuals in the development and maintenance of identity (Swann, 1983). The term "identity negotiation" refers to a process where verbal and non-verbal behaviors are exchanged between individuals in an attempt to establish, maintain, or change one's identity (Swann, 1987, p. 1048). This identity negotiation process incorporates a variety of factors including: (a) the strategies we employ to verify our self-views, (b) the way we selectively interpret feedback, and (c) how we subconsciously seek to maintain our identity (Swann). The primary motives underlying the identity negotiation process include (a) agency, the need for autonomy and competence, (b) communion, feeling a sense of belonging and interpersonal connectedness, and (c) psychological coherence, which includes regularity, predictability, and control (Swann & Bosson, 2008, p. 452).

In order to meet the identity related needs of agency, communion, and psychological coherence, individuals seek out "opportunity structures" (Swann & Bosson, p. 458), which are environments providing feedback regarding one's identity. Opportunity structures might include specific vocations, hobbies, leisure activities, or even preferred individuals. From an identity negotiation perspective, opportunity structures have been typically considered those environments which verify one's identity and have not been fully considered for their potential role in identity change. Others have noted the role of recreation as a structured activity, or opportunity structure, from a developmental perspective (Haggard & Williams, 1991; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997), particularly as it relates to the identity development of adolescence (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Damon, 2004; Duerden, Widmer, Taniguchi, & McCoy, 2009; Groff & Kleiber, 2001; Hanson et al., 2003; Kivel, 1998; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005). However, little is known about the role of recreation as an opportunity structure for the redefining of identity, although some attention has been given to the role of leisure in maintaining previous identities for individuals experiencing negative life events (Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber, & Dattilo, 2003; Kleiber, 1999; Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002).

In addition to the concept of opportunity structures, the identity negotiation perspective provides other information on how identity change can be facilitated. First, Swann and Bosson (2008) suggest that identity change is more likely to occur within novel environments in which attention is focused on the self and where new self-related knowledge can be obtained and integrated (p. 464). Second, they suggest identity change will more readily take place within contexts where abilities, particularly those of a physical nature, are either acquired or lost (p. 464). In general the identity negotiation perspectives suggest that long lasting change is more likely when individuals significantly reorganize or change the way they see themselves, and when others, or the society in general, provide feedback supporting this new self-view (Swann, 1987, pp. 1044-1045). The concepts of identity change, as represented in the identity negotiation perspective, shares similarities with the notion of identity crisis as discussed by Erikson (1970) and others. Each represents

a discovery, or rediscovery process as a result of acquiring new knowledge about one's self.

For the individuals in this study, their adaptive sports and recreation participation provided them with an ideal opportunity structure for meeting their identity related needs, while at the same time, satisfying some of the conditions necessary for long term identity change. First, the adaptive sports and recreation activities provided a novel setting in which to participate, especially considering the generally limited recreational opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Participants recognized the novel quality of activities they were participating in as they made comments such as, "I can do some things that not a lot of other people can, or won't even try." The concept of novelty was also represented by Steve in talking about the enjoyable aspects of his participation: "Just freedom, the freedom of movement ... you don't get a lot of movement in your life, you know, you're just kind of slow moving." For the individuals with disabilities participating in this study, the freedom of movement was both novel and enjoyable.

In addition to being novel, the adaptive sport and recreation setting was also a place in which new self knowledge was obtained, as has been discussed in relation to Erikson's (1970) notion of identity crisis. Participants repeatedly talked about what they had learned and how they had developed through their sports and recreation experiences. The adaptive sport and recreation environment seemed to facilitate identity change through both its novel programs and activities, and, as a result of the self knowledge individuals discovered through participation.

Another way in which the adaptive sports and recreation setting facilitated an identity change was by assisting individuals in the development of new skills, particularly those that were both physical in nature and could be successfully executed with peers who did not have a disability. Several participants talked about how their sports experience allowed them to participate on a level playing field, and in some cases even outperform individuals without a disability. The acquisition of physical skills appears to have provided a double benefit. Not only did it satisfy a necessary condition for identity change (Swann & Bosson, 2008), but it was also a prerequisite for the demonstration of competence, an important identity related need of all individuals (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Swann & Bosson), particularly for individuals with disabilities because, in their words, they are frequently seen for what they can't do as opposed to what they can do.

It also appeared that the acquisition of physical sports and recreation skills helped participants see themselves differently and facilitated a change in the way others saw them as well. As reported in the theme, "I'm their equal," it appears that participating in the community-based setting facilitated positive feedback from others without disabilities who were participating in the same setting, thus enhancing the opportunity for lasting identity change.

Modeling Identity Negotiation through Adaptive Sports and Recreation

Using the concepts of identity negotiation, particularly focusing on the principles related to identity change, a model was developed to illustrate the process of redefining stigmatized identities through adaptive sports and recreation (see

Figure 1). The model is based on the core variable identified in this study, identity negotiating. Identity negotiating is a process whereby individuals redefine their identity through the discovery or rediscovery of self-knowledge and by receiving positive feedback from others. Self-discovery and positive feedback are based on participation in opportunity structures, which satisfies identity related needs such as agency, communion, and psychological coherence, all of which facilitate the development of observable skills in novel or meaningful environments. The concept of identity negotiating is directly connected to the principles of social constructionism, identity, and identity negotiation, as represented in the themes identified in this study.

One of the more meaningful outcomes of the identity negotiating process for the individuals participating in this study was “feeling a sense of normalcy,” which they identified as a direct result of their participation in adaptive sports and recreation activities. Interestingly, feeling normal is in contrast to the idea of being stigmatized, a state of being labeled as helplessness, abnormal, and dependent on others (Fine & Asch, 1988). Feeling normal was represented in concepts such as (a) doing anything anybody else can, (b) being with friends, and going out with others (c) “hanging out” with everybody else, and (d) simply not feeling so different or being treated differently. For the individuals in this sample, their adaptive sports and recreation experience facilitated a sense of normalcy because it provided them with opportunities to develop and express their competence, be socially active and included, and be recognized for their similarities as opposed to differences.

In contrast to feeling a sense of normalcy, the outcomes of identity negotiation as proposed by Swann and Bosson (2008) are well-being, relationship quality, and goal achievement. More specific to sports and recreation participation, individuals with disabilities have reported outcomes related to their involvement such as (a) psychological well-being (Hutzler & Sherrill, 1999), (b) positive mental images and challenging negative cultural norms regarding disability (Groff & Kleiber, 2001), (c) transcending disability and traditional attitudes towards individuals with disabilities (Huang & Brittain, 2006) and (d) physically redefining themselves and expanding social interactions (Blinde & McClung, 1997). The outcomes identified in this study such as finding opportunities to build social networks, experiencing freedom and success, positively comparing themselves to others without disabilities, and feeling a sense of normalcy, both confirm and further extend our understanding regarding meaningful aspects of adaptive sports and recreation participation among individuals with disabilities and the primary outcomes of such participation.

Conclusion

While various authors have discussed the challenges individuals with disabilities face in dealing with negative labels, stereotypes, and stigma (Goodwin et al., 2004; Link & Phelan, 2001), the results of this study suggest that participation in adaptive sports and recreation provided an ideal context in which the outcome of redefining a stigmatized identity was realized. More specifically, the outcomes of

participation identified in this study, such as building social networks, experiencing freedom and success, positive comparisons with others, and feeling a sense of normalcy, are all in accordance with the commonly stated goals and purposes of most community-based adaptive sports and recreation programs.

Although previous research has identified the outcomes of competitive sports participation among individuals with disabilities (Brittain, 2004; Huang & Brittain, 2006), there has generally been a lack of information regarding the meanings and outcomes associated with community-based adaptive sports and recreation participation. The current study provides a theoretical starting point in which to better understand the outcomes associated with this type of recreational experience.

Studying the adaptive sport and recreation setting also provides a needed additional perspective regarding community-based recreational experiences for individuals with disabilities. Inclusive community-based recreation programs and services continue to receive warranted research attention with results demonstrating both successes (Devine, 2004; Devine & Dattillo, 2001; Devine & Lashua, 2002) and continued challenges (Devine, 2004; Devine & Parr, 2008) in serving the needs of individuals with disabilities. The findings of this study illustrate another potentially valuable type of community-based recreation experience available to individuals with disabilities.

While the results of this study provide an interesting perspective on recreational opportunities for individuals with disabilities, further research is needed to understand the usefulness of the identified theoretical model. Specifically, future research should consider additional theoretical sampling (Glaser, 1978) in order to determine the applicability of the identity negotiating process on individuals with different types of disabilities (acquired versus congenital, cognitive versus physical), or for individuals at different stages of adjustment to their disability. Future studies may also consider quantitatively investigating identity change using the proposed model, or may seek to investigate specific types of recreational activities to determine their influence on the process of identity negotiating.

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