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Gatekeepers, agency and rhetoric: An academic's reflexive ethnography of 'doing' a (failed) Adaptive CrossFit project

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Abstract

Individuals become activists to affirm both themselves and their vision of the world, often prompted to action by seeking out complementary individuals, groups or organizations that can help organize, research, and promote solutions to shared problems. A gap exists between research and practice within the field of disability sport and adaptive physical activity. In particular, the academy is failing to produce research that demonstrates what, how and why theory and practice can become misaligned and problematic. This novel and needed paper is a reflexive ethnography detailing my struggles to pilot a local adaptive CrossFit project to the disabled community due to unforeseen challenges with gatekeepers, stripping of agency and academic rhetoric. A narrative is included with the hope of revealing social processes outside and within the field of disability sport and adaptive physical activity and to provoke discussion regarding problems with choice, advocacy and agency.

Keywords: CrossFit. Reflexivity. Prac-ademic. Disability. Ethnography. Gatekeepers. Narrative.

Background: Being a Prac-Ademic

The synergy between social science theory and professional practice is a much sought after, but sometimes elusive, acme for community based sport and physical activity (PA) programs. Despite the United Nations Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities promulgating access to sport and PA as a fundamental human right under Article 30.5[i], the realisation of supporting and developing the physical and mental wellbeing of disabled people is grossly underserved. In seeking to bridge the gap between the academy and activists in the disability arena, we might remind ourselves of Gioux's (1999, 150) call for "the role of the university as a public sphere dedicated to addressing the most serious social problems a society faces". While it could be argued that access to an inclusive physical recreation may seem inconsequential to the list of essential needs for disabled people to fully participate in modern living (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2017), the profoundness of evidence regarding sport and PA as an enabler for improved physical and mental wellbeing is inarguable (for examples see Brooker et al., 2015; Büssing et al., 2012; Caddick and Smith, 2014; Dahan-Oliel et al., 2012; De Vries et al., 2012; Stapleton et al., 2017; Tomasone et al., 2013; World Health Organization, 2015). The serious problem for disabled people[1], therefore, is not necessarily access of participation per se; the serious problem is the denial, refusal and ignoring of access to participate in mediums of leisure that promote, develop, support and sustain long-term belonging, growth, connectedness and inclusion. Indeed, the social-rational model of disability (Thomas, 1999, 2007) theorises that this form of oppression becomes so deeply internalised that it affects who disabled people believe they are, what people they believe they can be and so, consequentially, affects what they then do – causing far more experiences of life limitations than the actual impairment of the individual. Reeve (2014) has further developed this concept to describe

[1] This paper subscribes to the Social Model of Disability introduced by Oliver (1983, 1990) and writes 'disabled people' as opposed to 'people with disabilities'. Furthermore the author agrees with historian Diane McWhorter (2001) that to "sanitize the language of segregation is to mute its destructive force – it is to dismiss or downplay".

psycho-emotional disablism, triggered by stigma and latent oppression in society. She argues that psycho-emotional disablism is absorbed from the outside, and is learned through a loss of opportunities, unpleasant experiences (such as discrimination) or the absence of pleasant experience (such as opportunities to participate in leisure activities).

Perhaps then the role of those working in the academy is to embody the 'prac-ademic' (Posner, 2001) – someone moving between the two worlds of academic endeavour and vocational practice in an attempt to understand the enigmatic dissemblance between the thinking and the doing of social sciences. Within the sociology of sport domain, a prac-ademic might work alongside (voluntarily or otherwise), research with and advocate for a particularly marginalized, invizibilized or disenfranchised group. However, as an academic teaching and researching critical disability studies, and as an inclusive physical education provider as well as an adaptive PA (APA) practitioner, I am acutely aware that I do not have an disability – I must purposefully and periodically check and challenge my positionality to, privileges within and assumptions about a community on which I am an inside-outsider. This position abandons the constructed dichotomies of being inside or outside a group, and instead embraces and explores the complexity and richness of the space between entrenched perspectives. Indeed, the "intimacy of qualitative research no longer allows us to remain true outsiders to the experience under study and, because of our role as researchers, it does not qualify us as complete insiders" (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, 11). Within this work I occupy the space between, acknowledging the costs and benefits this status affords. Furthermore, I contend that I have a professional responsibility and a moral interest to consistently engage in social actions that demonstrate advocacy and (attempt to) empower disabled people. Since the 1990s, scholars of social inquiry have called for enhanced practices in considered emancipatory research, whereby the production of knowledge is achieved through diminished power structures in the research process, and furthermore whereby the outcome of the research is both

owned by, and is of benefit to, oppressed people (Danieli and Woodhams 2007). For Barnes, (1992,122) "the establishment of a workable "dialogue" between the research community and disabled people in order to facilitate the latter's empowerment" should expose and confront the various ways in which oppression is maintained; not only in relation to research findings but also within the research process itself. However, as is argued by Barnes (2002, 16) "it would be impossible to imagine that any one piece of research, no matter how comprehensive or rigorous, could empower all disabled people at the same time […] to eradicate disability and, therefore, empower the disabled population, emancipatory research must resonate with non-disabled people too". And so, I offer this reflective piece of writing from an inside-outsider, prac-acdemic positionality to add comment on examining the relationship between disability, the academy and activism through the individual effectuating of a small scale adaptive CrossFit initiative, highlighting the potential for disempowerment through gatekeepers, rhetoric and a lack of agency.

CrossFit and Adaptive CrossFit

The fitness regime of CrossFit has seen increased societal and scholarly interest as a space for physical and personal change. The first CrossFit box ("box" is CrossFit terminology used for gym) opened in 2000 and registered more than 13,000 affiliates worldwide in 2019. CrossFit offers functional fitness workouts that simultaneously use a combination of cardiovascular endurance, strength, power and gymnastics movements in any one class. Each class is designed by the head coach of a box and constitutes a different Workout Of the Day (referred to as a WOD) each day that could comprise of a core WODs practiced globally (these are often used as benchmark WODs to track progress should an individual wish to do so), or a WOD specifically designed by that box. If they wish, individuals have the opportunity to take part in local, regional, national and international competitions (designed for novice through to elite

competitors) that usually issue prize money and can contribute towards ranking positions. Bailey, Benson and Bruner (2017) suggest that CrossFit participants report that CrossFit offers a sense of community, friendships and camaraderie beyond that of tradition gym spaces, often due to the opportunity for regular partner and team WODs as well as the social engagements that boxes will provide to its members. A principle training methodology of CrossFit is that all sessions can be scaled for each participant, meaning weights and movements are adjusted to fit the participant's abilities and that individual success and progression is not dependent on, nor measured against, peers. Therefore, offering CrossFit to individuals who have various experiences with sport and physical activity can encourage participants to focus their attention, effort and valuation on their own abilities and achievements at each session (Gipson, Campbell and Malcolm, 2018). However, the corporate foundations of CrossFit and its growth in popularity has led the regime to be critiqued amongst sociology of sport scholars as being cult-like (Dawson, 2017), encouraging exercise addiction (Lichtenstein and Jensen, 2016) and probelmitizing gender (Knapp, 2015; Nash, 2018; Washington, 2016).

Adaptive CrossFit practices the same fundamental movements as CrossFit, but the strategy and equipment are creatively modified to fit the needs and abilities of each individual. Although the inception of Adaptive CrossFit has not been accurately documented, online content referring to it as a mode of functional fitness training for disabled people has been growing since 2010, initially gathering traction specifically in the United State of America (USA) and within the wounded veteran population. As individual boxes across the USA formulated their own embracing and design of adaptive CrossFit, a wounded veteran charity called CrossRoads Alliance began to co-ordinate online training tutorials and deliver coach education workshops for boxes wanting to expand their knowledge, provision and support of CrossFit for disabled people. In addition they delivered the first adaptive CrossFit style competition in 2014 entitled the Working Wounded Games, which has now become their

flagship competition. In 2016, the annual international CrossFit Games[2] competition introduced the first Adaptive Athlete category into their programming. Since then, the organization has worked in partnership with CrossRoads Alliance to developing their coach education certifications and to promote Adaptive CrossFit to disabled people as an alternative APA to Paralympic sports or gym usage. This is perhaps of significant importance given the research available arguing that within the gym space disabled people experience barriers such as disrupting cultural gym norms, removal of autonomy, limited interpretations of health and fitness, oppressive messages from the built environment, and negative relational interactions (Calder and Mulligan, 2014; Johnston, Goodwin and Leo, 2015; Hale et al., 2012; Richardson, Smith & Papathomas, 2017; Rolfe et al., 2012). Considering this, adaptive CrossFit as a site for alternative PA is ripe for explorative research; and which I, therefore, offer this reflexive ethnographic piece.

Epistemic Reflexivity

Within a number of disciplines based in the social sciences (such as health care, education and social work) , a trend has emerged to use qualitative practitioner research, including reflexivity, to attempt to improve service delivery and reduce the misalignment between theory, policy and practice (Scaife, 2010). However, research available from the vantage of those in disability sport and APA is inexplicably scarce. A critical consideration of reflexivity, posed by White (2001), is that practitioners should ask 'What is?' rather than 'What ought to be?'; particularly when reflecting upon social processes rather than individual tendencies. Reflexivity should seek to uncover 'the social at the heart of the individual, the impersonal beneath the intimate, the universal buried deep within the particular' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 44). Matson

[2] The CrossFit Games is an athletic competition held every summer since 2007. Athletes at the Games compete in workouts that they learn about hours or days beforehand, consisting mostly of an assortment of standard aerobic, weightlifting, and gymnastics movements, as well as additional surprise elements, such as swimming or cycling. CrossFit Games stylizes their individual winners as the "Fittest on Earth".

(2003, 12) eloquently elevates Bourdieu's judgement by highlighting the need for reflexivity to be 'collective rather than individualist, procedural rather than narcissistic, and epistemological as well as sociological'. In adherence, researchers in the field of the sociology of (disability) sport should critique the social processes that drive (disability sport) service provider practices. However, for the prac-ademic, this can present a complex epistemic positionality; reflexivity will need to attempt to reduce both the bias associated with being an outsider (an able-bodied researcher) and an insider (an adaptive practitioner). Therefore, reflexive prac-acdemics should examine the social and political position they occupy, as well as the interacting relational forces that determine their attitudes and beliefs, as opposed to simply examining their attitudes and beliefs in isolation (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). As Schelly (2008) purports, the reflexive project should seek to repair the separation between theory, research and practice by shifting the focus from singular outcomes to structural processes. While (in this project) an outcome might include more frequent engagements in PA opportunities for disabled people, a process involves the conceptualization, measurement and critique of initial engagement and opportunity.

The 'doing' of reflexive ethnography

This paper is a reflexive ethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 1996) written from the perspective of an able-bodied prac-ademic at the intersection of research and practice in disability sport and APA. Davies (2012) explains the process as turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference grounded in a self-awareness and self-consciousness that is utilized at all levels of the research process; acknowledging that the ethnographer's social situation will affect their perspectives of the topic being explored. Research which explicitly problematizes the 'doing' of the sociology of sport is exceptionally limited; especially literature which extends to researching with the disabled community. Therefore, a perspective that integrates the roles of

practitioner and researcher is both novel and valuable. In this case, I hope to provide a perspective on the problems and practicalities of developing a community based APA initiative by exploring the tensions that exist between theoretical constructs developed by the academy and the application of these theories to real-world examples. The narrative offers a chronological description of a seven month period developing a pilot adaptive CrossFit project to the disabled community in London, United Kingdom in an attempt to improve the offer and choice of APA within the area. The narrative includes interpretations of conversations with interested parties, reflections on digital communications and personal observations of the initiative. Furthermore, I position myself as a story-teller (Phoenix, Smith and Sparkes, 2010); the narrative presented is a creative analytical practice that expresses the evolving thoughts that dominated my attachment to the initiative, including conflicts during the process between opinion, experience and evidence.

The experiences that I present are unique to me – constructed, reconstructed and shared through story telling in a journalistic style. As Sparkes (2000, 22) identifies "writing is also a way of knowing, a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it". This reflexive ethnographic piece has been crafted on a collection of reflections using diary entries, meeting notes, emails and social media as data to elicit memories linked to moments in time. Levitan et al. (2015) term this 'accidental ethnography', whereby extant data is "accidentally" gathered (i.e. the data were not collected as part of a predesigned study) to provide insight into a phenomenon, culture, or way of life. A timeline of the initiative was first drawn up, with data then being mined to correspond to each month. Short reflective narratives were then written around each data point, which were finally expounded with theoretical input. There is likely to be gaps and inaccuracies, as is common with storytelling and reflections of specific points in the past. Despite this,

storytelling is one of the richest, most vibrant and vivid ways to present this personal data and to provide the reader with an opportunity to sense make (Riessman, 2008).

Foley (1992, 45) discusses that when engaging in ethnographic work "authors must be much more honest about their own assumptions and value premises. They must also use language that is much more ordinary and understandable, and hence full of poetics, metaphors, sayings, connotations, irony, humour, personal voice, and the voices of others". Therefore the reader will notice the various voices of others but also a trio of personal voices – my internal monologue to demonstrate my thought processes, my evocative story telling voice to provide description, and my academic voice using theoretical abstraction or conceptual elaboration to make sense of the experiences recounted (Sparkes, 2009). In the case of any (auto)ethnographic writing, Coffrey (1992, 132) asks "are we in danger of gross self-indulgence if we practice autobiographical ethnography?". These reflections are my own however they are shared for the benefit of the other, the reader - for them to make sense of such reflections without adulation, judgement or punishment. However, as Richardson (2000, 10) postulates "ethnographies may indeed be the most valid and desirable representations, for they open spaces for thinking about the social that elude us now"

About me

There has recently been a call for scholars researching within the disability sport domain to be more explicit in the potential tensions that might arise in their work. For example, works from Brighton (2015), David Howe (2018), and Brighton and Williams (2018) discuss the nuances of empathy, positionality and reflexivity in ethnographies produced with disabled athletes. At the time of writing this paper I have a PhD in the Sociology of Disability Sport, I have worked with Paralympic national governing bodies of sport and their athletes, I am a Special Olympic national coach educator, I am a Paralympic technical classifier, I am an inclusive physical

education consultant, I am an intellectual disability charity volunteer. However, I must recognise that the political, social and literal space that I, as an able-bodied individual occupy, within the disabled community is at the perpetuated exclusion of others – it is *I* who am 'out of place' (Kitchen, 1998, 345), and a list of vocations and contributions does not qualify me to assume any right to speak on, for or on the behalf of any marginalized community. Whilst this particular article was not an intended output of the adaptive CrossFit project, I hope it speaks to Stone and Priestley's (1996) call for academics to become progressive partners, as opposed to parasitical professors, in disability research.

The Initiative

March 2016: Could this work?

Whist on the bus this morning, an interview with a Team USA Invictus Games athlete popped up on my Facebook feed – he accredited his return to fitness with his local CrossFit box running classes for wounded service men in his home city. I have been doing CrossFit myself for nearly 2 years and I am embarrassed that I have not heard about an adaptive version; as an academic in, and advocate for APA it is literally my job to know about things like this. An important and distinct sense of purpose to CrossFit is that any exercise can be adapted, scaled and modified to suit the physical capabilities of any individual that enters a box (disabled or not). I begin researching and find little grey literature and zero academic publications on the subject; however the on-line content I find demonstrates frequent postings, events and a strong following from the both the veteran and physical impairment community. Adaptive CrossFit has been building momentum in the USA since 2010 and has developed a critical mass of service delivers consisting of veteran charities, volunteer coach educators and supportive CrossFit box owners. I am surprised to learn that adaptive CrossFit is (seemingly) not happening in the UK at all – '*Why is that?*' I think. Despite understanding the collective evidence of the intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community and policy level barriers

faced by disabled people to access APA opportunities (Ginis et al, 2016), surely these barriers are redundant if the opportunity does not exist in the first place? I frequently lecture that approximately 7 in 10 disabled people in the UK want to be more active (Activity Alliance, 2016), and so I wonder how could I do more to abate the barriers I continuously critique? In 2016 there were over 500 affiliated CrossFit boxes in England, however the website responsible for promoting gym usage for disabled people in England reports only 44 gyms registered as having Inclusive Fitness Initiative[3] (IFI) accreditation – it is therefore likely a disabled person lives closer to a box than an IFI gym. Sartre (1956) argued that the oppressed are denied material, cultural and social goods – and so perhaps I should get out of the classroom and "get my hands dirty" (Park, cited in Prus 1996, 119) by bringing the cultural phenomenon of adaptive CrossFit to the UK.

I have started conversations with friends - a current Paralympic athlete, a former Paralympic athlete, an employee at a veteran's charity, and a regional disability sport engagement officer. I am so excited about the initiative that my privilege checking in overcoming bias becomes blurred – was this genuinely a good idea to explore, or was this idea simply re-centring myself in some form of dis/ability balance-sheet exercise (Weiss, 2016)? Does adaptive CrossFit perpetuate a compulsory able-bodiness within the PA space (McReur, 2006)? Or did I need to "check my ego" (Tiffany & Freeman, 2016, 62) and realise that my ableist attitude towards a novel PA opportunity would likely hold little value within the disabled community? Even asking these questions serve to highlight my ableist narcissism - am I simply pre-occupied with re-enforcing a need for self-improvement and corporeal enhancement to the disabled community (Campbell, 2012)?; *'Hey disabled people – don't you want to make yourself more*

[3] The Inclusive Fitness Initiative is managed by Quest and the Activity Alliance: Further information about the initiative is available at: http://www.activityalliance.org.uk/get-active/inclusive-gyms

able with the help of adaptive CrossFit?'. After all, the core of the initiative is, essentially, to desubjectivise the disabled body; focusing on its "functionality, pliability and improvability" (Campbell, 2012, 217). However, my friends tell me that if the disabled community in the US is embracing adaptive CrossFit then there must be a demand for it elsewhere.

Whilst writing my plan of action, I arrive at the disappointing realisation that the project might fall at the first hurdle – of all the UK disability sport scholars who I think could shape the project with me (inclusive design being fundamental), none of them actually had a disability (that I knew of). Perhaps I should not be surprised given the consideration that disabled people are three-times less likely to gain any formal post-19 education qualification (Papworth Trust, 2018), and that students with physical and sensory disabilities are the least likely to attend university (Weedon, 2017). My next option is to approach two colleagues who I think might be interested – both are strength and conditioning coaches with experience of working with Paralympic athletes, and whilst neither has a disability, they have a particular level of inside-outsider knowledge that I hope will legitimize their involvement in the project. I am expecting them to ask questions regarding time and remuneration – as a volunteer lead initiative there is no funding available and I estimate time towards the project at about 3 hours per week. Netting (2008, 410) reflects that the oppressed are often dependent on "donated talent"; reliant upon the collective behaviours of the non-oppressed to mobilize their access to denied essential life opportunities. Although it is not unusual for some sports clubs to depend entirely on volunteers (Parkington, 2018), the extent to which participation in modern living for disabled people is overwhelmingly conditional on the will of others pricked at the realization of the project – would I simply be contributing to the problem? However, it has just been announced that the first ever Adaptive Athlete category is being added to the 2016 CrossFit Games held in July, and I am taking this as sign that the project should go ahead.

April 2016: We've got nothing to lose!

The project incarnate will require more than simply my idea and the support of two colleagues to lead the coach education process with me, and so my next step is to identify partner organisations that could support, promote and deliver. I deduce that at the very least I will need i) a local CrossFit box in which to deliver the project; and ii) national disability sport organisations (NDSOs) to push the initiative to their communities. Following Parent and Harvey's (2009) Management Model for sport and PA community-based partnerships, I am conscious of the required antecedents to get the project up and running, and diligently consider the information I need to persuade each partner to invest in this unknown venture. As with many community led initiatives, the social capital held of *who you know* is often more important that *what you know* (Adler and Kwon, 2002); and as an inside-outsider within the disabled community I have a long list of people and organisations I can contact. My weakest connection is within the CrossFit community so I may as well start there.

This afternoon I invited the owner and head coach of the box I train at for a coffee to discuss the adaptive CrossFit movement – I present the pertinence of initiative, discussing the Invictus Games (May 2016), the CrossFit Games with an Adaptive Athlete category (July 2016) and the Paralympic Games (September 2016), whilst simultaneously punctuating the flow of conversation with videos of adaptive CrossFit athletes in USA. I am cognizant that exceptionally few sport and PA coaches have any formal or informal education or experience in training disabled people (Fitzgerald, 2018), and in addition am conscious I could be met with immediate resistance if I perpetuated the negative stereotype of being an "eccentric and militant" advocate of social change (Bashir et al., 2013, 614) – fundamentally, I don't want to make them feel stupid or guilty for not previously engaging in disability. However, the meeting

was successful, with both individuals seeing a purpose to what I hope to achieve. They have asked me to put a plan together and present it to the coaching team in a fortnight.

Over the past two weeks I have had a number of meetings. The first was with my two strength and conditioning colleagues to determine what the program could look like, agreeing that coach education was paramount to the initial success of the initiative. We decided on a 12 week coach education program of 2 hours per week; the content of the first 6 weeks would be a mixture of *"Disability 101 – Sociology"* (delivered by me) and *"Disability 102 – Anatomy and physiology of different impairments"* (delivered by them), with the second 6 weeks being practical sessions of common WODs led by the coaches with disabled people as participants. Knowing that interest in disability sport and PA is piqued by the Paralympic Games (Coates and Vickerman, 2016), we thought that having the project ready to launch at the end of the Rio Paralympic Games 2016 would be beneficial for maximum exposure – therefore the coach education process would run over June, July and August 2016. Next, we need to reach out to people with varying impairments who are already physically active and experienced within a gym-like environments to become involved in the second phase of the coach education program. I met with my colleague at the veteran's charity and asked for support in promoting the opportunity to their contacts; as the lead trainer for physical recovery from traumatic injury they occupy a critical role as a boundary scanner, a gatekeeper and knowledge broker (Haas, 2015) in so far as having access to a significant number of individuals and resources that might both input to, and benefit from, adaptive CrossFit. Finally I sent an email to a contact at a pan-disability NDSO responsible for listing all disability sport and adapted PA opportunities across the UK and asked them firstly if they would be interested in learning more about adaptive CrossFit and why we were embarking on this initiative, and secondly if they would promote the opportunity on their website. As part of my approach I provided (what I considered to be

helpful) links to recent government reports highlighting the need for universities, charities and volunteer led organisations to work closer together in pursuit of issues regarding social change[ii] - indicating the transformative potential of introducing adaptive CrossFit to the UK by providing an alternative APA opportunity to Paralympic sport and the IFI. My fingers are crossed - hopefully they will see the innovation and importance of the project.

May 2016: A slow start

I presented the education program content to the coaches today and they seemed relatively enthused, yet slightly apprehensive. It was no surprise that our conversations centred much around their own ableist perceptions of barriers to participation and (I hoped) unconscious prejudice towards disabled people in general (Friedman, 2016) – What if the coach said something offensive? What extra equipment was needed? Was CrossFit even safe for them to do? How would their inclusion affect the 'normal' classes? Perhaps my role in the coach education program was going to be more salient than I had first thought. As I played the coaches you-tube clips of adaptive CrossFit athletes in the USA, I scanned their faces for the usual reaction of the physically able unaffected by disability in their life thus far – facial expressions altering fluidly between wonderment, confusion and fear. Disability, Davis (1997, I) writes, is "always an actively repressed *memento mori* for the fate of the normal body"; it reminds non-disabled people that their able, strong and healthy body is both fragile and temporary in its existence. I wondered if this was the first time any of the coaches had thought about their body in this way before. I think I have a sound understanding of where the gaps in the coaches' knowledge are, and hope I have motivated them enough to engage in the project for the next 12 weeks and beyond. After all, the coaches are "involuntary volunteers" (Henny, Hacket and Porecca, 2017, 49) – expected to participate in the coach education process and sacrifice their

own work-out time (once a week) to engage in a social responsibility initiative that is not of their choosing (or necessarily to their interest).

My friend at the veteran's charity has told me their line manager was not keen on sending the adaptive CrossFit opportunity out to their network via a blanket email, nor did they want to advertise it on their website or their monthly newsletter – perhaps my contact is not the person to know after all! I am disappointed, but more surprised to learn that this is not seen as an added value opportunity to the work the charity already does. Instead, my friend has reached out to injured service men and women they still have contact with, however as most of them are either competing at the Invictus Games or preparing for the Paralymic Games he is not hopeful for the return communication.

It has now been four weeks since my email to the pan-disability NDSO asking them to display the information about the project on their webpage. I have politely prompted them 3 times via twitter to respond to my email, but each time all I was met with was a cut and paste tweet-reply of:

Tweet: *"Hi Natalie. Thanks for the tweet. We'll get back to you shortly via email"*. They never did. I refer back to my list of contacts and email someone whom I had a good working relationship with a few years ago when I myself worked for an NDSO - they now have a managerial role at the leading organisation for overseeing disability sport and PA in England. I told them about adaptive CrossFit, about the project we are piloting and about how we needed people with impairments already involved in PA and sport to be part of the coach education process - could they help me spread the word? The response is *'no'*; communicating opportunities directly to the disabled community is not within their remit, but also their legal team has advised them not to promote anything with the brand name of CrossFit without

evidence of it being formally endorsed by the company. The message? "Don't Cross CrossFit" unless you want to be taken to court for trademark infringement (Helm, 2013). Moving further down my list of contacts, I consequently reach out to participation officers I know in 5 NDSOs coving visual impairment, dwarfism, CP, limb difference and wheelchair use. Thankfully, each NDSO responds positively about the project and promises to cascade the information to their regional officers as well as posting the opportunity onto their internal opportunity boards – however they echo that they will need to replace the word CrossFit with something else (we settle on adaptive functional fitness; not as catchy). Finally – some advocacy!

June 2016: When one door closes, turn to twitter?

The practical element of the project is due to start in 6 weeks and we don't have any participants - I need to think beyond my initial network of how I can let disabled people know that the opportunity is happening. I ask my student-Paralympic-athlete to pass on information about the project to the athletes at his high performance disability sports club; but he told me '*Sorry Natalie. A few people are interested but coach doesn't want anyone doing anything that might cause an injury so close to the Games'*. Another *'no'*, another gatekeeper I had not considered. But if someone really *was* interested, they would get in touch, wouldn't they? Research on the Foucauldian concept of social-control mechanisms to promote subjugation and surveillance in elite sport is well documented (most recently see Clark and Markula, 2017; Jones and Dennison, 2017; Mills and Denison, 2018), so why am I even surprised by these docile bodies (Foucault, 1977)?

I am struggling to understand the resistance I am being met with; the inclusion of adaptive athletes in the CrossFit Games 2016 has caused a twitter storm, with praise for the movement being blogged, tweeted, facebooked and insta'ed across the US. Why is the UK not catching on? The use of twitter as a tool for social engagement has surged – from brand development,

to health campaigns to customer services (Dempster and Lee, 2015) – I wonder if I can use it to bypass some of the individuals and organisations policing access to the disabled community; as if socialized to "be wary of the academics […] who want to use you for their own purposes - a story or a campaign - without concern about your own goals" (Martin, 1999, 26). Is this what I am doing – ignoring the goals of the disabled community? But wait; there is abundant grey and academic literature reiterating that their goals are to do more sport and PA. I reflect on why I am so eager to get adaptive CrossFit happening in the UK – am I merely succumbing to the La Rochefoucauld-inspired reasoning that altruistic compassion is, in reality, cloaked egoism? Or the Nietzschean position that I embarked upon the project with a presupposing of suffering by the disabled community; that I imposed my understanding of a lack of adaptive CrossFit in the UK as somehow bad (Reginster, 2000)? Did I want to pioneer adaptive CrossFit in the UK? Yes. Did I want a funded research project out of this? Probably. Was that my only reason for pursuing it? Absolutely not. Did I want to do it regardless of academic merit? Of course – I am not interested in naïve activism (Freire, 1972). Whilst internalizing if I should carry on with the project, I dig deeper in social media responses to the adaptive athletes at the CrossFit Games 2016 – searching for some sort of sign to legitimize my cause. On June 10th 2016 I find that sign. A tweet from the leading organisation for overseeing disability sport and PA in England (whom I had approached previously) presented a link to a report in a leisure management magazine stating:

Tweet: *"Activity Providers need to be more proactive in reaching disabled people"*

Oh the irony! I feel angry. Compelled to voice my experiences thus far I tweet back:

Response: *"Advocacy is a big problem though – orgs deciding if opportunities to PA should even be passed on to ppl!"*

I had 1 'like' and zero replies, comments or retweets. I begin to wonder how I could – as the tweet suggested - be more proactive knowing that I had now worked my way through my list

of contacts. I decide that if twitter was being used to recruit people to jobs, to medical trials, to flashmobs and to protests maybe I can use it to recruit to our adaptive CrossFit project. I begin my relentless twitter campaign; merging strategies in digital marketing and digital activism to target disability specific outlets, local and national media by creating content that aimed to enhance engagement, produce dialogue and stimulate interest (Baird, 2017), whilst simultaneously avoiding disability "slacktivism" (Kristofferson, White and Pezola, 2014, 1149). I want people to know adaptive CrossFit is an option for them. I send about 50 tweets over 5 days. Table 1 shows the twitter target, the number of impressions from each tweet, the number of engagements from each and any direct action resulting from each tweet.

Table 1: Twitter campaign to recruit participants to the adaptive CrossFit project

Outlet	**Impressions**	**Engagement**	**Resulting Action**
2 National Disability Charity	1298	16	2 RT
4 Local Disability Charity	1048	18	3 RT
2 Military Charity	358	13	1 RT 1 DM*
6 National Disability Media	2088	66	3 RT 2 DM* 1 DM**
3 Local Media	285	12	2 RT
1 National Media	3051	259	0
5 NDSOs	2094	59	2 RT
Hashtag targets***	3841	208	10 RT
TOTALS	**14,063**	**641**	**27**

RT = Retweet

DM = Direct Message

* = No follow up from return message given

** = Requested payment upfront before engaging in potential news feature

*** = Tweets sourced using associated hastags to CrossFit, Adaptive Physical Activity and Disability

In addition I create posters advertising the opportunity and take them to local businesses and organisations that might be frequented by the disabled community – this includes local physiotherapy and osteopathy clinics, local mobility-aid shops, local disability charity centres and a county based prosthetic centre (I don't know if they actually put them up). With all this effort put into making the opportunity visible through digital and physical outlets, all I have to do is wait for the emails to come flooding in – right?

July 2016: Tweeting, waiting, wishing

In the space of 3 weeks, my tweets have been seen by over 14,000 people (not even counting the retweets from the organisations), over 600 people have clicked on the link to our project information page, and collectively there have been 27 resulting actions to each tweet; but not a single person has been in touch to learn more about the project. A national disability magazine has asked if I could contact their publishers as they would be interested in running a feature to coinside with some of their Paralympic specific content in a forth coming issue. I see this as a great opportunity for exposure, however (an abridged version of) our telephone conversation went something like this:

Magazine: So which Paralympians are involved in this project?

Me: None, as they are all currently training for the Rio 2016 Games and it probably wouldn't be a good idea to disrupt their training

Magazine: Oh… OK. It would be great if you could get a retired Paralympian to attend maybe? You know, to bring a bit more hype to the project?

Me: We don't have a budget to be able to pay a Paralympian for an appearance I'm afraid. And the idea is that you don't have to be a Paralympian do to this kind of work out … so it might send the wrong message to the community if we had one as part of the promotion of the project. But this is a big news story no? Something that the disabled community won't have seen happening in the UK before?

Magazine: Right, right. Well – we can still do a feature for you but it's not exactly a news story as such - so it would need payment. We cost in at £2000 per 4 page feature.

Me: But as I said, we don't have a budget…

Magazine: Right, right. That's a shame. Come back to me if you can find a Paralympian to attend?

Ah yes – the (assumed) essential need for a supercrip to sex up a project such as this (Gallar, 1984; Hardin and Hardin, 2004; Claydon, Gunter and Reilly, 2014). No doubt the feature would be emblazed with the damaging rhetoric of empowerment, overcoming, valourization, adversity and effort (Grue, 2015). I think about the paradox of what I am requesting of the magazine – the supercrip is often derided as a figure that is antithetical to the interests of disabled people and so I am mindful that a Paralympian would (in any case) not be a great idea. But, even without an elite athlete, am I no less guilty of selfishly peddling inspiration porn (Young, 2014)? On reflection, this conversation exposes my naiveté three-fold. Firstly, I uncritically breached my own maxim of failing to acknowledge the heterogeneity an intersectionality of the disabled community by fuelling the concept that the term 'disabled' is an all-encompassing social and personal identity; deducing that *of course* a 'disability' magazine would want to know about a 'disability' PA opportunity. At best, this concept is highly offensive and at worst is severely handicapping (Campbell, 2018). Secondly, I guilelessly assumed that disability PA was of such wanting, in need of such benevolence that it would somehow escape the neoliberal condition of the indebted man (Lazzarato, 2012); that if they would not take interest they would, at least, take pity (on me). But above all, I approached the situation with such self-inflation – a naïve ego of ideological fictions and pseudosolutions, blind to its own innate limitation and the a priori dimension of the problem. Alas, the world is the totality of what, for me, is valid as existing (academically at least!)

(Silverman, 1976) – that *of course* disabled people in the UK would want to do adaptive CrossFit!

I am nervous - the practical element of our project starts in 2 weeks and I have one participant (a para-skiier who is a friend of my friend at the veteran's charity can attend for the first 2 weeks); ideally I need 6 people so that each coach has someone to work with. What am I going to do? I decide that in addition to my vigorous blanket tweeting and hashtag hunting (#CrossFit #AdaptiveAthlete #IAMADAPTIVE #APA to name a few), I will contact organisations whose only purpose is to deliver disability sport across the UK – Paralympic National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs). Perhaps they would welcome an APA initiative? I craft an email and seek out the most appropriate person to send it to, ensuring I know their name, role and their responsibility to promote local opportunities (mainly provided to me by friends and colleagues working within these NGBs already). I have contacted 26 Paralympic Sport NGBs asking them to share the adaptive CrossFit project to athletes who were not competing at Rio 2016 and to their more experienced members.

A week later and only 5 NGBs send me a reply; 3 NGBs tell me they think the project is a great idea (1 has even seen adaptive CrossFit footage previously) and will send the information directly to the all members on their database, whilst 2 NGBs tell me they like the project but would not be passing the information on as they prefer to only communicate opportunities about their particular sport. I get no response from the remaining 21 NGBs despite follow up emails and phone calls – I feel like the protagonist in Kafka's parable (1915), despairing before the gatekeepers, waiting to gain entry – perplexed, disillusioned, irrelevant, yet I remain intentional. My final attempt at promoting our project is to contact a national charity for injured professional sports athletes. After 2 weeks of radio science I vent over a business lunch to a

colleague - an ex-professional England player who had shown an interest in the project (he had taken up CrossFit after he retired from sport). *'Let me put in a word'* he said. A few days later I received an email from the client services manager letting me know that she would send the project information out to their members. *'A small win'* – I think.

The practical aspect of our coach education program starts in a few days and luckily I now have 3 people signed up to the coach education program. TB – male, a former soldier, Great Britain para-skiier with a spinal cord injury, SA – female, a former navy officer and Invictus Games athlete with a limb difference, and GS – male, a friend of the box owner who has a tumour on his spine and partial paraplegia.

August 2016: OK – let's do this!

All 3 participants are pleased to see that the information regarding the accessibility of the box is relatively accurate (disabled parking out the front, level access throughout, a bus stop 50 pushing metres from the entrance, a disabled toilet but no accessible shower facilities, no hearing loop, signs not written in braille or easy read). I purchased a bag of Active Hands[iii] for each participant to use and keep as a thank you for participating. The session goes well and the coaches follow the mantra we discussed of *Assume* (the person can do it by themselves), *Ask* (if you can be of any help), *Assist* (exactly as you have been directed to). Furthermore, the coaches became increasingly confident in asking questions about the (dis)abled bodies in front of them, forgoing the usual curiosity restrictions surrounding stigmatized identities – *'Would doing this movement affect your catheter?', 'Does anything trigger your spasms?', 'What happens to your balance if I move your leg over here?'* – a common process of trial and error often experienced by coaches entering the disability coaching space (Taylor et al., 2014). Afterwards, I have a coffee with the coaches to get feedback on how they found their first

adaptive CrossFit experience and to facilitate some reflection – a process sometimes made more challenging for able bodied coaches in disability sport and APA due to the need to confront previously held prejudices and fears about disabled people (Taylor et al., 2015), as well as needing to recognise voids in professional and interpersonal knowledge (Coté and Gilber, 2009). They seem excited; surprised that it was not as frightening an experience as they might have first anticipated. They are looking forward to next week already, and I have asked them to support me in getting the word out that their box will be running adaptive CrossFit sessions from the beginning of September. The coach education sessions will finish the same week as the Rio 2016 Paralympic opening ceremony – perfect to piggy back on the clockwork timing of 2 weeks' worth (in 4 years) of ubiquitous media coverage of disability sport, drenched in (questionable) platitudes of inspiration and superhumanism.

It is week three of the practical aspect of the coach education program and 2 of the participants have dropped out. TB had already told me that he was had to go on training camp with his fellow para-skiiers, and SA sent me an apologetic email explaining that she could not make the 2 hour journey across London for her to attend the subsequent sessions due to work commitments. I am grateful that GS has attended but I feel sorry for him somehow as the only participant this week – the dynamics of the session seem to have shifted from weeks one and two being authentic, personal and engaging to in week three GS's body somehow being a singular specimen of "forbidden attention" (Thomson, 2005, 124), expected to perform for the benefit of the 6 coaches staring at him (in addition to myself and my two strength and conditioning colleagues). I feel like my conviction in this project is actually just prideful and self-conceited, and that I am wasting everyone's time. A few days later the box owner calls me to say that GS won't be able to attend the coach education program in weeks four and five – he has an infection and is confined to bed rest. I briefly consider appealing for participants,

however if the previous 3 months of searching were anything to go by I am pessimistic about the outcome.

In the final week of the program GS is back, but only the head CrossFit coach attends. I ask where the others are and I sense the undertone of embarrassment in his voice – *'I didn't think it was worth everyone being here for 1 person, but I told them they could come along if they wanted'*. Clearly they did not want to - but I am not sure why. Perhaps they don't want to miss any more work-out times? Perhaps they don't want to develop their adaptive CrossFit coaching skills further? Perhaps they don't want to witness GS's deteriorating and dying body? Perhaps they don't want to confront the discomfort in accepting their ableist privilege? Perhaps, they just don't care about it all as much as I do? But, who am I to demand the position of anybody's ethical compass? After all, are we not all morally ambivalent (Bauman, 1993)?

A tweet from the leading organisation for overseeing disability sport and PA in England has come up on my feed, and of course I tweet back:

> Tweet: *Find out what disabled people, non-disabled people and journalists think about disability sport. Our report is out tomorrow!*
>
> Me*: Keen to learn! No responses to our adaptive CrossFit story despite emails, calls, tweets. Not even disability specific media.*
>
> Response Tweet: *@DrNJCampbell send it to us too to take a look at. Always happy to help where we can*
>
> Me: *Thanks. We already did but with limited success. Looking forward to hearing about what media want and how to do it better (thumb up emoji)*

September 2016: We've got nothing!

The Rio 2016 Paralympics starts this week and the project has just sort of, stopped. I started all this thinking '*We've got nothing to lose'* but the reality is more like *'We've got nothing at all!*. I had imagined some sort of grand promotional stunt at the box, picturing Channel 4 filming Ade Adepitan, our project participants and neophytes doing an adaptive WOD and using the footage to supplement their Games time coverage. I have tweeted and emailed Channel 4 and the Last Leg Project[iv] a number of times inviting them to come down but I have not had a response.

A tiny measure of progress is that the box owner has posted a statement about classes being inclusive on the website homepage, delighting in writing that his coaches are the only ones in the country to have received coach education on adaptive CrossFit – which is true to some extent I guess. He has promised to extend the discount given to uniformed workers to any disabled people wanting to become members, and will seek accessibility advice for the new box he is opening next year.

The organisation has tweeted a link to their report on disability sport in the news, and naturally I respond:

> Tweet: *New research finds demand for more disability sport news. Check out our better practice guide for reporting on disabled people in sport*.
>
> Me: *Needed report but for our #adaptive #crossfit project we contacted 14 media outlets and had only 1 response – who wanted payment.*

Vegh's (2013, 81) concept of advocacy in digital activism begins with information distribution. It informs the recipient in order to "generate awareness of a social problem and seeks to mobilise individual-level self-empowerment and self-politicization". I felt indignant that

adaptive CrossFit was available to some people in the disabled community but not others, and so, as Steffensmeier and Schenck-Hamlin (2015) would argue, was prompted to action by seeking out complementary individuals, groups or organizations that could help me to organize, research, and promote solutions to the problem. If I scroll through my emails, and tweets, I can see that, really, I only brought the crux of the project's challenges out into the open twice; a lack of advocacy and a lack of interest – hardly activism! I have been informed through the research of both disability sport scholars and industry leaders that the problem is that not enough opportunities for alternative provisions of PA are available to disabled people. However, I will start to tell my students that this is a *symptom*. The problem is my miseducation on how to provide an APA opportunity to the disabled community. The problem *here* is my misjudgement that the disability sport community would want to support me in launching adaptive CrossFit. But what about beyond this project? Perhaps the problem is gatekeepers? Perhaps the problem is advocacy? Perhaps the problem is the removal of agency. Perhaps the problem is the (disability sport) academy pedalling rhetoric? In all my years of reading, teaching and doing disability sport and APA why is this news to me? I guess all I can do is share my experience and decide how to approach these concerns moving forwards. Maybe I'll start by writing a paper.

Conclusion

Activism begins within fields of possibility, in the form of an emergent sense that something is now possible. Or, as Duggan and Muñoz (2009) might argue, activism begins with "educated hope," a "thinking beyond the narrative of what stands for the world today by seeing it as not enough" (278–279). My educated hope was that if abundant testimonies from people across the spectrum of physical and intellectual disability in the USA (from former veterans to completely sedentary individuals) discussing how their physical and mental wellbeing has

improved in part due to adaptive CrossFit, then it was not enough that this medium of APA was not available to disabled people in the UK.

Health promotion policies often call for greater opportunities for Paralympic sport, however - and importantly - CrossFit is not a Paralympic Sport; it is APA. Research by Braye, Dixon and Gibbons (2013) argues that the Paralympic Games can (re)produce (re)presentations of false empowerment – a mockery of equality that permeates public discourse as the design of disability. Furthermore, the Paralympic Games as repressive eudaemonic entertainment (Bartsch et al., 2018) only serves to expand the lack of relevance between Paralympians and others in the disabled community, often failing to acknowledge the real-world challenges of austerity, felt and enacted stigma and invisibility (Brown and Pappous, 2018). However, the project sought the support and endorsement of organisations which are (at least partially) responsible *for* championing the voice of disabled people within the sport and APA landscape as well championing the importance of sport and APA *to* disabled people, and so this lack of interest and facilitation needs to be better understood. A significant body of academic literature and industry findings consistently present the argument that low rates of participation manifest in physical, logistical and psychological barriers, with psychological barriers (personal perceptions and attitudes of others) being the most debilitating (Activity Alliance, 2012). The project attempted to assuage some of the more commonly reported barriers regarding the lack of consultation with disabled people, lack of awareness about the opportunity, lack of instructor education, lack of accessible facilities, and lack of adaptive equipment. In addition, the project acknowledged its weaknesses in not sufficiently addressing the subtleties and stratifications of provision required across all impairment groups. On paper, the project addressed many of the difficulties that research purports as blockades to participation. So why did the project fail? The Activity Alliance (2012, 16) argue that the "first step in improving access is improving awareness" – that both disabled people and non-disabled people need to know the sporting and

APA opportunities available to the community. However, in many cases the project was not afforded awareness – underscoring an issue of gatekeepers denying disabled people agency and exposing the power relationships that exist. Is the *choice* to participate not paramount?

Responses to the crisis of representation in critical disability studies have included a push for more reflexive writing and research practice; local, specific community-relevant micro-theories rather than grand narratives (Eales and Peers, 2016). This is both challenging and complex to navigate when discourse regarding inclusion must be expanded to incorporate issues of context, disability rights, and social justice. Scholars and practitioners in disability sport and APA may want to revisit their colloquy of 'providing opportunity' to engage and engender research that discusses what *does not work* as opposed to reporting only what does. Furthermore, researchers should seek to adopt a critical realist approach that unpacks and interrogates mechanisms that contribute to *why* an opportunity may or may not be successfully advocated, promoted and delivered, whilst simultaneously not being afraid to problematize the academic status quo or challenge industry ideology. Finally, the academy should allow themselves to be vulnerable in recognizing that "failing to transform individual lives need not be the sole criterion of 'good research', especially where a real contribution can (and must) be made in a wider context" (Stone and Priestly, 1996, 723).

This paper has been slow, self-reflexive, immersive and conscious; and throughout the narrative I have asked myself some essential questions which I encourage other able-bodied activists to do. Through this self-reflexive questioning, I must attempt to theorize why the adaptive CrossFit project did not materialize – perhaps I (or CrossFit itself) was considered an alter in an ego network neighbourhood of disability sport and APA (Barnes, 1954)? Perhaps the project perpetuated a neo-liberal healthist discourse unwanted by the disabled community beyond the request of NDSOs (Crawford, 2006)? Perhaps the project has exposed a able-bodied saviour complex within me? Perhaps it is another reason that I am (presently) entirely

ignorant to. Regardless, I began the project thinking I knew how to provide an APA opportunity that disabled people *could choose* to participate in should they want to. However, to conclude quoting Popper (1963, 39) "… all knowledge is human; that it is mixed with our errors, our prejudices, our dreams, and our hopes; that all we can do is to grope for truth even though it be beyond our reach. We may admit that our groping is often inspired, but we must be on our guard against the belief, however deeply felt, that our inspiration carries any authority, divine or otherwise". Therefore, the 'truth' of why this initiative failed is beyond the human authority of both the academy and disabled activists – no knowledge is beyond criticism – but I will continue to advocate it nonetheless, learn from this experience and attempt to do better next time. Fast forward to 2019 and adaptive CrossFit is starting to gather momentum in the UK, with a core group of athletes regularly contributing to online content and attending competitions. Perhaps adaptive CrossFit has found a way to bypass the gatekeepers after all?

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[i] United Nations Article 30.5 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Available at: http://pacific.ohchr.org/docs/UN_Sport_Disability_Booklet.pdf

[ii] https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/universities-and-charities-need-to-work-closer-together

[iii] Active Hands are an accessory to make gripping for those with hand function weakness more independence around the home, garden, gym and for leisure activities. Available at https://www.activehands.com

[iv] The Last Leg (known during its first series as The Last Leg with Adam Hills) is a British comedy and late night television talk show that originally ran alongside the 2012 Summer Paralympics every night following the main coverage on Channel 4. It has since become a weekly show giving an alternative look at the week's global current affairs and events.