A Qualitative Study in the Development of Self-Advocacy and Independence Through Symbolic Interaction: A Focus on Wheelchair Basketball Athletes

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[Poster Background]

* Basketball graphics in the top left and bottom right corners.
* Background is light green.
* Information boxes have white background.
* Results boxes have orange background.
* Participant information boxes have darker green background.

[Left Column]

Introduction

World War II was the catalyst for the development of wheelchair basketball, and it successfully served the athletes by providing therapy, distraction, fitness, and a sense of normalcy. Ludwig Guttman is often referred to as the father of wheelchair basketball. His patients were Holocaust survivors and World War II veterans.

Numerous teams began surfacing across the United States. As wheelchair basketball became popular, the sport evolved and teams combined to form the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA).

Today, in the United States, there are 13 competitive collegiate wheelchair basketball at nine universities. These students graduate at three times more often than other students with physical disabilities.

Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of students regarding self-advocacy and independence as a college student and inter-collegiate wheelchair athlete?
2. What are the perceptions of students regarding whether athletics is the best resource, or one of many effective resources, which teach the participant to mediate barriers and facilitate academic success?

[Center Top Row]

**Results regarding Independence**

Being able to do some things on one’s own or with the assistance of another person. Wheelchair basketball made a positive physical or mental impact on participants.

I think I might be able to do more self-care on my own if I lose a little more weight... I have become stronger to do more things for my own care. I see Class 1's that don't need assistance, and that would be complete independence for me (Gwen, 2012).

**Sources of Support**

They’re [coaches] sure not all squishy soft and feely, but they are there for the players whether it has anything to do with the game or not… (Travis, 2013).

I hang out with some music folks and filmmakers... I’m not always talking basketball or sports. I guess I prefer to hang out with them so it’s not always about the chair (John, 2012).

**Choice and Opportunities**

Mindy was introduced to basketball after choosing a different sport – women’s traditional golf. Having the ability to participate in both sports gave her the opportunity to try out for the Paralympics. (Mindy, 2012).

Tyler dreamed of being an Olympic gymnast. The opportunity to play basketball kept that dream alive via the Paralympics (Tyler, 2012).

**Trying New Things**

My parents have been really insistent I do whatever my brothers do... I know I have support when I need it, but I am also free to try things, even if I don't succeed... I feel absolutely free that if I planned it out right, I am free to go anywhere and do anything I want to do... I've watched some of my friends with disabilities' parents just crush all their dreams because they can't let go like my parents did (Gwen, 2012).

Player Classification System

1-point: Little or no trunk movement or rotation. Balance is impaired, rely on arms to return to the upright position.

2-point: Some partially controlled trunk movement. Has upper trunk rotation but poor lower trunk rotation.

3-point: Good trunk movement and upper trunk rotation, but no controlled sideways movement.

4-point: Normal trunk movement, but has difficulty with controlled sideways movement to one side.

4.5-point: Normal trunk movement in all directions and able to reach the side with no limitation.

[Center Middle Row – Description of Participants]

**Stephanie (Class 2)**

* 23 year old senior
* pre-pharmacy
* Spinal Cord Injury
* Paralympian

**Tyler** **(Class 2)**

* 21 year old junior
* Sports Psychology
* Spinal Cord Injury
* Wheelchair X-games

**Gwen (Class 1)**

* 20 year old junior
* Music Education
* Vertebrae Deformity
* Swimming

**John (Class 1)**

* 28 year old sophomore
* Film and Visual Arts
* Spinal Cord Injury
* Plays only for fun

**Abby (Class 1)**

* 24 year old freshman
* Chemistry
* Spinal Cord Tumor
* Paralympian, tennis

**Mindy** **(Class 4)**

* 19 year old sophomore
* Sociology
* Born with one leg
* Traditional golf

**Travis**  **(Class 2)**

* 33 year old junior
* Advertising
* Spinal Cord Injury
* Basketball

[Center Bottom Row]

Photo with Caption: Arizona women block a shot by Wisconsin.

**Results Regarding Self-Advocacy**

Being able to make informed decisions, understand legal rights, and ask for assistance in ways that meet the needs of a given situation. Wheelchair basketball made a positive physical or mental impact on participants.

I'm more willing to go to professors and fight for what I need. At first I was scared they could give me bad grades just because they could, but they aren't like high school teachers ...they actually will usually hear me out and think about what I'm asking for (Abby, 2012).

**Navigating Barriers**

People I play with are very helpful and kind about doing things you need them to do, but they really force you to think about ways to get what you need or want on your own (Tyler, 2012).

I look at how my teammates brainstorm solutions... it makes me very aware of the fact that I shouldn't say I can't, when I see the things other players navigate (Mindy, 2012)

**Role Models**

I think we challenge what people think people with disabilities are able to do, but we are certainly far from perfect... (Abby, 2012).

I think from the first day on campus, the other players have been most helpful. They have taken my chair apart and told me best ways to be fast or get through mud and snow (John, 2012).

**Asking for Help**

I think if you asked any vet, it would be really hard... We have it pounded into our brains to be able to take care of things, and to give that up and let somebody else help you is a real challenge... (Travis, 2013).

Most of the time, I know that when I ask for help, I really do need it (Gwen, 2012).

[Right Column]

Quote from (Hendrickson, Boundless Determination, NCAA.com, 2013):

*Wheelchair basketball offered an antidote. It reinforced players’ self-esteem and reduced problems with depression and obesity. Academic performances improved, and their perception of disabilities upended. Shaver states the impact bluntly: “We save lives,” he said.*

Photo with caption: Lew Shaver is the coach for collegiate wheelchair basketball at Southwest Minnesota State University.

Other Information About the Participants

* 54% of participants moved more than 1,000 miles from home to play.
* 66% of participants are male.
* 77% do not use personal care assistants (PCAs).
* 16% use PCAs for special circumstances.
* 8% use PCAs on a regular basis.
* 76% make own accommodations with professors.
* 18% work with Disability Support Services (DSS) occasionally.
* 6% work with DSS on a regular basis.