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Spencer-Cavaliere, N. & Peers, D. (2011) Wheelchair Basketball, Reverse Integration and the Question(ing) of Disability. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 28, 291-309.

Available online at: <http://journals.humankinetics.com/apaq>

“What’s the Difference?”

Wheelchair Basketball, Reverse Integration and the Question(ing) of Disability

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Abstract

The integration of able-bodied athletes in disability sport has provided a unique forum in which to examine sport and disability. Within Canada, for example, a functional classification system allows athletes with and without disability to compete together in wheelchair basketball: a phenomenon known as reverse integration. The aim of this study was to examine the perspectives and experiences of female athletes who experience disability, within the context of reverse integration in this sport. A collaborative approach, using emic and etic perspectives, guided this study. Athletic identity was used as a conceptual framework to conduct interviews with 9 competitive women wheelchair basketball players classified as having a disability. A thematic content-analysis led to the emergence of the overarching theme, “What’s the difference?” as it relates to the subthemes of athlete, team, and outsiders. The results are discussed within the context of athletic identity, reverse integration and the meanings of disability. Future directions for collaborative research in adapted physical activity are also presented.

Keywords: reverse integration, wheelchair basketball, disability, athletic identity

Within the field of adapted physical activity (APA), examinations of sports integration have typically focused on either the inclusion of those who experience disabilities within traditionally *able-bodied* (AB) sports, or the inclusion of disability sports as separate events within mainstream sporting festivals (Nixon, 2007). A third, less vetted, form of sports integration, however, is reverse integration. In reverse integration, athletes who may or may not experience disability compete with and against each other directly, in what have traditionally been known as disability sports: sports created or adapted specifically for those who experience disabilities (Brasile, 1990, 1992; Nixon, 2007). To date, researchers have focused more on theorizing about the potential results of reverse integration (Brasile, 1990, 1992; DePauw, 1997a; Nixon, 2007; Thiboutot, Smith, & Labanowich 1992), rather than studying the phenomenon within contexts where it is already taking place. In this study we address this gap by exploring the experiences of female Canadian athletes who compete in integrated wheelchair basketball.

The integration of AB participants into wheelchair basketball is actively encouraged, supported and accepted in all Canadian domestic leagues. According to the national governing body's website, "Wheelchair Basketball Canada believes in a policy of inclusion, meaning able-bodied participants and athletes with a disability play alongside each other at the domestic level" (Wheelchair Basketball Canada, 2010, Frequently Asked Questions, para. 1). There are no official statistics on the number of AB athletes, however, in 1992, Brasile stated that of the 1,135 Canadians taking part in wheelchair basketball, approximately one-third were AB.

Within the Canadian context, reverse integration occurs within an adapted version of wheelchair basketball's international classification system. According to International Wheelchair Basketball Federation (IWBF) classifier, Anne Lachance (2010):

Classification is the process by which a team's total functional potential on the court is leveled off with respect to its opponent. It is a functional evaluation taking into consideration each player's ability to perform skills specific to the sport of wheelchair basketball...In Canada, classifications are closely based on the international classification system and range from 0.5 to 4.5. Lower class athletes are more limited in their functional skills. Athletes assigned higher classes have few if any limitations. The total number of points on the court assigned for each of the five players may not exceed 14 points at any one time in most divisions (“Process of Classification” para. 3).

The Canadian classification system differs from that of the IWBF in that there is no limitation on who can play the sport. Unlike international athletes, Canadian domestic athletes are not required to be *classifiable*, that is, they need not meet the IWBF’s criteria for minimal disability.¹ Within Canada, therefore, *classifiable* athletes (class 0.5 to 4.5) are eligible to compete internationally and *unclassifiable* athletes (class 4.5, often termed *AB*) can only compete domestically. As much as possible, we have incorporated this context-specific language into our research and writing.

Based partially on the Canadian popularity of reverse integration, some scholars have theorized about its potential merits and faults within an American sporting context. Brasile (1990, 1992), for example, argued that reverse integration can serve to promote a better understanding of the actual abilities of people with disability and create an equitable platform for socialization and competition. Furthermore, he suggested that including athletes without disabilities can encourage the growth of wheelchair basketball, as it has done in Canada, creating more teams, more competition and a greater range of opportunities to take part. Similarly, Depauw (1997a) supported reverse integration because of its potential for rendering the disabilities of athletes less visible in relation to their athletic accomplishments. Thiboutot et al.

(1992), by contrast, argued that reverse integration furthers the view that wheelchair sports require AB athletes to legitimize them, and that it ultimately limits competitive opportunities for athletes with disabilities. Likewise, Lindstrom (1992) argued that AB participation would eventually lead to the loss of identity for athletes with disabilities. Regardless of its potential merits and faults, however, Thiboutot et al. (1992) argued that all decisions about implementing reverse integration should be reserved for the sport's athletes: the athletes' perspectives should be paramount.

This athlete-centered focus was embraced by Medland and Ellis-Hill (2008) in their recent study on reverse integration. Through the use of a questionnaire, AB athletes and athletes who experience disability from Canada, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and the United States were asked about their reasons for participation and about their perceptions of AB involvement in wheelchair sport. Results revealed that friends and/or relatives were pivotal in engaging AB athletes in wheelchair sport, who then continued their involvement because of opportunities for strong athletic competition. It is worth noting that the majority of the study's participants were in favor of reverse integration, citing benefits such as greater competition, growth of the sport, and increased public awareness.

While it is critical that research in this area takes into consideration the experiences of many different kinds of athletes, some categories of athletes generally have far fewer opportunities to have their voices heard and their experiences considered. As Olenik, Matthews, and Steadward (1995) argue, "women with a disability aspiring to high levels of sports competition often face double discrimination associated with disability and gender" (p. 54). This occurs within the context of sport participation, but also within the context of sport research,

where women athletes who experience disabilities continue to receive very limited attention (DePauw, 1997b; Hardin 2007; Olenik, 2003).

One exception is Hardin's (2007) exploration of the intersection of gender and disability in the lives of elite female wheelchair basketball players. By way of interviews, participants shared that sport and its associations had "lessened the stigma of disability in their everyday lives" (p.51). While disability was acknowledged as central to participants' self-perceptions, a sporting identity appeared to provide partial relief from the stigma of disability, but conflicted with the desire to meet gender norms of femininity. The female athletes in Olenik et al.'s (1995) study, spoke about the importance of participatory and competitive opportunities, sustaining participation, acceptance of self and by society, and interpersonal and institutional support. In speculating about the lack of representation of women in disability sport, the authors called for their purposeful inclusion in research as a critical opportunity to empower and "bring the voice of the female athletes with a disability to public consciousness" (p.57).

In addition to the two research gaps outlined above: (a) lack of athlete-centered research examining reverse integration and (b) the need to include the voices and experiences of female disability sport athletes, researchers have also called for increased scholarly attention to the psychosocial characteristics of athletes with disabilities in integrated and segregated sport contexts (Sherrill & Williams, 1996). Athletic identity is part of a multidimensional approach to self-concept. It is defined as an individual's identification with the role of athlete and his or her dependence on others for acknowledgement of that role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). It is positively associated with developing a salient sense of self, improvements in sport performance and increased motivation to engage in sport, but negatively associated with exclusivity of identity (Brewer et al., 1993). Research has demonstrated that individuals with

disability who compete in sport do identify with the role of athlete (Groff & Zabriskie, 2006; Martin, Adams-Mushett, & Smith, 1995). Participation in disability sport and strong athletic identity have been associated with reducing the stigma of disability (Hardin, 2007), increasing levels of self-acceptance (Olenik et al., 1995), increasing levels of sports engagement (Groff & Zabriskie, 2006), and high levels of competitiveness and motivation (Martin et al., 1995). Similarities and differences between athletic identities of athletes with and without disabilities have also been reported (Groff & Zabriskie, 2006; Tasiemski, Kennedy, Gardner, & Blaikley, 2004). However, to date, there is no research on how reverse integration affects the athletic identities of disability sport athletes.

The purpose of our study was to investigate the phenomena of reverse integration in wheelchair basketball from the perspectives of classifiable women athletes. Specifically, we used athletic identity, as a conceptual framework, to illuminate issues of reverse integration in wheelchair basketball and to examine the impact of AB inclusion on the athletic identities of participants. It is critical to investigate the experiences and athletic identities of these women, we argue, because their insights may help us to work towards the promotion and growth of disability sport in a way that legitimizes the performances and perspectives of these athletes.

Method

Design

We employed a collaborative research design to explore reverse integration in wheelchair basketball from the perspectives of classifiable women athletes. As Patton (2002) points out, there are different degrees of collaboration and variations in collaborative approaches and labels. For the purpose of this study, collaborative research was defined as the exchange and application of etic (*outsider*) and emic (*insider*) perspectives and knowledge throughout the research

process. The primary players in this collaboration were the first and second authors. The outsider was a researcher in the field of APA with research interests and experience in inclusion, disability sport, and psychosocial theories of self. The insider was a competitive, classifiable female wheelchair basketball athlete who was also a graduate student with research interests in disability sport and social theory. Through this collaboration, we are responding to the call for greater involvement of people who experience disability, as research collaborators, in the field of APA (Bredahl, 2008; DePauw, 2000). In addition, we chose an idiographic and exploratory approach, using qualitative methods. This approach provided opportunities for classifiable women athletes to have their voices heard on issues of importance to them (Olenik et al., 1995).

Participants

We used the purposeful sampling strategy of criterion sampling to identify and recruit participants who had in-depth experience with the phenomenon central to this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). This process was facilitated by the insider-researcher. Criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet a particular criterion (Patton, 2002). The inclusion criteria for this study consisted of: (a) being female, (b) being classifiable according to the IWBF's classification criteria, (c) being over the age of 18 years and, (d) having playing experience at a competitive level in wheelchair basketball. Competitive was defined as sustained involvement in national tournament competition. Nine female, classifiable wheelchair basketball athletes between the ages of 22 and 55 years, mean age 34.6, with playing experience at the competitive level, agreed to be interviewed for this study. Participants self-identified as having a variety of disabilities including: paraplegia, quadriplegia, spina bifida, polio, degenerative osteoarthritis and ligament laxity. Participants had functional classifications ranging from 1.0 to 4.5.² Playing experience ranged between 3 to 25 years with an average of 12.6 years. Ethics approval for this

study was obtained from a University Research Ethics Board. Given the insider's involvement in wheelchair basketball, study participants were also informed of her role as a researcher on the study. Only participants for whom informed consent was received took part.

Data Collection

The data for this study were triangulated. Triangulation involves substantiating evidence through the use of various sources, methods, researchers and theories (Creswell, 2007). Three different methods were used to gather information for this study. Specifically, data were collected using a measurement scale, interviews, and reflective notes.

Measure. The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993) was used to collect information from participants about self-perceptions of athletic identity. Although differences in the factor structure of the AIMS have been reported (see Groff & Zabriskie, 2006), we opted to use the four factor structure based on its use in disability sport studies (Martin, Adams Mushett, & Ecklund, 1994; Martin, Ecklund, & Mushett, 1997). The four factor AIMS contains 10 items with 4 subscales that assess self-identity (e.g., I consider myself an athlete), social identity (e.g., Other people see me mainly as a athlete), exclusivity (e.g., Sport is the most important part of my life), and negative affectivity (e.g., I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport) (Martin, et al., 1994). This measurement tool has demonstrated adequate construct validity via factor analysis and internal consistency (Martin et al., 1997; Martin et al., 1994). The AIMS scale was employed as part of the interview; participants were asked to read and respond to each item aloud. Although participants responded to questionnaire items using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*), items were ultimately used to structure questions around the impact of reverse integration on their athletic identities. The purpose of the scale was not for response quantification, but as a starting point for discussion.

Interviews. The interviews were performed by the outsider-researcher and consisted of two phases. In the first phase, the AIMS items were used to introduce and guide questions related to the impact of AB inclusion on athletic identity. After the response to the level of agreement with each questionnaire item, follow-up questions were used to explore initial item responses in the context of AB inclusion in wheelchair basketball. In the second phase of the interview, a series of open-ended questions were asked in order to allow participants to share their more general perspectives, thoughts, feelings and experiences of reverse integration.

To ensure the questions were applicable and effective in eliciting conversations about the topics of interest to this study, a pilot study was conducted with the insider-researcher, who had not participated in the creation of the original questionnaire probes. After this point in the study, the insider became an official collaborator and additional questions were added to the second phase of the interview. Interviews were digitally audiotaped and took on average 40 min, 6 s.

Field notes. At the end of each interview, the interviewer recorded her impressions of the interview and her initial thoughts about data analysis. These notes enabled the researcher to revisit the interview during analysis and to verify data interpretation (Mayan, 2009). The notes also served as a check system for interview quality, allowing the researcher to reflect on various aspects of the interview such as rapport building and content coverage (Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

The data were prepared in the form of verbatim transcripts. A thematic approach to examining the data was carried out using content analysis. Within this process, primary patterns in the data were coded and categorized by examining the data in segments, by question, line by line and as a whole in order to develop, explore, and interpret the relationships between and within themes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Mayan, 2009). Both inductive and deductive

strategies were employed; discovering themes and employing an existing framework were both part of the analysis process (Patton, 2002). The initial analysis of the data was performed independently by the two collaborators in order to capitalize on their different backgrounds and areas of expertise. After the initial analyses, meetings were held between the collaborators to discuss the data and compare analyses, ultimately leading to mutually agreed-on themes.

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness is critical to qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). According to Guba (1981) there are 4 major concerns related to establishing the trustworthiness of naturalistic research inquiries: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The credibility of this study was achieved through the triangulation of different data sources, peer debriefing, corroboration coherence and a pilot study. Prolonged engagement in the wheelchair basketball community was also achieved given the insider's background. The use of thick description and purposive sampling contributed to transferability. Dependability was accomplished by maintaining an audit trail of decisions made throughout the research process. Finally, confirmability was established through data triangulation, reflective notes, and independent coding.

Results

The overarching theme of this study was best encapsulated by one participant's rhetorical question, "*What's the difference?*" This question repeatedly emerged as participants spoke, on the one hand, about experiences where differences between classifiable and unclassifiable athletes were apparent and, on the other hand, about instances where any difference was denied. At times, participants questioned us or themselves about who, exactly, qualified as an AB. As one participant asked at the beginning of her interview: "I guess I should ask right now when you

mean AB would that be somebody with a knee injury, would they still be disabled...?” Another participant asked, toward the end of her interview, “You mean having an AB instead of like a classifiable 4.5?” While we were careful to specify that AB referred to players not classifiable internationally, interpretations of able-bodiedness varied widely, not only from our own, but also between and even within participants’ accounts. We further discuss this question of “What’s the difference?” throughout each of our three sub-themes: (a) *athlete*, (b) *team*, and (c) *outsiders*.

Athlete

Questions in phase one of the interview, in particular, elicited discussion about the impact of including AB players on participants’ self-perceptions in the athletic domain. All participants indicated a positive association with the role of athlete. These responses were based primarily on holding performance goals, a commitment to training, competing at a high level, and considering wheelchair basketball as critical to daily life. One participant shared, “I’m training and competing, national and international level. I’m somewhat gifted with sport and I work at it.” Competing at the national level was also salient for another participant who said, “I do lead a healthy lifestyle, I mean I exercise a lot, I’m very into being physical, I know I’m very strong and I’ve worked out tons over the years, trained hard, I was on the national team.” Seeing oneself as an athlete was not dependent on elite participation for all players, as illustrated in the following quote: “I’m not an elite athlete but I do take wheelchair basketball very seriously. It’s not just a hobby for me, it’s a passion.”

When asked about the impact of AB players on these self-perceptions, only one participant indicated that her view of self was negatively influenced. Upon further exploration it became apparent that this view was tied to her own lack of opportunities to gain sports skills throughout life compared to many unclassifiable athletes, whom she perceived to have had more

sports experience. In contrast, a number of athletes shared that competing with AB players enhanced their athletic identities and abilities. According to one participant: “the inclusion of AB athletes raises the level of athletic ability across the whole league, so if we do include AB athletes then the disabled athletes have to become more athletic and better at what they do.”

Another participant who attributed her strong association with the role of athlete to the participation of AB players shared: “the opportunities I’ve had to develop myself as an athlete and my own skills have been directly related to having AB participation, just having the numbers to compete against and competing against their skills.”

The importance of being viewed as an athlete, not as an athlete with a disability, was communicated by a number of participants. For example, one participant stated, “don’t put me above because I’m disabled, put me above because I’m a really good athlete.” Reverse integration appeared to facilitate these athletic perceptions, as several athletes spoke about the irrelevance of disability in the context of wheelchair basketball. In the words of one participant:

It makes me feel like I’m included in something, something that doesn’t have separation in it. So it’s something inclusionary in the fact that it doesn’t matter whether you have a disability or not, you’re there because you’re an athlete and you love to play.

While identifying as an athlete challenged the relevance of disability for the majority of participants, those who used wheelchairs in their daily lives clearly saw a difference between how they experienced injury compared to their AB teammates who, according to one participant, “[could] go and do a running sport” if injured. The importance of this difference is highlighted in the following quote: “it’s a quality of life issue for me. If any AB athlete injures their shoulder, well, it’s not that big of a deal....for me it’s a huge issue cause that means no transfers, no wheeling.”

Akin to participants' perceptions of themselves as athletes versus athletes with disabilities, players also challenged the perception of wheelchair basketball as a disability sport. This was clearly illustrated by one participant who said, "wheelchair basketball is a sport on its own, not a disabled sport." According to another participant, when AB players are exposed to wheelchair basketball it "legitimizes it as just a sport for them....they do find out that people in wheelchairs are athletes and that it is a sport." In making the case for wheelchair basketball as a sport, participants often referred to the wheelchair as a piece of sports equipment. "A lot of people think that the sport, myself included, is more a sport rather than a disabled sport and I think that people should be looking at it, that it's not a wheelchair, it's a sports chair," shared one participant. In the eyes of several players, the wheelchair served as an equalizer between AB players and those with disabilities. One participant expressed, "you're all on the same level playing field cause you're all in a wheelchair." Or, in the words of another athlete: "you're on the courts and you're all in chairs, it doesn't matter if you're AB or not." This was a particularly salient theme when participants compared classifiable and unclassifiable athletes with the same 4.5 classification. One athlete responded, "I think you'd be the same functional ability in the chair, what's the difference? You often have the same equipment." These sentiments were echoed by another participant, who confidently claimed: "A 4.5 classifiable, or a 4.5 AB, same functional ability in the chair."

Interestingly, despite claiming *no difference* between classifiable and unclassifiable 4.5s domestically, and despite supporting reverse integration in nearly every other context, the majority of participants felt that unclassifiable athletes should continue to not be permitted to compete at the Paralympics. As one participant put it, "[the Paralympics] is where we showcase our disabled athletes, right?"

Team

In response to questions about reverse integration, participants frequently spoke about the various roles that classifiable and unclassifiable athletes assumed on and off the court, as part of the team. On the court, AB athletes appeared to play a critical role in sustaining and promoting the growth of wheelchair basketball, for women in particular. “I don’t know where the sport would be, really if we didn’t have AB players,” said one participant. Another shared, “It’s different from male to female...just in the numbers....the male wheelchair basketball world there’s lots of people available to play the sport...but if you’re in the female sport...it’s very limited by the numbers.” Similarly, another participant expressed that “if there were no AB women especially involved then the program probably wouldn’t be as successful.”

Off the court, AB players also performed various team-related roles. “They’re organizers, they’re volunteers, they’re board members, they’re very involved,” said one participant. AB players had a facilitative role off the court particularly when it came to tournament play and travel, explained another participant: “[they are] hauling wheelchairs, you know helping with transfers...loading the bus with the wheelchairs and the bags.” One participant spoke about feeling more comfortable because of the presence of AB players, particularly when she was new to wheelchair basketball:

AB players do a really good job of keeping their eye out for guys like me [lower class] who like will picture themselves in the snow bank...they’ll make a point of picking us up or they’ll offer...to put our chairs in the back of the vehicles.”

On court roles for athletes also differed in relation to functional ability and player positions. In reference to the critical role that players with lower classifications played in the performance of AB athletes, one participant said:

The primary scoring usually is coming from the AB athletes. Look, who's setting those picks, who's making those passes, and who's getting them inside and you know, pulling down the boards and doing all those other things, I mean it's the little guy that gets the big guy there.

Several athletes also discussed their individual roles in the team's success and how to best utilize their strengths relative to functional ability. For example, one participant shared:

I need to be faster, I'm not so concerned about being big in sport, being tall I mean, obviously I'm a very short person so I need to utilize what I have and that is speed, an outside shooter and ball handling skills.

Most participants viewed the classification system as crucial for providing everyone with, in one participant's words, "a place on a team where they have value." This valuing of all players was also achieved through strategies and tactics that equalize functional abilities, and the developed understanding of the different abilities of teammates. As one participant explained: "the individuals on their team will all have preferences and they'll all have limitations...whether they're AB or disabled and that just part of becoming a team member, is learning what those preferences and limitations are."

Being part of 'the team' also involved assuming roles as 'teacher' and 'learner.' Participants spoke often about learning new skills and strategies from AB players. "I've just had a lot of really good mentors who are AB athletes who came to wheelchair sport after a pretty good college or even sort of adult recreational league but they were able to share those skills with me" said one participant. Another participant expressed that one of her most positive experiences in wheelchair basketball was when an AB athlete took the time to teach her. She said, "there's one person, that was AB when I first started and I learned so much from her and

she was so willing to teach everybody, you know and share her knowledge. That was a great experience.” Finally, one participant shared her introduction to wheelchair basketball through AB players when she was newly injured and adjusting to disability. She said:

They [AB players] would strap me in this chair and strap me up and keep passing me the ball...and I was like how pathetic like they couldn't get the ball really above my head like my balance was so bad. They kept trying, kept trying, kept trying....They kept feeding me all this garbage 'oh your going to be amazing! You're going to be amazing!

While participants recognized and valued the knowledge AB players brought to the team, reverse integration also provided opportunities for AB athletes to learn from classifiable athletes. For example, one participant said, “a new AB, like they don't have the chair skill so you know you gotta help them. They might not have the speed or you know you might have to help them too.” On court, classifiable athletes also taught AB players about the different functional abilities of their teammates. As one participant explained:

It's a huge learning curve, just the sort of physical nature of the disability and what a Class 1 or high para versus, you know, someone with CP or an amputee, just what their physical potential may be. Things like balance and range of motion, it takes a while to learn what each athlete is capable of.

The steepest “learning curve” for AB players, according to participants, was learning about and understanding the off-court issues relating to disability. As one participant said:

The social parts of living with a disability they start to learn and understand and appreciate more....Just things like transferring...accessibility issues...things like pressure sores and bathroom bowel routines, they're exposed to all of it.

In the words of a classifiable participant who was not a full-time wheelchair user:

It's hugely eye opening about accessibility [and] people's attitudes ...you travel with a group and if you're the person standing that's who's going to get asked the questions. It's like the people in the wheelchairs can't answer a question or you know don't have an opinion...so it's very eye opening...about attitudes about disabilities and accessibility

Another participant shared that she felt AB players gained a better understanding of, not only the trials of disability, but also what those who experience disabilities are capable of: "they just get a better understanding of what we go through in a day but they also realize that there's a lot that we can do and that they hadn't thought before."

An aspect of wheelchair basketball that was apparent in all of the interviews, was that reverse integration provided an opportunity for all of the athletes to share knowledge about both sport and disability. It is worth noting, however, that the learning did not only occur between ABs and classifiable athletes; classifiable athletes also taught and learned about sport and disability from each other. As one participant explained: "It really helped me gain my independence ...I got stronger and I mean hanging around...the lower class players...[they] taught me how to do things...I probably owe most of my recovery to teammates."

Outsiders

In addition to sharing how reverse integration influenced them individually and as a team, participants also spoke about the misconceptions people outside of the sport held about disability and reverse integration. As one participant said:

I do have some friends and family members that because I'm in a wheelchair don't believe that I can ever be an athlete...if I was an NHL goalie, it still wouldn't matter, I'd still be, you know, the girl in the wheelchair and wouldn't be an athlete to them.

The relevance of the wheelchair to outsiders of the sport was also illustrated by another participant, “if you are out on the street on an average day, the first thing people would see would be the wheelchair, but when you’re on the court and you’re all in chairs, it doesn’t matter if you’re AB or not.” Participants also claimed that the integrated environment of wheelchair basketball led to integrated social relationships between people of varying abilities. An integration that, according to participants, is not common outside of this community. In one participant’s words: “if you’re not in that wheelchair basketball community sometimes it’s harder to make friends in the AB group...because people want to separate themselves from other individuals with disabilities.”

According to participants, outsider beliefs about disability also led to misconceptions about the roles of AB athletes in wheelchair basketball. As one participant said laughing, “when other people see us they assume all the ABs are like our helpers.” Although some participants saw AB inclusion as legitimizing the sport in the eyes of outsiders, many felt that negative stereotypes of disability, as lack of ability, were more influential. As one ambulatory participant shared, “I can walk...they think I’m AB so...first they ask if you’re a coach...no, no, I play...wow isn’t that cheating or how do the people in wheelchairs feel about that?” Similarly, another participant indicated that there is “a perception that they’re [ABs] taking away opportunities or court time.” Whatever the reaction, athletes read these outsider attitudes to integration as belittling the abilities of athletes who experience disabilities. This is illustrated through sarcasm in the following quote: “because we can’t be contributing members of society or a sport, or a society or an association of our own. We are not capable.”

Participants were also critical of outsider perspectives coming from leadership positions within the sport itself. This was especially evident around the issue of who should be making

decisions about the direction of the sport. As one participant said, “the IWBF is full of referees, none of them are disabled. But they are now making the decisions about the direction that the sport goes. So that’s hard to take when they don’t even play the sport.” When asked who should make these decisions, most participants echoed one participant’s claim: “anybody who’s involved in the sport who’s an athlete.” When asked for clarification, all participants clearly articulated that ABs are among the athletes who should be making the decisions.

Despite the frustration of many participants at outsider perspectives, a number of participants recognized the opportunities that reverse integration provided to challenge some of the assumptions of outsiders. As one participant said, “I think most of them [outsiders] feel it’s unfair that AB’s play and that it’s stealing time from people who are disabled...and I think that’s just partly our job to inform them.” The opportunities to change outsider thinking were further illustrated by a participant who said, “even when they [outsiders] come in not knowing anything about people with disabilities...it is still a positive thing cause that’s just one more person...learning about somebody in a chair and what they’re capable of doing.”

Discussion

Exploring the perspectives of classifiable women athletes about AB inclusion in wheelchair basketball brought to light various issues relating to athletic identity, reverse integration, disability, and research in APA. In this discussion section, we will first discuss how our results relate to existing literature on athletic identity and reverse integration. Second, we will discuss what our results suggest about the categories of disability and able-bodiedness. Last, we will discuss our collaborative research design and the resulting study, articulating its limitations and suggesting its implications for future research in the field of APA.

Athletic Identity

Athletic identity refers to an individual's identification with the role of athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). Consistent with the literature, participants in this study expressed strong affiliation with the role of athlete as exemplified through high levels of training, competition and sport commitment (Groff & Zabriskie, 2006; Martin et al., 1995). In line with Groff and Zabriskie's (2006) prediction, it appeared that level of sport engagement was a stronger contributor to athletic identity than the presence of disability. Most participants identified that taking part in competitive and elite wheelchair basketball led to stronger associations with the role of athlete. This was further illustrated in the context of reverse integration; participants shared that AB involvement contributed positively to their athletic identities because it increased the competition level of the sport by creating more teams and opportunities to compete against a greater range of highly skilled players. This resonates well with what was hypothesized by Brasile (1990) and reported by Medland and Ellis-Hill (2008) and Olenik et al. (1995). These findings are also in direct contradiction with criticisms put forward by Thiboutot et al. (1992). That participants claimed themselves to be athletes, not disabled athletes, further reinforced the findings of Olenik (1995) and Hardin (2007). Although participants identified with the role of athlete, they felt that others, outside the wheelchair basketball community, viewed them as disabled. This finding lends support to our use of the four-factor structure of athletic identity for athletes of disability sport (Martin et al., 1994), since it helps to demonstrate the apparent differences between perceived self identity and social identity outside of the sporting community.

Disability and Ablebodiedness

As articulated through the overarching theme "what's the difference," and within our three sub-themes athlete, team and outsiders, our results demonstrated how the seemingly static

and mutually exclusive categories of disability and able-bodiedness were consistently being negotiated and/or challenged by our study's participants. The most consistent challenge to the common notion of disability-as-difference emerged within the sub-theme of the individual. It emerged through the participants' clearly articulated affirmations that wheelchair basketball is a sport, not a disability sport, and that their sport wheelchairs are pieces of sports equipment, rather than markers or tools of disability. These claims are consistent with Brasile's (1992) idea that disability sport might be better understood as wheelchair sport, and that wheelchairs, within such sports, can take on "the aura of a piece of equipment" rather than being understood as "a means of confinement" (p.303). Within the on-court contexts, most athletes framed the wheelchair as a tool for equalization and inclusion, rather than a symbol of inequality, segregation and difference. The sports wheelchair, and the sport itself, helped to produce a space where participants understood the disability/able-bodied dichotomy as far less obvious and, according to some participants, invisible and irrelevant. This sentiment echoes DePauw's (1997a) understanding of reverse integration in wheelchair basketball, which she claims to be an example of the "(in)visibility of disability in sport," a concept that she described as: "the point at which athletes with disabilities are visible in sport as athletes or a time when an athlete's disability is no longer visible" (p. 425). This *(in)visibility* of disability was often characterized, both in DePauw's work and in the interviews, as a strongly positive and progressive phenomenon.

Although many of the participants' experiences resonated with the concept of the *(in)visibility* of disability, there were also a number of situations in which differences between disability and able-bodiedness became more meaningful or apparent. In our initial coding, these differences were taken at face value. Upon more detailed readings, however, we realized that participants' use of the terms *AB* and *disabled* did not always conform to either our stated

definitions, or to the ways that the same participants used the terms within conversations about different contexts. In other words, even when participants experienced differences between able-bodiedness and disability, these differences were negotiated as unstable, shifting, contextual, and at times confusing, categories that, often, did not fall along the lines of sports classification. For example, many athletes articulated a difference in the ways they experienced injuries, as compared to their AB counterparts. In this context, the participants who used wheelchairs outside of sport appeared to associate able-bodiedness with the ability to move around without a wheelchair. The consequences of injury were perceived to be much more significant for these participants than for athletes whose daily mobility would not be compromised as seriously from an injured shoulder or elbow. Within this context, a significant proportion of classifiable athletes were interpolated as able-bodied, including some of the athletes that we interviewed. By contrast, questions about other, more on-court, contexts resulted in an apparent shift in the criteria of able-bodiedness. Sometimes participants' use of the term *AB* seemed to match our stated criteria of the athlete's international unclassifiability. Other times, the term *AB* seemed to refer, more generally, to athletes with a combination of higher classification, higher skill level, more prior sport experience, and/or more height than the participant who was being interviewed. In some cases, participants used the names of specific athletes in their stories about ABs: athletes that the insider-researcher was able to identify as not only being classifiable, but sometimes, as being classified as low as 3.5 or 3.0 (as a result of amputation or neuropathy, for example).

This shifting and contextual understanding of disability lends credence to some of the more *social*, rather than *biological*, understandings of disability in APA (Shogan 1998; DePauw 2000). As Shogan (1998) argues: "the claim that disability is socially constructed includes a recognition that disability is not a static, ahistoric notion" (p. 273). Within social models,

disability is understood to not (only) reside within the physiology of those whom we deem to *have* disabilities, but (also) to be embedded within (and reproduced and/or transformed through) our ever-shifting social contexts, such as our cultural understandings (e.g., attitudes) and social practices (e.g., sports), and the resulting physical artifacts (e.g., sports chairs) and interpersonal relations (e.g., between teammates). Due, perhaps, to the emphasis on ABs (rather than on disability) in our interview questions, our results suggest a similar yet more rarely discussed corollary to the social model discussions in APA, to date; our participants' experiences suggest that able-bodiedness, too, can be usefully understood as a shifting, contextual and socially constructed phenomenon that has significant implications for the athletes of disability sport.

The contextual understandings and importance of the AB/disabled divide also emerged in the sub-theme of the team. Participants referred the idea of *no difference*, in the team context, and spoke in terms that harmonized with the equal status language used by Brasile (1990). Participants characterized both themselves and AB players as athletes, teachers, learners, and advocates, lending further support to earlier research on the multiple roles taken on by athletes in women's disability sport (Olenik et al., 1995). Although participants claimed that all athletes played these multiple and interdependent roles, some of these roles were articulated as being more commonly linked to specific classifications or to ABs in particular. Within this subtheme, as with the previous subtheme, the meaning of AB appeared to vary greatly between participants and contexts. Regardless of how AB was defined, it is worthy of noting that, similar to Brasile's (1990, 1992) hypotheses and to Medland and Ellis-Hill's (2008) findings, the vast majority of participants experienced reverse integration as conducive to supportive social relationships, positive team dynamics and meaningful athletic opportunities. In particular, our findings support Brasile's (1990) hypothesis that "such integration will lead to a deeper commitment to as well as

a keener insight into the needs of the disabled individual in regard to the attitudinal and architectural barriers” that they face (p. 4).

The contexts in which the disability/ability divide became most relevant and unpleasant for participants was in their interactions with outsiders to the wheelchair basketball community. Despite viewing themselves as athletes, many participants felt that outsiders tended to view them as disabled *rather than* as athletes. This outsider conception of disability, according to participants, lead to the common misconceptions that ABs (articulated, here, as those whom outsider’s viewed as able-bodied) were involved in wheelchair basketball either as helpers or as cheaters. Although frustrated by these misconceptions, participants viewed reverse integration as a way to begin conversations with outsiders about stereotypes of disability, and thus, as a vehicle for educating the public and advocating for themselves. These findings lend further credibility to Medland and Ellis-Hill’s (2008) earlier findings that reverse integration was seen, by athletes, as a way to change common perceptions of disability.

Although most of our findings aligned more with the works of Brasile (1990, 1992) and Medland and Ellis-Hill (2008), rather than that of Thiboutot et al. (1992), there is one aspect of the outsiders theme that strongly resonated with one of the latter authors’ arguments. The majority of participants strongly believed that athletes should be the major decision makers within their sport, and about the use of reverse integration, specifically. When asked *which* athletes should have the decision-making authority, however, participants strayed significantly from the position taken by Thiboutot et al. Whereas these authors believed that the decision should be that of athletes with “a disabling condition” (p. 288), the vast majority of participants were clear that *all* athletes, both AB and classifiable, should be the primary decision makers. Rather than being considered part of the outsiders, AB athletes were very strongly identified by

the participants as fully legitimate insiders to the Canadian women's wheelchair basketball community.

Collaborative Approach and Future Directions

The collaborative approach we employed in this study involved the exchange, consideration and application of etic and emic perspectives. In discussing ethical aspects of research in APA, Bredahl (2008) explored some of the benefits and challenges of involving people with disabilities in APA research. In this section, we respond to some of these benefits and challenges, and provide suggestions for future research.

While the research question was developed prior to the insider's involvement as a collaborator, her involvement in the pilot study, and the debriefing and discussion that followed, confirmed the relevance of the question and the methods used to access information about reverse integration. These discussions also led to a broader set of interview questions to explore additional issues relating to reverse integration. The insider acted as a gate-keeper to the wheelchair basketball community, which resulted in a very strong study participation rate (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Her relationships with study participants laid a foundation for trust, which the outsider-researcher was able to use her interviewing skills to build upon. In the subsequent data analysis and discussion, both collaborators were able to draw on her respective areas of expertise. Of note, the insider's knowledge of the wheelchair basketball community led to more accurate interpretations in instances where participants referred to individuals not known to the outsider. On the other hand, both the outsider's training and distance from the community lead to insightful follow up questions that significantly strengthened the resulting data. A potential criticism of the insider's involvement as a collaborator is around the issue of bias (Bredhal, 2008). As qualitative researchers, we agree that biases are always inherent in research,

irrespective of disability. We also concur with Bredahl that the insider's background gave her a unique position from which to facilitate participant recruitment, to contribute to the development of relevant research questions, and to contribute insight into "the participants' situations and statements" (p.263). We tempered this bias through adherence to the standards of rigor established within the traditions of qualitative research. Likewise, a potential criticism of the outsider's involvement in the research could be her lack of insider knowledge, an issue rarely acknowledged in APA. Again, we relied on standards of rigor and our collaboration to preserve the quality of our study. Ultimately, our collaboration increased the relevance, richness and potential contribution of this study to the field of APA.

In considering future directions for research in APA, we strongly advocate for the type of collaborative approach we employed in our study. This type of approach can lead to the exploration of new topics of research that are most relevant to those who experience disability (Bredahl, 2008). This approach also resonates extremely well with the philosophy of inclusion put forward in the field of APA. We encourage researchers to listen to the perspectives of their participants, and to adopt the use of methods that facilitate this type of meaningful knowledge generation. As it relates specifically to the findings of our study, and to future work in the area of disability, we, as researchers, might benefit from no longer assuming that *able-bodied* and *disability* are self-explanatory categories that can be left undefined and unproblematized in our participant descriptions, interview questions, and transcript analyses. We might benefit from asking ourselves the complex and, at times, perplexing question, "What's the difference?"

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Footnotes

¹“For acceptance into the IWBF a wheelchair basketball player must meet the following criteria: 1. A wheelchair basketball player is unable to run, pivot or jump at a speed and with the control, safety, stability and endurance of an able-bodied player. 2. A wheelchair basketball player has a permanent physical disability in the lower limb(s) which can be objectively verified by acknowledged medical and/or paramedical investigations such as measurement, x-ray, CT, MRI etc.” (<http://www.iwbf.org/index.php/iwbf-regulations/f-classification>).

²In order to protect the anonymity of study participants from this small wheelchair basketball community, we have not provided a table that cross-references disability, classifications and ages.