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**“I Think I Became a Swimmer Rather than Just Someone with a Disability Swimming  
Up and Down”: Paralympic Athletes Perceptions of Self and Identity Development**

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### **Abstract**

*Purpose:* The purpose of this study was to explore the role of swimming on Paralympic athletes' perceptions of self and identity development. *Method:* A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was taken. During semi-structured interviews five Paralympic swimmers (aged 20-24 years) were asked questions about their swimming career, perceptions of self, integration, and impairment. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. *Results:* An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis<sup>1</sup> yielded three superordinate themes: a) 'One of the crowd'; none of the participants viewed themselves as disabled, nor as supercrips; these perceptions stemmed from family-, school-, and swimming- related experiences, b) 'Becoming me'; participation in swimming facilitated self- and social- acceptance, and identity development, and c) 'A badge of honour'; swimming presented opportunity to present and reinforce a positive identity. *Conclusions:* Swimming experiences enabled the participants to enhance personal and social identities, integrate through pro-social mechanisms, and to develop a career path following retirement from competition. *Key words:* Paralympic sport, lived experiences, congenital disability, qualitative research.

42 **“I Think I Became a Swimmer Rather than Just Someone with a Disability Swimming**  
43 **Up and Down”:** Paralympic Athletes Perceptions of Self and Identity Development

44 Identity, typically considered as sets of meanings applied to the self in a social role or  
45 situation<sup>2</sup>, is said to represent an individual’s self-understanding, self-objectification, and/or  
46 integration of information about the self.<sup>3</sup> It has also been proposed that identity is the  
47 organisational process that links how people act and behave to their social world.<sup>4</sup> Identity as  
48 a concept is also used in various ways (such as exploring the salience of particular identities)  
49 to highlight different facets of human self-definition<sup>5-7</sup>, and as such, has also become a  
50 prolific, and contested, topic of research.<sup>5</sup>

51 Within sport, researchers have generally adopted a dispositional approach to identity,  
52 and have explored a range of affective, cognitive, behavioural, and personality correlates of  
53 domain-specific self-identity.<sup>8</sup> One particular type of domain-specific identity that has  
54 increasing research interest is ‘athletic identity.’<sup>9,10</sup> Athletic identity (i.e., a dispositional  
55 perspective to identity)<sup>11</sup> has been considered as the extent to which individuals identify with  
56 the role of an athlete. Athletic identity is considered to be both a cognitive structure (schema)  
57 and a social role<sup>10</sup>, whereby it consist of a (a) a cognitive structure that affords clarification of  
58 information, coping across different situations, and influences behaviour, and (b) individual’s  
59 perceptions of others and of social roles<sup>12</sup> assigned to the identity. In other words, individuals  
60 might make inferences regarding perceptions of their commitment to an activity, their ability  
61 to engage in the activity,<sup>13</sup> and a commitment to ideological and occupational options most  
62 consistent with their needs, values, skills, and interests.<sup>14</sup>

63 Typically athletic identity is considered as being pervasive, and as creating positive  
64 impressions regardless of sex, age, or activity level – and ‘able-bodiedness.’<sup>15-17</sup> An  
65 individual may describe oneself through multiple identities represented by specific self-  
66 attributes (e.g., I am athletic) or specific social roles (e.g., I am a cyclist, I am a swimmer).<sup>18</sup>

67 These multiple possible identities are typically organized in a “salience hierarchy” whereby  
68 the more important identities receive greater investment of time and effort in order to ensure  
69 enactment<sup>18</sup> of those identities. How athletic identity is constructed within population of  
70 athletes with disabilities, is still relatively unknown. Equally, research investigating the  
71 influence of sport on disabled athletes sense of self and identity development is limited.

72 What is known, is that sport as a domain has been identified as a venue that can  
73 facilitate opportunity for favourable self-perceptions to develop among individuals with  
74 disabilities.<sup>19-21</sup> To date, research has demonstrated positive correlations between athletic  
75 identity and positive perceptions of physical ability amongst children with visual  
76 impairment,<sup>22</sup> equally strong athletic identity between athletes with disability when compared  
77 to those without a disability<sup>23</sup>, and confirmed that athletes with disabilities strongly  
78 considered themselves as athletes, and have many sport-related goals as wells as a strong  
79 desire to achieve these goals.<sup>24</sup>

80 However, researchers have urged that more exploration be conducted with regard to  
81 the more research to fully understand the social-psychological characteristics of athletes with  
82 disability.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, disabled athletes have been under-represented in sport psychology  
83 research, with a focus only appearing within the past 10 to 20 years.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, research  
84 focusing specifically on athletes with congenital disability is rare. The authors were able to  
85 trace only one paper<sup>27</sup> exclusively focused on athletes living with congenital disability,  
86 highlighting a significant gap in the literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to  
87 explore the role of swimming on Paralympic athletes’ with congenital disability sense of self  
88 and identity development. Specifically, the exploratory research question was: How did  
89 swimming influence identity development and maintenance?

## 90 **Method**

### 91 **Participants**

92           Following institutional ethical approval participants were purposively sampled.  
93   Details of the study were made available, and subsequently five swimmers (male  $n = 2$ ; age  
94    $20.5 \pm 3.5$  years; female  $n = 3$ ; age  $24.3 \pm 6.7$  years) consented to participate. All participants  
95   lived with a congenital physical disability, and had been categorised into particular swim  
96   events via the International Paralympic Committee Classification Code 2007, within groups  
97   S1–S10 (swimmers with a functional physical disability e.g., amputees, cerebral palsy,  
98   multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injury). All participants had represented Great Britain at the  
99   London 2012 Paralympic Games. References to particular disability locations, and  
100   competition class, were removed from the study to protect participants' anonymity.  
101   Pseudonyms were allocated to further protect the anonymity of participants.

#### 102   **Interpretative framework**

103           Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis IPA<sup>1</sup> was used as the analytical framework  
104   to facilitate understanding of personal accounts of particular events and topics; i.e., lived  
105   experience.<sup>28</sup> IPA researchers assume a connection exists between individuals' accounts,  
106   cognitions, and physical states that interpretation of accounts can yield.<sup>1</sup> IPA is founded  
107   upon phenomenology and symbolic interactionism.<sup>1</sup> That is, IPA allows researchers to  
108   explore how individuals experience, and thus make sense of, their personal and social worlds.  
109   Thus, the aim of IPA is to understand lived experience, rather than the aim of producing  
110   objective accounts of the topic under investigation.<sup>29</sup> IPA is also considered to be a co-  
111   constitutive process<sup>29</sup> in that, whilst it aims to explore a participant's view of the world, it  
112   also incorporates an 'insider's' perspective of the topic under investigation.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the  
113   researcher's own interpretation of meanings elicited within analyses is central to an IPA.<sup>31</sup>  
114   Whilst participants are attempting to understand their world, the researcher is attempting to  
115   understand the participant's world.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, whilst the intention is to get as close as  
116   possible to the participant's life world, it is acknowledged that this cannot be achieved either

117 directly, or completely. Similarly for symbolic-interactionists, the meanings which  
118 individuals ascribe to events are of central concern, but it is again acknowledged that those  
119 meanings are only obtained through a process of social engagement, and a process of  
120 interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Hence, to a large extent, interpretation is dependent upon a researcher's own  
121 perceptions of a participant's life world.<sup>28,29,32</sup>

## 122 **Procedure**

123 Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with participants being asked to  
124 talk generally about: (a) their experiences of growing-up with a disability, and (b) the  
125 personal and professional impact of swimming. A question schedule was developed in order  
126 that what the research team thought/hoped might be discussed was reinforced.<sup>29</sup> To enhance  
127 the process a structure based upon Patton<sup>33</sup> was developed whereby the background,  
128 experience and behaviour, opinions and values, and emotions of participants were sought.  
129 Flexibility in the questions was maintained to facilitate potential variety in participant  
130 responses.<sup>32</sup> Interviews were audio-recorded, and transcribed at the semantic level (e.g.,  
131 spoken words, laughter, and significant pauses) as deemed appropriate for IPA.<sup>29</sup>

## 132 **Analysis**

133 The focus of analysis was upon the meanings participants ascribed to topics,<sup>34</sup> and  
134 therefore upon developing thick description<sup>35</sup> regarding how the participants thought about,  
135 and dealt with, complex issues.<sup>1</sup> Each transcript was analysed following detailed  
136 guidelines.<sup>1,36, 28,37</sup> Transcripts were transferred to the middle of a three-column table, and  
137 were read several times to increase familiarity. Notes were made in the right-hand column  
138 regarding issues that seemed interesting or significant. Analysis guidelines<sup>28</sup> suggested  
139 noting associations, repetitions, contradictions, connections between participants' speech, and  
140 the use of language. Furthermore, the guidelines suggested making preliminary  
141 interpretations, and noting initial theme titles that reflect the emerging essence of topics in the

142 left-hand column of the table. Emergent themes were then clustered according to apparent  
143 connections, and related back to transcripts to check the fit with the participants' accounts.  
144 This resulted in development of a set of super-ordinate and sub-themes. This process was  
145 completed for each transcript to afford contextually interpretative analyses,<sup>28</sup> and resulted in a  
146 master list of themes being produced for each transcript with each list then being compared to  
147 others. New, and repeated, themes were thereby identified within each account that had an  
148 alternative meaning for participants. These processes continued iteratively, and were  
149 combined with the writing-up process<sup>1</sup> thereby enabling movement from a descriptive  
150 thematic analysis to a contextually interpretative reading of each case.<sup>28</sup> The data from the  
151 interviews offered particularly rich description; therefore in order to select quotes for  
152 inclusion the notion of 'searching for gems'<sup>38</sup> was used. Smith<sup>38</sup> describes 'shining',  
153 'suggestive', and 'secret' gems as being utterances which present significance  
154 disproportionate to their size.

### 155 **Trustworthiness**

156 The trustworthiness of qualitative research might be judged by its credibility,  
157 transferability, confirmability, and dependability.<sup>39</sup> For example, an audit trail was  
158 maintained relating to the procedures and data analysis allowing the coherency,  
159 confirmability, credibility and dependency of argument to be examined.<sup>39</sup> Adding further to  
160 the credibility of the study was the saturation of data evident during analysis. Interpretation of  
161 the data was conducted by all authors resulting in reinterpretation of the links between several  
162 themes. Also, participants were sent drafts of these interpretations for comment with respect  
163 to whether these fairly and accurately represented their perspectives and practices.

### 164 **Attending to the researcher's presence**

165 Reflexivity has become increasingly associated with qualitative research as a means  
166 of accounting for the researcher's presence in qualitative research.<sup>40</sup> Personal, and

167 epistemological, reflexivity have been described as introspection whereby researchers explore  
168 the impact of their own experience and understanding in interpreting the phenomena under  
169 investigation.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, a process of self-dialogue and discovery was undertaken based  
170 upon our reflections, thought processes, and intuitions via reflexive diaries and discussion.

## 171 **Results and Discussion**

172 This section presents, and discusses, the key elements of three related themes which  
173 emerged from the data. These were: (a) one of the crowd, (b) becoming me, and (c) a badge  
174 of honour. Each theme is illustrated by verbatim extracts from the interviews.

### 175 **One of the crowd**

176 Participants described experiences, linked to swimming, which seemed to depict  
177 processes of normalisation whilst growing-up: “my mum was a swimmer, and my brother and  
178 I started lessons, just like any other child” (Christy; living with Cerebral Palsy). There was  
179 frequent comparison of their childhood to a stereotypical social reality, thereby positioning  
180 swimming as an everyday component of growing-up. Swimming had been the expected thing  
181 to do. This lends support to previous research<sup>42</sup> which indicates that environmental and  
182 family demographics are more significant determinants of participation than the  
183 characteristics of disabled individuals themselves. Vince (living with Osteogenesis  
184 Imperfecta) had “completed that bit” in order to please his parents, and also explained that  
185 swimming had been a rational choice of activity: “The doctor said to keep fit this is a good  
186 idea sort of thing, non-contact, didn’t break anything, that sort of thing” (Vince). Despite  
187 such cautions Vince had never considered himself as disabled, and it seemed that his belief  
188 stemmed from his parents having treated him as a child rather than as a ‘condition’. He  
189 offered a positive self-appraisal that resisted social stereotypes of disability by positioning his  
190 circumstance as innocuous:

191

192 I was never brought up being told I was disabled, like there was never an issue with  
193 oh you can't do that because you've got this. Like for example, if I was messing  
194 around and fell over and broke something, then it's like idiot child, what you doing?  
195 You know you shouldn't be doing that instead of screaming at me you can't do that.  
196 They let me learn, so I don't consider myself any different from other people. For us  
197 having a disability is like someone having a certain type of hair, but if you had only  
198 ever seen one colour of hair, you would be like what's that sort of thing. You just talk  
199 about it, I mean, on the team we all take the mick out of each other all the time. No-  
200 one's particularly fussed by it and we just get on with it. (Vince)

201

202 As reported by participants in previous research e.g.,<sup>5</sup> impairment was not  
203 considered important to Vince's sense of self, and conceiving of life without an impairment  
204 seemed like a 'phenomenological impossibility'. However, in making sense of disability, and  
205 restructuring normality<sup>5</sup>, the maintenance of self, and other, seemed important. For example,  
206 making disability visible via humour contributed to a sense of mutual understanding,  
207 acceptance, affiliation, empathy, and enhanced self-congruence within a select sub-culture.  
208 Vince's ascription of disability to fundamental biological factors negated any alternative  
209 explanations of difference, and seemed normalising and stoic. Yet, he offered a downward  
210 comparison between himself and others in his environment:

211

212 There are people on the team that are missing both their arms, so they eat with just  
213 their elbows and put the fork in their mouth that way really, and I don't understand,  
214 like I don't understand how people with one arm can tie shoelaces, in my head it  
215 doesn't work, yet every day I see it, and it's like, how are you doing that? So, it's just  
216 normal. (Vince)

217

218           In contrast to some individuals with acquired disability,<sup>43</sup> Vince did not base his self-  
219 concept upon a former self. Nor did he place an emphasis upon the body as tragedy, nor as  
220 limiting future possible identities, as depicted within the medical model of disability. Instead,  
221 Vince's conceptualisation of disability appeared to correspond to benchmarks of current and  
222 future functionality ('bodily capital')<sup>44</sup> of the swimming-body as providing meaning within,  
223 and beyond, swimming: "My whole self-perception is probably based around swimming, so,  
224 because if I didn't have swimming I wouldn't know what to base if I'm doing well or not on"  
225 (Vince). Thus, Vince's strong internalised identity standard<sup>45</sup> provided a holistic sense of  
226 being 'fit for purpose'. Hence, competitive swimming provided an arena in which to  
227 objectively gauge his-self. In contrast, Tony commented on others (non-swimmers) with the  
228 same disability (as his own) who did not use their limbs, and consequently experienced  
229 further disability and pain.

230           The participants described a watershed, during early teenage years, following which  
231 they began to train and compete seriously. For Anne (living with a missing limb) this  
232 watershed signalled the end of an existential quest and the emergence of a tangible sense of  
233 belonging in, and contribution to, the world: "As I got into swimming more and more, I felt  
234 like I had a place more and more" (Anne). Perceptions of integration often stemmed from  
235 attendance at mainstream schools where experiences had generally seemed positive.  
236 However, owing to a lack of specialist facilities integration had been the only option. Tony's  
237 reflexive account highlighted 'enforced' integration/denial of opportunity in swimming:  
238 "Even now I'm just doing public swimming, and it's a case of because I know what I'm  
239 doing with swimming, I just get in and everyone's just like well yeah, I can swim kind of  
240 thing *thank you*" (Tony).

241 Tony' circumstances however seemed beneficial in that focus was largely upon his  
242 swimming behaviour, as opposed to embodied experiences, ensuring that his athletic identity  
243 and biography remained intact.<sup>46</sup> Self-identity might rest upon what people are actually able  
244 to do,<sup>5</sup> and not how they do it. As such, "identity is disembodied".<sup>5</sup> Certainly, Tony was keen  
245 to prove potential stereotypical judgements as unwarranted, and (as with Vince) to reject  
246 notions of difference on the basis of functional capability and not physical difference:

247

248 You got to know the regulars, or they got to know me to the point where they would  
249 always sort of say hello and stuff, and that was really positive, so I was known as the  
250 swimmer and not that kid with the disability. I'd always be conscious like if I went  
251 swimming that people would stare because even if it was just family fun time, people  
252 always do stare, but then, I know now, if I get into the pool and people stare, I could  
253 swim up and down and people wouldn't stare anymore because they would realise  
254 that I can do it just as well. As soon as I get into the water I'm no different to anybody  
255 else. Once you're in the water, then you're in the water and just swimming. (Tony)

256

257 Disabled individuals have been described as being disqualified from full social  
258 acceptance.<sup>47</sup> This disqualification is perhaps evident in the lack of participation in sport  
259 wherein disabled bodies perhaps do not meet expectations of an ideal sporting body/identity;  
260 and therefore warrant lack of participation. Many individuals with disability also experience  
261 low performance expectations.<sup>42</sup> However, a more positive impression of disability is  
262 generated when individuals are physically active, perhaps via a judgement of utility that adds  
263 to a sense of normalisation.<sup>48,49</sup> Tony's pro-social approach to dealing with perceived  
264 negative reactions was supportive of this notion, and his (autonomous swimming)  
265 performance re-presented his body (to the public) as a possibility not a problem.<sup>50</sup> He did not

266 require, nor seek assistance, and so considered that he did not present an anomaly nor a  
267 burden. Thus, once immersed in the water he countered a poolside ‘disablist socio-spatial  
268 environment’<sup>51</sup>, and transcended his conspicuousness and self-consciousness. Whilst  
269 swimming Tony’s disability was masked by the water thereby shifting focus from disability  
270 to competency, such distraction processes are especially powerful when people are not  
271 expected to perform well in certain activities.<sup>52</sup> Thus, Tony’s body had ‘something to teach’;  
272 his body was communicative<sup>50</sup> in conveying possibility. Therefore, swimming provided a  
273 means of demonstrating competence and efficiency; both of which are ‘self-profitable’ traits  
274 linked to perceived ability.<sup>49</sup> The need to be self-sufficient was apparent in Michaela’s  
275 account of ‘policing’<sup>53</sup> other swimmers:

276

277 I think I proved that most people with disability can fit in somewhere as long as  
278 they’re willing to work as well as everyone else is. I know we had a few people and  
279 on the way, they were like I’ve got a disability, you owe me something, and it was  
280 like no, kind of go away, you’re here to work, you’re here as a swimmer. (Michaela)

281

282 Disabled athletes consider that their commitment to sport is what defines them as an  
283 athlete, regardless of disability status.<sup>46</sup> However, despite proving her competency in the pool  
284 Christy spoke of challenges she experienced on joining a new club. When asked for  
285 clarification by the interviewer (“you had to persuade the coach to let you in”?) Christy  
286 replied: “Yeah because he was a little bit worried that I’d be in the way, like taking up room  
287 for his other swimmers who were much faster than me”. Stereotypes position disability in  
288 such a way that behaviours different to those ascribed by a stereotype are considered unusual.  
289 Therefore, an athletic identity is hard to attain when those with a disability do not fit the  
290 model of a ‘normal person’ or that of a ‘normal athlete’.<sup>54,55</sup> Whilst Michaela described

291 striving to achieve her best as a swimmer, this did not appear to be a compensatory strategy.  
292 Nor, as reported by Berger<sup>56</sup> with regard to wheelchair basketball players, did she wish to be  
293 viewed as a ‘supercrip’<sup>57</sup>: “At the end of the day, we’re still doing the same things and we  
294 still all just want the same things” (Michaela).

295 In summary, the participants’ accounts highlighted the importance of swimming with  
296 regard to facilitating social and self-acceptance, and a sense of identity. Similar to previous  
297 research<sup>5</sup> their life-course was depicted as being no different to that of other people, as having  
298 extended far beyond medical model notions of disability, and as having led to an ongoing  
299 enhancement of quality of life.

### 300 **Becoming me**

301 The notion that living with congenital disability is easier as opposed to living with  
302 acquired disability is a myth.<sup>58</sup> Certainly most of the participants described existential  
303 challenges akin to those described by individuals with acquired disability. For example,  
304 Michaela spoke of difficult on-going self-rationalisation in order to find an acceptable  
305 explanation for her circumstance:

306  
307 In childhood and early teenage years, I struggled to realise what disability meant,  
308 partly because I didn’t want to accept it and didn’t want to be different to my brother  
309 and sister and friends, but actually, it got to a point where I couldn’t keep up with  
310 them any longer, and thought hang on a minute, who am I? I was quite fortunate, I  
311 had a couple of really good physios and a really good consultant that said if you don’t  
312 accept it now, you’re not going to be able to do anything later on, that’s part of the  
313 reason I use a wheelchair, because if I don’t preserve the mobility I’ve got now, I’m  
314 not going to have anything when I’m older. (Michaela)

315

316           Michaela was aware of unavoidable progressive physical decline and restriction, and  
317 her difference precipitated an existential search for her-self. Her account of early life  
318 experiences seemed to epitomise a future ‘feared self’<sup>59</sup>, and a discernible causality for her  
319 disability was unavailable which highlighted an inability to make sense of circumstances.  
320 However, despite the daunting prospect of using a wheelchair doing so had afforded greater  
321 predictability<sup>60</sup> and independence, facilitated opportunities for “learning who I am myself”,  
322 and thus offered greater self-congruence through comparison of past, present, and possible  
323 future selves. Far from presenting a pessimistic, and disabling, prognosis of future  
324 functionality her on-going use of the chair appeared to offer an optimistic alternative. As  
325 reported in other research, Michaela had become ‘en-wheeled’ and subsequently ‘newly  
326 abled.’<sup>61</sup>

327           Anne (living with a missing limb) also described early difficulties in understanding  
328 her disability, and her account resonated with rejection and disassociation:

329

330           There wasn’t any reason for it, doctors didn’t know. When I was younger, I was  
331 embarrassed and I didn’t like to be different. I felt people watch me and kids would  
332 be like ah mum look she’s got one arm. I’ve had an operation, I thought I looked  
333 cuter, but that is the only disability I have, like it didn’t affect any other areas. (Anne)

334

335           Although still uncertain as to why ‘it’ had happened to her and despite her early pre-  
336 occupation with, and dislike of, her appearance Anne had felt able to exert some level of  
337 influence. Manipulation via surgery had facilitated a sense of adjustment, and presented  
338 opportunity for compromise in terms of achieving a more acceptable appearance and sense of  
339 self. Yet, an element of incongruence, sensitivity, and vulnerability still remained:

340

341           When I first went to boarding school, only the swimmers for the first six weeks  
342           realised I was missing an arm because I'd wear my prosthetic so often that no-one  
343           knew, and then when the rumour went round, people were like she's missing an arm,  
344           oh my god, I had a bit of an issue with the maths teacher once who was asking me  
345           why I wasn't using my arm, I was like I don't have one, and I took my arm off.

346           (Anne)

347

348           Anne's attempts to remain inconspicuous (and pass as 'normal') had failed through no  
349           fault of her own, and being 'discovered' had seemed uncomfortable. In contrast to other  
350           participants, Anne's sense of self appeared to be dominated largely by the perceptions she  
351           believed others (outside of swimming) had of her at that time. In contrast to the other  
352           participants, Anne had attempted to comply with what she believed others considered as  
353           normal; and account for something that was 'missing'. However, the prosthetic had not  
354           functioned in the manner she had hoped, and instead had become a troublesome encumbrance  
355           upon which much of her self-concept had been based. This 'enforced' ineptitude adds to  
356           previous research wherein participants report physical changes as leading to a sense of  
357           ineptitude.<sup>46</sup> Attempting to 'beat' or 'fight' disability might lead to an inability to re-embody  
358           the self. However, for Anne, the abandonment of the prosthetic, and her involvement in  
359           swimming, had facilitated a positive change in her self-perception:

360

361           I'd always worn a prosthetic unless I swam or slept, so going to swimming at first was  
362           a bit of a challenge because people were just so open about their disability, and like  
363           obviously when you swim you can't hide it, so that was a bit of an eye opener for me.  
364           I kind of learnt to like my disability and that people didn't care, especially when  
365           you're in a disability environment. (Anne)

366

367           This unaccustomed norm of visible disability appeared to have offered comfort,  
368 opportunity for adjustment, and an improved body-self relationship. In contrast to ‘dys-  
369 appearance’ of the body<sup>62</sup> due to over-emphasis upon an impairment, Anne’s body had ‘re-  
370 appeared’. Abandonment of the prosthetic had seemed an empowering release, and had  
371 afforded repair and reintegration of the self. Through swimming, and positive reinforcement  
372 from significant others, Anne seemed to have resisted a debilitating sense of difference and  
373 instead had achieved a desired validation. Vince also described swimming as pivotal in the  
374 understanding and acceptance of his current self: “It (*swimming*) gave me the confidence to  
375 recognise that I’ve got a disability, embrace it rather than saying I don’t want to do that  
376 because I’m disabled. Now I understand it” (Vince). Disabled individuals often have a  
377 limited range of identities to choose from because of societal labels and ascriptions, and  
378 whilst identity exists at personal and societal levels it impacts most when it is self-defined as  
379 an individual experience.<sup>63</sup> Understanding disability therefore appeared to relate not only to  
380 their physical nature but also to the establishment of an acceptable and worthwhile place in  
381 the world. Swimming appeared to have presented opportunity for definition, and in some  
382 cases repair and redefinition, of the self. It appeared that the participants had been able to  
383 reclaim their body from the rights of public scrutiny and judgement.<sup>64</sup> Swimming had  
384 provided a benchmark which had facilitated development of a holistic self-concept and  
385 transcendence of negative stereotypical beliefs (including their own) regarding disability.

386           The participants’ self-acceptance had also involved self-presentational concerns in a  
387 positive manner: “I kind of quite like having big shoulders because it shows that I’ve worked  
388 hard at my sport and like, this is what I’ve got to show for it” (Christy). Tony’s account  
389 illustrated a transformative process, and gradual ownership of an identity that involved him  
390 mutually in physical, psychological, and social terms:

391

392 I think I became a swimmer rather than just someone with a disability swimming up  
393 and down. So I'd say someone that could achieve something, because I was doing  
394 sort of the same training and I had the same mentality as some of the able-bodied  
395 swimmers, you know you put the hours in, I was a swimmer. It wasn't because I was  
396 disabled that I was achieving, it was because I was a swimmer and I had put that work  
397 in. (Tony)

398

399 Individuals who have accepted and integrated an acquired disability are said to focus  
400 predominantly on present behaviour and goals, competition, and performance as opposed to  
401 dwelling on a loss of self.<sup>46</sup> This focus was also evident amongst the current participants, and  
402 appeared to facilitate the development and maintenance of an athletic identity. Michaela's  
403 emotional account served to illustrate change in her self-worth through swimming, and to  
404 depict the disavowal of an unassuming self that appeared to offer little hope:

405

406 I was a very shy and quiet little girl who was just, I don't know, I was sort of  
407 participating in swimming, I'd try and pass everything at school and was involved  
408 with stuff. But I wouldn't say I was actually achieving in anything particularly, sort  
409 of the average student, I was always tired trying to keep up with all my friends so it  
410 was that little bit harder to do everything so, I think when I started achieving stuff,  
411 that changed and I changed, I became a lot more confident, I could speak for myself.

412 (Michaela)

413

414 As a child Michaela had considered herself as having been "alright; if anyone asked".  
415 From being unassuming and not wanting, or feeling worthy of, attention Michaela described

416 how her confidence had blossomed. Similarly to participants in previous research<sup>54</sup> sport had  
417 enabled Michaela to ‘come out of her shell’. Whilst only able to speculate on a life without  
418 swimming there was consensus amongst the participants regarding the debt owed: “I don’t  
419 know what I would have achieved without it, because having that positive self-perception of  
420 myself meant that I’ve realised I can do other things” (Christy).

421 In summary, a disabled body and impairment were not defining features in an  
422 emergent sense of self. The participants appeared to have experienced an on-going discovery  
423 and maintenance of the self, as opposed to a singular moment of ‘rebirth’ or ‘remaking’ the  
424 self.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the current self was not limited by a desire to resurrect a previous self.

#### 425 **A badge of honour**

426 The participants described a noticeable change in public attitude towards disability  
427 following media coverage of the London 2012 Paralympic Games which they perceived as  
428 having showcased disability sport. For Tony, disability appeared to have since become a  
429 badge of honour:

430  
431 It almost makes having one arm an amazing thing. It’s got a use in a way, it provides  
432 me with a career, it’s not just like oh missing a limb, that’s it. Someone told me the  
433 other day that they had a little one who was just walking down the street and saw  
434 another disabled person in the street, and I think their prosthetic leg was on show, and  
435 they said look Mum it’s a Paralympian, so they instantly made that connection that  
436 actually, it’s not a disabled person but it’s a Paralympian, that they can do something  
437 great, so that’s a really good shift I think, as long as the parents respond to that and  
438 don’t keep telling the child don’t look at them or whatever. (Tony)

439

440           It has been argued that disability might represent a badge of pride<sup>66</sup>, and unanimity.  
441 This appeared to be the case for the participants and, far from distancing themselves from a  
442 disability identity, they appeared to gravitate toward an athletic identity and its associated  
443 characteristics (whilst not wanting to be viewed as ‘super-crips’). Thus, in contrast to previous  
444 research,<sup>5</sup> the participants indirectly ‘subscribed’ to disability in a manner that they found  
445 empowering. Tony’s comment supports previous research that an athletic stereotype might  
446 reverse prevailing negative perceptions of disabled individuals<sup>67</sup> as the apparent admiration  
447 perhaps indicates the presence of positive competency-based perceptions.<sup>49,67</sup> Tony continued  
448 to describe how being part of a select sub-culture helped to normalise his appearance, and  
449 increase his sense of pride:

450

451           Your disability is pretty visual in swimming, but I kind of learnt to be proud of it, and  
452 when there’s a whole eight of you that have got the same disability standing behind  
453 the block, people aren’t just watching you. If I was in town, people notice, but when  
454 there’s eight of you, they don’t notice, they see you as a whole group, so when I race,  
455 I’m kind of part of a group not an individual. (Tony)

456

457           Thus, benefits appeared to arise from both a demarcation of the individual and the  
458 group. Being exposed within such an environment with similar others is something that has  
459 been proposed as an intervention for “normalisation”<sup>15</sup> wherein a group-identity is formulated  
460 which leads to the establishment of a sense of belonging. Despite the multifaceted nature of  
461 disability<sup>68</sup> many disabled individuals still feel a sense of commonality with each other which  
462 produces what is commonly called “disability culture”.<sup>69</sup> This protective culture, borne out of  
463 common experience<sup>70</sup>, assumes a common voice to address societal barriers.<sup>71</sup>

464 Anne took pride in considering that her participation in the Paralympics had  
465 contributed to changes in media and public perception, and a possible shift from viewing the  
466 participants as legitimate athletes and (as with Tony) not as ‘supercrips’.<sup>72</sup>

467  
468 I think that was one thing the Paralympics achieved this time round in London was  
469 that people realised it wasn’t a Paralympic games, it was just athletes doing things a  
470 different way. Swimming has given me the opportunity to represent my country on  
471 numerous times. I mean, to walk out in front of 17,000 people at this last games, all  
472 shouting for you, that just pretty much says it all. (Anne)

473  
474 Success in swimming had led to an increasing visibility for the participants which  
475 afforded interaction with the “normal world” .<sup>47</sup> Instead of hiding their disability the  
476 swimmers appeared able to present favourable holistic images of themselves which provided  
477 a catalyst for empowerment in other contexts.<sup>73</sup> For example, Anne described how her  
478 performance in swimming, her corresponding growth in confidence, and a strong sense of  
479 athletic identity and accomplishment had led to a career beyond competitive swimming:

480  
481 Because I’ve achieved in swimming, that opened other doors, because I was known as  
482 a swimmer and not someone that needed lots of adaptations because of my disability.  
483 So, then because I’ve been able to do that, I’d had a better perception of myself  
484 because it’s been able to open other doors, so it’s been a sort of self-perpetuating  
485 thing. (Anne)

486  
487 Similarly, in a study using a life history narrative approach, a Paralympic wheelchair  
488 tennis player described how an acquired spinal cord injury had presented a dilemma. The

489 athlete appeared to conclude that their achievements gained from playing wheelchair tennis  
490 outweighed the disadvantages of disability.<sup>74</sup> The current participants also seemed to believe  
491 that significant changes regarding what is required for competitive success had materialised  
492 during their swimming careers. Ironically, Vince believed that such changes had further  
493 rendered invisible particular population groups. However, he was clear in his assessment of  
494 what is required to become an elite athlete, and in his acceptance of himself as a Paralympian.

495

496 I would say certainly pre-96, there was kind of you're doing disability sport, you can  
497 be a Paralympian, whereas now it's blimmin hard work and the majority of  
498 Paralympians are doing it as a full time job, they're on lottery funding. There's  
499 certainly swimmers and cyclists that are doing the training of an able-bodied  
500 swimmer, so they're not just doing a couple of hours a week and turning up and  
501 winning, it used to be, in the very early days, and you could do multi-sport and all the  
502 rest of it. I'd say '96 until now, it's completely changed, it's more professionalised,  
503 it's very much like the Olympics, it's very elite. (Vince)

504

505 In summary, the participants had described perceptions of personal and societal  
506 transformation that defied tenets of a medical model of disability. Far from representing a  
507 substantial and long-term negative impact on their ability to undertake normal daily activities  
508 disability had instead facilitated a sense of ability, competence and pride.

509

### **Conclusion**

510 The purpose of this study was to explore the role of swimming on Paralympic  
511 athletes' sense of self and identity. Overall, the accounts indicated that the participants did  
512 not view themselves as having lost some-thing, as being disabled, nor as supercrips.<sup>72</sup> Yet,  
513 difference, was not, and could not be denied both whilst growing-up, and later in the

514 possibility of a hierarchy relating to ability and work ethic within Paralympic swimming.  
515 Similarly, the participants believed that public focus had shifted from disability to proficiency  
516 in an activity within which they had not been expected to excel. Therefore, their swimming  
517 careers have directly supported proposals within progressive models of disability (e.g. the  
518 Affirmation Model of Disability)<sup>75</sup>, and further eroded medical discourse, by indicating that  
519 participation in swimming facilitated overall quality of life by enhancing movement  
520 capability, and instilling and maintaining an identity which provided a sense of acceptance,  
521 purpose, and pride. As a career choice swimming had also facilitated independence, the  
522 development of social networks and, for some, the establishment of a career upon retirement  
523 from competition.

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