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Carla Filomena Silva and P. David Howe

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# The (In)validity of *Supercrip* Representation of Paralympian Athletes

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## **Abstract**

This article provides a critical overview of the viability of the “supercrip” iconography as an appropriate representation of Paralympic athletes. It focuses on its validity as a vehicle for the empowerment of individuals with impairments both within the context of elite sport and broader society. This type of representation may be seen by the able moral majority as enlightened. However, supercrip narratives may have a negative impact on the physical and social development of disabled individuals by reinforcing what could be termed “achievement syndrome”—the impaired are successful *in spite* of their disability. The authors will focus on the implications of the use of language and images embodied in supercrip iconography, relying on examples of two European Paralympic awareness campaigns disseminated through mainstream media.

## **Keywords**

Paralympics, supercrip, disability, media representations, empowerment

## **Introduction**

The Olympics is where heroes are made. The Paralympics is where heroes come.

Steadward & Peterson, 1997, p. 8

Traditionally, disability has been perceived as “nothing more than a problem” (Stiker, 1999; Titchkosky, 2007). This understanding of disability is often legitimized through the use of apparent positive narratives of people who “overcome” their own personal tragedy. For Kama (2004), “supercrip” applies either to a person with

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disability who performs ordinarily in his or her daily life or to people who really excel. Berger (2008) presents supercrips as “those individuals whose inspirational stories of courage, dedication, and hard work prove that it can be done, that one can defy the odds and accomplish the impossible” (p. 648). For Hardin and Hardin (2004), “This model involves presenting the disabled person as heroic by virtue of his or her ability to perform feats normally considered not possible for people with disabilities or by virtue of the person living a ‘regular’ life in spite of a disability (Clogston, 1991)” (5.3). In the context of this article, supercrip implies a stereotyping process that requires an individual “to fight against his/her impairment” in order to overcome it and achieve unlikely “success”. Drawing upon Stuart Hall’s (2003) work, we articulate this stereotyping process as *Othering*.

Frequently in discourses surrounding disability, people with impairments become “super” in contexts where an able-bodied individual would be just an ordinary person. Often the awarded praise stems from the assumption that people can actually do something positive, “despite” their disability. Social expectations are so low for individuals with a disability that any positive action may induce praise from others. When it comes to disability, the baseline reference from which mainstream society assesses the worthiness of an event or performance is normally very low. What is judged as “impossible” for people experiencing disabilities is often based on distorted assumptions and is not a realistic assessment of such individuals’ capabilities. Supercrip narratives can be considered to be an expression of society’s low-level expectation placed upon people with disability, which ultimately perpetuates the understanding of their existence as a “problem.” In presenting disability as “nothing but” a problem, these narratives limit the possibilities of living with impairment in any other way (Morris, 1991). The unquestioned positiveness of “overcoming” narratives is inscribed in the inviolable package of things naturally taken for granted in a world ruled by an able-bodied majority (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). These overcoming tales are spread in and through all walks of life included but not limited to education, politics, welfare, economics, religions, and sport. We feel it is important to question whether praise is always positive. Can expressions like “Paralympics: Where the heroes Come,” which is used in the title of a book (Steadward & Peterson, 1997), or a term like “superathlete,” be detrimental to the people they intend to empower?

Disability sport provides a context that may significantly influence the social understanding of disability, due to the disruptive potential (DePauw, 1997; Hargreaves, 1994, 2000; Howe & Jones, 2006) generated from the perceived tension between disability and the practice of elite sport (Brittain, 2010). However, the positive potential of the relationship between sport and disability can only be enacted through representational practices consonant with the “empowerment” promise of Paralympic Movement. In this sense, it is crucial not only to analyze, discuss, and assess the responsibility of certain modes of representation in the maintenance of disability as a “marginal” reality but also to creatively think of representational practices as a political stage for social change. A shift in attitude, beliefs, and worldview is deeply connected with contemporary ways of writing and reading disability (Titchkosky, 2007, 2009).

For this transformation to occur in the world of sport it is crucial to identify the pervasive, unreflective beliefs and distortions surrounding disability and its representations in the world of sports, of which supercrip narratives are an example.

Acknowledging the misrepresentation of disability in sport, this article will initially explore the process of constructing “Others,” which we term *Othering*, displayed in traditional disability modes of representation. This Othering will be connected in the second part of the article with Stuart Hall’s (2003) theorization of stereotyping. We will further elaborate on the disruptive potential inscribed in disability sport and the Paralympic Movement and how modes of representation may develop or hinder this potential. In doing so, we will draw upon examples from extensive media campaigns developed in Portugal, the Portuguese Super Athlete Project marketing campaign for Paralympics (2000, 2004, 2008), a responsibility of the now-defunct Portuguese Federation for Disability Sport and also the United Kingdom’s Channel 4 “Freaks of Nature,” the marketing campaign for the 2012 Paralympics. These particular examples were selected because they clearly invoke some of the stereotyped features of supercrip imagery; they both reach wide audiences and exemplify national realities familiar to the authors.

As the 14th Paralympic Games approaches, anyone who observes media discourse related to Paralympic athletes will be confronted by the recurrence of supercrip characters in narratives about Paralympians. Although research in media and Paralympics is still relatively scarce (e.g., Chang, Crossman, Taylor, & Walker, 2011; Howe, 2008a; Schantz & Gilbert, 2001; Schell & Rodriguez, 2001; Smith & Thomas, 2005; Thomas & Smith, 2003) and further research on the topic is needed, this article does not intend to address this lacuna. Instead, by offering an account of the processes at stake when disability is connected with “super” and by critically evaluating its implications, it intends to offer theoretical criteria to identify stereotyped narratives. This article ultimately emphasizes the need to critically evaluate meanings associated with supercrip imagery in media coverage of disability sport and to reflect on the possible outcomes of this type of representation. Before we get into the heart of the argument it is important to clarify terminology that may be unfamiliar to readers.

*Disability*, in this article, is understood as a comprehensive term that includes the social, cultural, and individual factors that have an impact on the experiences of people with impairment(s). A combination of these factors often restricts individual abilities as compared to the norm within mainstream population. In this sense, it becomes inappropriate to use the expression “a person with a disability,” since disability is not a personal attribute, but a multidimensional phenomenon, of which the individual physical impairment is just a constituent part. Although impairment is a biological as well as a social concept, it is also a more individualized category than disability, aligned with what Shakespeare calls a predicament: “To call something a predicament is to understand it as a difficulty, and as a challenge, and as something which we might want to minimise but which we cannot ultimately avoid” (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 63). Vehmas and Mäkelä (2009) use the concept of *brute fact* to acknowledge the organic entities, the physical base of impairment that exist prior to any statement

about them. In other words, disability is a phenomenon generated by the relationship between the brute fact of impairment and the surrounding world; as such it is shaped by personal and environmental factors. Yet none of these terms designate realities purely individual or social. They can never be categorized in absolute extremes.

*Empowerment* is another important term in this article, often used within Paralympic institutional discourses. The International Paralympic Committee (IPC, n.d.) in its *Vision, Mission and Values* uses the word “Enable”: “To Enable Paralympic Athletes to Achieve Sporting Excellence and Inspire and Excite the World.” As the IPC further specifies, “To enable: this is the primary role of the IPC as an organization: To create the conditions for athlete empowerment through self-determination” (IPC). Similarly, empowerment signifies the increasing control individuals have over their own lives, to live the type of life chosen and valued, according to practical reasonableness and in respect for basic principles of human dignity. Empowerment, the act of creating or acquiring power, implies not only freedom to live without others’ interference, but also positive freedoms, in the sense people have real valuable choices to make, are aware of them, and possess the resources for their realization. When disability is present, due to possible effects of internalized oppression (self-beliefs of inferiority, unproductivity, and dependence; Charlton, 2000), making opportunities available may not be enough because people tend to wish for less than they can be, achieve, and have. It is crucial to actively motivate people with disabilities to participate in areas where traditionally their participation has been undermined, such as sport, as it is also crucial to deconstruct those internalized, distorted self-beliefs. This conception of empowerment is strongly influenced by Amartya Sen (1999, 2009) and Martha Nussbaum (2006, 2011).

## Disability as “Otherness”

Encounters with disability normally induce emotional responses that fluctuate between repulsion and fascination. The observer preserves a safe distance in relation to the object of gaze and categorizes it as an “Other.” In between those extremes exist surprise, admiration, compassion, pity, fear, and so on (Davis, 1995; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Thomson, 1996). To interpret disability as Otherness is frequently a strategy to conceal the impermanence and fragility of observer’s own body and to reaffirm one’s “normality” by increasing distance in relation to the “outcasts.” Stiker (1999) explains this process: “Nobody wants to be the “different”; we desire similarity, and, even more, we desire identicalness” (p. 9). This general understanding reinforces disability as opposite to a well-established aesthetic/functional norm, which is itself a construction of a particular historical moment (late 18th and 19th century) linked with industrialization, the development of natural sciences, and the growing of statistics as a political device (Davis, 1995; Shogan, 1998). Moreover, some critics point out that not only is the idea of defective body socially constructed but so too is the pervasive reactions to it: “Repulsion is the learned response on an individual level that is carried out on a societal level in actions such as incarceration, institutionalization, segregation, discrimination, marginalization and so on” (Davis, 1995, p. 13). Mitchell

and Snyder (2000, p. 3) go further by affirming that disability normally marks the “baseline of cultural undesirability,” the “master trope of human disqualification,” in such a way that even other disenfranchised communities try to distance themselves from it. In their opinion, that distance reifies disability as the true “abnormality” or the true “monstrosity.” Siebers (2008) stresses the disabled person is seen as the “other other that helps make otherness imaginable” (p. 48). In sum, when the encounter between “normality” and “disability” occurs, “they” often become the “Other” in different expressions: the “freak,” the “exotic,” the “monster,” and/or, as we will argue, the “Super.”

Media representations are one of the main tools responsible for the perpetuation of social myths around disability, including its construction as Otherness. Media patterns of disability representation have been manufactured alongside an emotional “ethos” that reproduces the dominant binary abled/disabled:

Representational media secure our attention as readers and viewers in the double bind of our fascination/repulsion with physical difference. . . . We experience disability through an anticipation of our desire to “know” the secret labyrinths of difference, without significantly challenging our investment in the construction of difference itself. . . . Reader’s experience of the dual pleasures of fascination and repulsion also evolve out of an ability to leave the site of a fiction with our membership in normalcy further consolidated and assured. (Mitchell & Snyder, 1997, p. 15)

We refer to this process as “Othering”—the process of magnifying differences and undervaluing similarities. The effect is an increased distance in relation to a certain person who is emotionally and/or sociably undesirable. Language and representation are the main instruments in this process and are also the most pervasive and dangerous oppressive mechanisms for people experiencing disability (Barnes, 1992; Charlton, 2000; Longmore, 1985; Morris, 1991). Although it is difficult to provide a consensus on examples of positive representations, due in part to a multiplicity of different perspectives on disability representations (Davidson, 2008; McRuer, 2006; Siebers, 2010; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006), if we are to increase awareness of “normalizing” mechanisms, the implications of distinctive modes of illustration ought to be disentangled. In order to contribute to this aim we focus on the concept of the Supercrip, one of the manifestations of the Othering process.

## **Supercrip as a Stereotype**

*Supercrip* can be defined as a stereotype narrative displaying the plot of someone who has “to fight against his/her impairment” in order to overcome it and achieve unlikely “success.” When uncritically interpreted, this type of narrative can be regarded as positive, contesting dominant views regarding disability as “negative” and “inferior.” However, it is the negative “ethos” of disability that feeds the low expectations placed

on the individual labeled as *disabled* in a way that any achievement is easily glorified, no matter how insignificant. The difference in expectations between the “abled” and the “disabled” world is well articulated through the quote that introduces this article.

This is not to say that great achievements should not be praised and valued but that the distorted tendency to either “undervalue” or “overvalue” achievements whenever disability is present should be denounced. The irreducible individuality of disability experience means there is no standard reference for the “extraordinary” when disability is present, unless the social expectations are extremely low. Reinforcing low expectations is what makes supercrip iconography so problematic. Moreover, successes are generally judged in terms of the ability to conform to able-bodied norms: “if a person with a disability is ‘successful’, or seems to have a good life, he is seen as brave and courageous or special and brilliant. Given the intrinsic abnormality or awfulness of disability, anyone living a ‘normal’ life must be extraordinary” (Charlton, 2000, p. 52). The able-bodied majority expects those who are “different” to develop and adapt, sometimes at very high personal expense, in order to be respected as citizens of equal value (Rogers & Swadener, 2001). Overcoming disability is a very lonely task that rarely requires adaptation by the able majority but can constitute significant change for a person with impairment. It rarely invokes the learning and developing of new possibilities and alternative modes of living full lives, free of stigma, prejudice, or any sense of inferiority. The verb to “overcome” is almost exclusively conjugated in the first person (Shapiro, 1994), ignoring the complexity inscribed in disability experiences and accentuating disability as an individual matter that is personal responsibility.

In many cases, the line between an honest appreciation of inspiring achievements and the supercrip stereotype might be very difficult to draw. Not all successful stories are stereotypes. What, then, distinguishes positive, uplifting stories from supercrip narratives? This distinction can be seen to be mediated by interpretation, historical and situational context, the range of dissemination, mode of discourse, and various other circumstances. The same example can be judged differently according to all these factors. Drawing upon a social constructionist approach to representational practices, Stuart Hall (2003) provides a useful account of three mechanisms involved in stereotyping representations. They constitute conceptual criteria that can be used to identify examples of supercrip stereotyping:

*Stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes “difference” . . . another feature of stereotyping is its practice of “closure” and exclusion. It symbolically fixes boundaries, and excludes everything which does not belong. . . . The third point is that stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power. Power is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group. (p. 258, author’s italics)*

Therefore, according to Hall, a stereotype reduces complexity to simple characteristics, presenting a part as if it is the whole; presenting particular characteristics of



difference as “natural,” irrevocable, and permanent features, thus fixing a particular meaning while ignoring the ambiguity inherent to all representations. It sets apart, constructing the “Other,” and it is used in contexts of power differential. Stereotypes are imposed, instead of negotiated. Supercrrips are ripped of individuality, and, as a result, all the complex details and subtleties of their stories are undermined. Throughout a chapter entitled “The Spectacle of the Other” Hall (2003) explores some examples of how difference has been marked in sport, in relation to issues of race, for instance. Although he does not explore cases where difference is located in impairments, similar mechanisms can be identified in “supercripization” (Howe, 2008b). This connection will be illustrated by focusing on examples from Portuguese marketing campaigns for 2000, 2004, and 2008 Paralympics and from the United Kingdom’s Channel 4 campaign of Paralympics awareness entitled “Freaks of Nature,” which includes the documentary “Inside Incredible Athletes.” The selection of specific features from these campaigns does not imply that all discourses produced in these campaigns are stereotyped. Supercrip imagery is paramount in these campaigns; however, some features from both the U.K. and Portuguese campaigns could be considered more progressive representations.

In fact, although the cross-cultural analysis of representational practices around the Paralympic Games is not the focus of this article, similarities in the way supercrip narratives populate disability sport discourses as shown by the two examples highlighted here suggests that a study on the ways these athletes are represented across different cultures could provide interesting insights into distinctive cultural approaches to disability and sport.

## **Can the Paralympics Change the (Dis)ability World?**

The idea that what reality “is” is significantly influenced by the way it is represented, in an unpredictable network of connections and influences, justifies the importance of a cultural analysis of Paralympians’ representations. Although the Paralympic Games have been widely understood and promoted as potentially empowering for athletes and for people with disabilities in general, the empowerment of these populations still needs to be assessed (Gilbert & Schantz, 2008; Howe, 2008b). Nevertheless, the sporting global stage offered by the Paralympic Games is a golden opportunity to challenge hegemonic ideals of masculinity, physicality, and sexuality (DePauw, 1997). As Hargreaves (2000, p. 199) states, “They [Paralympic Games] also symbolise a challenge to ‘ableist’ ideology, a reinvention of the (dis)abled body and a redefinition of the possible.” In opposition to the “dis-abled” body, the Paralympic body presents itself as productive, functional, and efficient. A body focused on possibilities instead of limits.

Consistent, regular, and high quality exposure of images of efficient impaired bodies can strongly influence social perceptions of (dis-)ability: “These images of athletes with a disability can, and will, alter our traditional view of the normal body (bodies) and of sport and performance” (DePauw, 2000, p. 366). They can also

challenge our perception of the body, its functionality, and its role in a person's identities. Thus, the idea that the body is not only socially normalized (Elias, 1978; Foucault, 1977) but also challenges, reconfigures, and shapes the embodied world in which we live (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) legitimizes an analysis of Paralympic's representations.

Despite the obvious transgressive potential of a global event such as the Paralympic Games, inculcated perceptions of disability often jeopardize the possibility of social change. The increasing media influence and economic importance of Paralympics means, as social scientists, we should pay careful attention to the modes of representation disseminated and their possible implications. Due to the specific emotional ethos of high-performance sport, the tendency for disability supercripization may be amplified to serve interests that might not be aligned with ideals of empowerment.

### **“Superatletas,” “Incredible Athletes,” or “Freaks of Nature”**

It can be argued that discourses around elite sport have always been inflated with laudatory tones that create sporting heroes, as a strategy to keep the emotional ethos of competition high and feed the sport business industry (Cashmore, 2010). This strategy explains, in part, the recurrence of supercrip narrative in Paralympic's coverage. Whereas in mainstream sport, the heroes are a few “rare” talented athletes, in disability sport the *super* label is often used indiscriminately (Howe, 2008b; Peers, 2009). The expression “the Olympics is where heroes are made, Paralympics is where heroes come” (Steadward & Peterson, 1997, p. 8) is a clear example of this understanding.

In order to illustrate these views we focus our attention on the Portuguese Paralympic marketing campaigns (2000, 2004, 2008), “Projecto Superatleta” [Superathlete project] and on the United Kingdom's Channel 4 campaign entitled “Freaks of Nature.”

#### ***The “Superatleta” Campaign, Portugal***

The “Superatleta” campaign was a marketing project designed and developed to help support the Portuguese participation in the Paralympic Games of Sydney (2000), Athens (2004), and Beijing (2008). One of its important and distinctive features is the *Superatleta* [superathlete] logo. The first version was unveiled to the world on April 15, 1999, as part of the 2000 Sydney Superathlete campaign, a joint responsibility of the Portuguese Federation of Disability sport and the marketing agency Young & Rubicam. Against a vivid blue background, the shape of the geometric figure is the same as in superman's logo, yellow inside the red symbol surrounding a red line drawing of a wheelchair, replacing the original superman “S.” The text accompanying the logo is: “Support Portuguese superathletes.” This logo was disseminated on posters, television ads, and official documents and in the *Book of Portuguese Paralympic Mission 2004* (Federação Portuguesa de Desporto para Deficientes, 2004). *Superatleta* logo was highly successful and recognized in marketing award circles, the most significant of which was the Cannes Lyon International Festival of Creativity in 1999, in the category “Press and Poster,” a section of social causes.

*Superatleta* logo also provoked a reaction from Superman copyrights holders, the estate of Jerry Siegel (the Superman creator), and DC Comics, who stood up against this association, threatening those responsible with legal action for plagiarism. This action led the design getting more publicity. The Portuguese creators were forced to redesign the logo, which came out in a new format in 2003. In this version (see figure 1), the most direct connection with Superman symbol was erased. The new symbol presents a very simple representation of wheelchair's wheels, in red, with a body (in yellow) that was designed in the form of an "S" keeping the connection with the "Super" concept. Visual and metaphorical power of this symbol is generated from the surprise effect created by the analogy of the Superman symbol (also invoked by the expression *superathlete*) with the most universal symbol of disability—the wheelchair.

Mainstream competitive sport celebrates only the strongest and the most able, which in an odd way makes the connection between disability and elite sport somewhat paradoxical (DePauw, 1997). From this unlikely association between elite sport and disability, the *superathlete* is born. The emphasis on disability as a problem may be seen as the background against which the observer makes sense of qualifying athletes with impairments as *super* when, in any other context, an athlete would be just seen as an athlete. According to the *Portugal Paralympic Mission Book Athens* (2004, p. 63) the image was intended to represent the human ability to transcend self-limits. By adopting a "super" logo, participation in disability sport can be promoted as inherently extraordinary. In the campaign for Beijing 2008 Paralympics, the advertising campaign includes a video that gave the *super* analogy a different tone. This video was the result of a partnership between the advertising agency BBDO Portugal and the Portuguese Federation of Disability Sport.<sup>1</sup> Instead of focusing on a sporting situation, the ad depicts a person in a wheelchair traveling along the sidewalk. The wheelchair user, a double-leg amputee, has to make a tremendous effort to climb over a car abusively parked across this path. It is surprising and shocking that something like using a sidewalk, which is accessible to the able majority, is compared to elite athletic training. The indignity of this situation is obvious: Why should somebody have to be an elite athlete just to move around? Judging by this video, it can be suggested that moving around for some citizens may require athletic ability above and beyond the average able-bodied person. Reminiscent of the *superathlete* image, this ad suggests that people experiencing disability may be forced to be super in their everyday lives, not because of their inadequacy but because of others' insensitivity. The selection of the music is not innocent in this regard, "You are not my friend." Another version of the ad says, "Thank you for the obstacles, barriers, and difficulties. We're in shape for Beijing 2008. Thank you." Although it is important to have realistic depictions of everyday life conditions for some of the Paralympic athletes, there is not much difference from the experience of others with impairment; nevertheless the analogy of everyday life with Paralympic preparation may reinforce the idea that the Paralympics Games are second-rate sport. Moreover, although this ad seems to counteract supercrip depictions, there is still an absence of information about the sports person portrayed. It is important to replace the anonymous supercrip characters with Paralympians who engage in sport successfully and who can function as role models.



**Figure 1.** “Super Atleta” logo

Another prominent character in *Superatleta* Portuguese marketing campaign is “Bicas,” the mascot. Bicas was born in 2003. He is dressed in the same colors as Superman: He wears a red shirt and blue trousers, and his head is a big yellow star. Bicas is a “super” bird:

Bicas does not have wings, but can “fly,” showing willpower, determination to overcome, and also a thirst for victories, in a true sporting spirit of fair play. Bicas intends to be, in an imaginary world, a new species that has some similarities with a bird that represents freedom. (*Portugal Paralympic Mission Book Athens*, 2004, p. 53)

Bicas (see figure 2) can be understood as the animal version of supercrip in the bird world: He possesses a super cape, the *Superatleta* logo is on his shirt, the star, and the super colors (blue, yellow, and red). Bicas also possesses the spiritual attributes that are part and parcel of the supercrip stereotype: strong will, determination, and spirit. These are the qualities needed to fly without winds, to triumph, despite impairment. In sum, the “Superathletebird” becomes a symbolic commoditization of Paralympian ethos: Physical impairments are annulled and overcome by the qualities of the spirit. In addition, Bicas is also physically energetic and dynamic. He practices a great diversity of sports and is always on the move; thus, he is the “living” proof that impairment is not an impediment to participate in sport. Several interpretations of the “super” character within this campaign are plausible: In order to engage in elite sport disabled athletes have to be super, due to all the additional obstacles they are obliged to face, or they qualified as extraordinary because to engage in sport is an exceptional event when performed by people with impairments. Perhaps more positively, they can also be super simply because they are elite athletes. These three different interpretations can coexist in the same narrative and be present in different interpretations of superathlete images.



**Figure 2.** Bicas, the mascot

## *Freaks of Nature*

*Freaks of Nature* is the label given to the London 2012 Paralympic marketing campaign launched by the host broadcaster, Channel 4. This campaign started with a weekend devoted to Paralympic sport, during which the documentary *Incredible Athletes* (presented on August 29, 2011) was the highlight. A press release dated August 9, 2010, from Julian Bellamy, Channel 4's acting chief creative officer, set the tone:

Channel 4 sees the London 2012 Paralympic Games as an opportunity to bring about a fundamental shift in perceptions of disability in the UK, and *Inside Incredible Athletes* perfectly encapsulates this. This beautiful and insightful documentary examines the athletes' phenomenal ability and films them performing in

ways that have never been seen before. The *Freaks of Nature* marketing trail is part of a bold campaign that portrays Paralympians as Channel 4 feels they should be seen—supremely talented athletes who, like their able bodied sporting counterparts, are set apart from the rest of us by their staggering ability, not their disability. And this reflects our ambitions for our coverage of the London 2012 Paralympic Games themselves—encouraging viewers to focus on the awe-inspiring ability on display throughout. (Channel 4, Press release, August 9, 2010)<sup>2</sup>

In the documentary's trailer<sup>3</sup> the public is invited to “meet some of the Britain's most extraordinary Paralympians.” The laudatory discourse is illustrated with numeric criteria, “nine medals, one hundred and nine goals in one hundred and eleven games,” so, in this sense, some evidence is presented that these athletes are actually “special” among their peers. At the end of the trailer, two of the athletes say, “We are freaks of nature.” The broadcasters claimed that the expression “freaks of nature” is used in a positive sense, making the point these athletes are “set apart from the rest of us by their staggering ability, not their disability.” However, this expression, uttered by athletes themselves still created a controversy. According to good access guide website,<sup>4</sup> some disability activists accused Channel 4 of breaking the United Nations (UN) 2006 *Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities* when they utilize the term “freaks.” The Channel 4 website quoted their “disability executive” stating that their “prime purpose was to try and draw people” and “generate a buzz about it” and that because of the “very competitive market” you sometimes “have to take a bit of a risk” (Another argument was that the expression “freak of nature”—pronounced in the trailer by the nine times Paralympic gold medalist Lee Pearson—was a “deliberate attempt to cast our athletes in the same light as Olympic athletes” (see Note 2).

This episode, surrounding the launch of the London 2012 marketing campaign, illustrates some important issues: First, the immense sensitivity around media representations of disability, second, the need for constant comparison to the Olympics Games is sign of how far the Paralympics Movement still needs to go before establishing a distinctive and legitimate identity as a high-performance sport. Finally, the controversy over the use of the word “freaks” highlights the lack of consensual representational models surrounding disability and, by extension, Paralympic sport. In essence, disability remains a social taboo.<sup>5</sup>

### *Inside Incredible Athletes*

Some features of this documentary counteract the supercrip representation made via first-person statements from participating athletes and are depicted in everyday regular activities in sporting and other contexts (home, work)—the deliberate intention to label and “market” these athletes as “super” is self-evident. Bearing this in mind, we turn our attention to the examination of some of the mechanisms of supercripization at play. Perhaps the most obvious of these mechanisms is the use of language: the

superlative terminology—"incredible," "extraordinary abilities," and "amazing athletes." The video is also replete with terminology that essentialize, individualize, and reduce the success of these athletes to features hidden in their bodies: "discover the secrets inside their bodies."

The close examination, analysis, and dissection of Paralympian bodies through "state-of-the-art" technology turn their specialness into objects of scientific enquiry. This is the second mechanism at play to build in the presentation of Paralympians as "Freaks of Nature." The technological tools used to analyze sporting performance are such that allow for a deep incursion into the body, to access the secrets hidden within individual bodily boundaries, with a strong focus on the brain. It is important to analyze some of these secrets. The right hemisphere of Liz Johnson's is overdeveloped to compensate for the left hemisphere neurological damage, a result of cerebral palsy, which is used to explain her mastery of the symmetrical movement of breaststroke ("her secret lies deep inside her brain"). In similar terms, explanations for the skilful abilities of the "blind football player," David Clark, are mapped through an in-depth examination of his brain: "Could the secret lie in his brain and in his hearing ability?" David is submitted to a testing protocol where the hearing function is activated and his brain activity is recorded. Apparently David's brain reacts as it "should" in the first part of the test, but at some point, the brain areas responsible for the vision are also activated. Rhodri Cusack, neuroscientist in Cambridge University, interprets this fact as an example of brain plasticity, the capacity of human brains to adapt and redesign themselves.

In the case of the wheelchair rugby players portrayed, Mandip Sehmi and Steve Brown, are shown to have "exceptional values when compared to normative values of untrained wheelchair individuals" (as stated by Dr. Vicky Tolfrey, Loughborough University). This statement is made after they are submitted to a cardiorespiratory maximum capacity evaluation ( $\text{VO}_2 \text{ Max}$ )<sup>6</sup> and their results shown to be better than the predicted scientific values for average wheelchair users with the same degree of function. Again, instead of something extraordinary in their bodies, it is the process of intensive training that induces adaptations, a conclusion that is explicitly conveyed when it is also said in narration that they adapt "by developing the function they still have."

Developments in cognitive and neurosciences (Clark, 2008, 2011; Sheets-Johnstone, 2011) prove what phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty (1962) have been claiming for long time: the inextricable connection between mind, body, and world. In other words, it is more plausible to interpret Liz's brain's "specialness" as an adaptation to her "20 weekly hours of swimming and a cycle of relentless competition." Similarly, David's brain developed the ability to create pictures of "reality" due to the ways he has been using his body throughout his life. The ability to "see" the public, the coaches, the ball, the opposition, and the goal is not the result of an extraordinary hidden secret, but a fruit of years of training and competition. Body (extended),<sup>7</sup> mind, and world shape each other, possessing a plasticity, a certain scope for change and adaptation: "human minds and bodies are essentially open to episodes of deep and transformative restructuring in which new equipment (both physical and 'mental') can



become quite literally incorporated into the thinking and acting systems that we identify as our minds and our bodies" (Clark, 2008, p. 31). Moreover, Clark goes further to affirm that the recruitment process of problem-solving resources do not exhibit any preference between "neural, bodily, and environmental resources except insofar as these somehow affect the total effort involved" (2008, p. 13). This means that adaptations happen in different forms and different locations: in the neuronal system (Liz Johnson, David Clarke), in the musculoskeletal system (Stefanie Reid, Johnny Peacock), in the cardiovascular and musculoskeletal systems (Mandip Sehmi, Steve Brown), in technical skills and abilities (Lee Pearson).

In sum, the search for the hidden secrets "Inside Paralympic Athletes" stems from a particular view that sporting success is impossible for athletes with impairment unless some "special" traits exist. However, the adaptations induced by training and hard work are largely responsible for Paralympic athlete's performances. Success is much more grounded in the flexibility and plasticity of our human gearing (body, mind, and world) than in any specific secret inside "Freaks of Nature."

The last mechanism of supercripization that we wish to illuminate is the omnipresent norm of the able-bodied. A continuous comparison seems to be needed to portray different bodies in terms that "normal people" can understand. But if the able-bodied referential stands as "right" and "beautiful," the empowerment potential of disability sport is weakened; for example, only when compared to an Olympic swimmer does Liz's impairment becomes obvious. But why is the comparison needed in the first place? Why is it interpreted as so exceptional that wheelchair athletes improve their functional abilities by training hard? Why is it so surprising that David Clarke, the captain of the British Paralympics blind football team, plays the game as well as his office colleagues? In sum, as the documentary unfolds and the secrets inside the athlete's bodies are disclosed, the "supercrip" model is deconstructed as well as, partially, reconstructed at the same time. The ultimate reasons for these athletes' sporting success presented in the documentary are not extraordinary: extensive hours of training and a certain amount of talent, as is required from any other athlete. Incredibility is only envisioned against the background understanding of disability as exclusively negative, a perception still present in expressions such as "cope with his impairment" and "conquered her impairment." In the end, the secrets that were supposed to be hidden in these incredible bodies are translated in three words: "training," "effort," and "determination".

In the context of elite sport, it is true that athletes' images are manipulated through a media lens so that they appear superhuman, responding to the contemporary obsession for records and sporting heroes. In the highly mediatized representations of elite sport, natural ability tends to be overvalued whereas training and effort are undermined. As the press release quoted earlier highlight, although the use of expression, "The Freaks of Nature," is intended to equalize media treatment of Paralympians and Olympians, the use of this phrase still carries the weight of social stigma faced by people with disabilities. To this end it is felt that, "Freaks of Nature," "Incredible athletes," "amazing athletes," "Superatleta," and so on are still obvious markers of "Othering" processes, as opposed to the Paralympics' empowerment potential.



## Supercrip as the “Other”

Can the Portuguese and British campaigns highlighted above be seen as stereotyping as highlighted in the work of Hall (2003)? It is possible to identify in *Superatleta* iconography some of the mechanisms highlighted by Hall. The *Superatleta* campaign “essentializes, reduces, naturalizes and fixes difference” and assume all Paralympians are super. The same interpretation applies when “Freaks of Nature” is extended to all the athletes who participate at the Paralympic Games and in some of the processes emphasized in our analysis of the documentary “Inside Incredible Athletes.” This type of judgment is born out of a dogmatic view of competitive sport and disability as incompatible. The idea of every athlete as a “super” may also reinforce Paralympics’ second-rate status undermining its legitimization as elite sport (Howe, 2008b).

On another level, expressions like “Freaks of Nature,” “Superatleta,” and “Incredible athletes” are also a product of an exclusion mechanism. They create the *Other*, recognizing exceptionality in someone who may not be considered in that manner if it were not for the predicament of impairment. The tension is obvious: By opposing extreme negativity (the idea of the impaired athlete as weak and frail) with extreme positivity such as supercripization we may simply be reinforcing disability as “Otherness” and, as a result, add to the understanding of impairment/disability as human negative deviance.

## Repercussions of “Fighting Disability” Stories

“Super” images overemphasize difference, fixing it as something extraordinary, and stimulate extreme emotional responses while preserving a safe distance that reaffirms the “normal” condition of the viewer. The immediate danger of these processes is well emphasized by Koppers (2003): “If the disabled body is only shock, no desire towards its potentiality for difference can be generated” (p. 10). Audiences of the superathlete logo and the “Freaks of Nature” campaign are invited to challenge the disseminated notion that disability and sport are opposites, confronting the assumptions that disabled people are weak and frail. By presenting athletes as “super” or “incredible” the responsibility for success seems to be located within the individuals themselves, without considering all the other factors that have an impact on an athlete’s success. On the other hand, detached fascination forms a barrier against a more sympathetic relationship accentuating disability as “Otherness.” By conveying the idea that all the dreams are possible depending on an individual’s effort and merit, the social injustice of unequal opportunities for “able” and “disabled” people is ignored. The “Super” or “Incredible” athlete label applied to Paralympians put the Paralympic Games in danger of becoming reminiscent of Victorian freak shows, as this episode narrated by a former Paralympic athlete illustrates:

[Journalist] “Oh, so fantastic. . . . You’re blind and you can run an hundred meters. . . . Oh, isn’t it difficult?” [Athlete] “Nothing is wrong with my legs . . . it is my sight that is the problem. . . .” They thought if something was wrong

with you, you couldn't do anything and then everything that you're doing is fantastic. (Silva, 2008, p. 35)

Another implication of stereotyped success stories is the pressure of social expectations put upon people with impairments to "overcome" their own impairments, overlooking the high specificity of each disability experience and the normative autocracy of this expectation. In many situations, to overcome impairment, to strive to live as "normal" as possible, in spite of disability, may not be achievable or even desirable depending on the practical consequences of this upon the quality of life of the individual. This leads to the situation where it may be seen as a failure when people experiencing disability do not have the conditions, the will, or the power to lead a normal life.

In sporting contexts, presenting all athletes as extraordinary can disseminate the message that only "super" people can be successful in sport and undermine the potential of Paralympic images to motivate others to engage in sport.

### *Athlete's View of Supercrip Tales*

For some athletes, the moment of classification (the system of equitably organizing impaired bodies for competition) is the first time they are confronted with their impairment. Eligibility for Paralympic sport often leads to the acquisition of "special" status. This specialness for some is derived from being officially considered disabled, rather than because they are athletes (Howe, 2008). In these cases, athletes may not hold strong views on disability representations because they are still negotiating their new social identity. For other athletes, such as individuals congenitally impaired, for whom the "disabled" identity has been more deeply internalized, the images of "Super" might be interpreted as an alternative response to the view of disability as a limitation and to Paralympic sport as second-rate competition. In this sense, the superathlete concept can be received as positive and progressive by many athletes.

Although some athletes and people with disabilities have already manifested their discontentment toward "super" representations of themselves (Peers, 2009; Schell, 2001), we must be open to other interpretations of this image. The lack of positive "role models" for people with disabilities helps to reinforce negative and limited understandings of disability. Supercrip representations offer a glimpse of hope and visibility in a sporting world ruled by media and marketing, where disability sport is fighting for social acceptance and credibility. Some research on the reception of supercrip images among athletes (Berger, 2008; Hardin & Hardin, 2004), highlight some ambivalence in regards to this iconography. Yet here we must reiterate the idea that, within these studies, the supercrip concept can be understood along a continuum of inspiring stories, which include more realistic ones, specifically the ones that draw more heavily upon stereotypes.

Berger's work (2008, 2009) provides some insight into the positive effects of supercrip examples, accentuating the possibility of personal agency for people labeled as *disabled*. Successful athletes, in Berger's study, provided important role models for younger athletes to emulate, yet there are negative undertones that can be exclusionary for people who are not motivated by sport or simply do not "try hard enough":

I think you have a responsibility to present yourself positively to the rest of the world because there are already enough stereotypes out there. . . . Yet there's some people who try to use their disability to their advantage. They might be getting a push, and they're able to push themselves. . . . Do they really need a power chair? No. But they're using one. In my opinion, that's someone who's deserving of a negative title for a person with a disability. (2008, p. 662)

In Hardin and Hardin's (2004) study, participants expressed the opinion that supercrip narratives can show disabled people in a positive light, offering inspirational stories to which others can relate; however, such stories can also lower the level of expectations about what people with impairments can do:

I cannot count the number of times people have come up to me and said, "I just think it's great you're out doing this and that"—like when I'm out at a bar. "I just think it's awesome you're here," and I'll say, "Why?" Are they crazy? I'm at a bar! . . . People look at me like, "Oh, that's so sad. You should be laying in bed everyday." (7.10)

Fighting negative stereotyping of disability with another stereotype may, in time, prove to be nonsensical. Yet we must acknowledge that, at present, some positive outcomes may occur by motivating others to adopt a more proactive attitude toward disability, emphasizing personal agency, self-determination, and inviting disabled people to contest the dependency roles normally imposed on them. There is, however, a fine line between passivity and adjustment that needs to be negotiated by people with disabilities, in order to live with impairment, which sometimes forces them to conform to standardized, "able-bodied" views of performances. The inspiration that supercrip offers to some people with disabilities might develop from an internalization of inadequacy and the desire to be socially accepted, leaving intact the normalized views dictated by an able, moral majority.

In the available social scripts for disability, to be and behave like a "normal" person seems to be the only suggestion offering some kind of inspiration and hope for a dignified life. However, in our opinion, this approach does not open the way to a more integral view of humanity, where difference does not equate to "Otherness." This openness to difference seems to us the only viable way to reduce effectively the stigmatizing power of a highly "normalized" society. Supercrip narratives feed the illusion that human life can be controlled by human agency; therefore, the hurdles of

living with impairment ought to be surpassed by the individuals. The complexity of disability experiences is ignored when one assumes disability can be overcome by individual effort alone. In the world of sports stereotyped images of disability constitute a lost opportunity to acknowledge the pervasiveness of difference. The exceptional character of some athletes has to be assessed against criteria that respect the specific ethos of the Paralympic Games and must not be based on the premise that impairments make people special. In order to treat athletes with impairments as true athletes, media coverage must play a crucial educative role in increasing public knowledge on the specificities of the Paralympics, namely, classification, new sports, records, and performances in order to develop an informed and educated audience. The attempt to cover the Paralympic Games in the same manner as Olympics by Channel 4, portraying athletes as “Freaks of Nature,” may ultimately undermine the intention of equal treatment because it triggers and reinforces representations of disability as freakery and Otherness. Viewing all Paralympians as “Superatletas” is another manifestation of similar cultural meanings, and perhaps this is the reason this campaign in Portugal has now been discontinued. In a personal communication, the Portuguese Paralympic Committee (PPC) stated that this campaign diverts attention from the Paralympics itself (Communication and Marketing Office, personal communication, May 12, 2011). What exactly this means and how the Portuguese will market the Paralympics in the future is rather unclear, but it is a sign that issues of representation are a crucial concern.

The social impact of media images imposes responsibilities that must be remembered by a critical and demanding audience. By re-opening the discussion over the implications of “supercrip” models in talking, writing, and showing disability, we hope to have made a contribution to an increasingly “empowering” Paralympics Games that is, at least in part, a result of a more enlightened media coverage.

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### **Notes**

1. Accessible on *Youtube* (posted by *videosmeios* channel): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhFTFiJf4g4&feature=related>
2. Available (to U.K. residents) at <http://www.channel4.com/info/press/news/two-years-to-change-perception-of-disability-sport>
3. Available at <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/inside-incredible-athletes/articles/inside-incredible-athletes-trailer>
4. <http://www.goodaccessguide.co.uk/news/info.php?refnum=378>

5. Reactions to this terminology can be consulted in James Balardie's (Channel 4 Paralympics' site editor) blog <http://blogs.channel4.com/paralympics/2010/08/28/freaks-of-nature/>
6.  $\text{VO}_2$  max. expresses the maximum volume of oxygen that is possible to consume.
7. Two main ideas ground the concept of an "extended mind": First, the mind is not only inside the head; that is, it is not related to brain functions alone as it also demands the action of the whole body; second, the mind extends beyond one's own body to include the active interaction with environment (Clark & Chalmers, 1998).

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