

# Beyond the Aww Factor: Human interest Profiles of Paralympians and the media navigation of physical difference and social stigma

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## Abstract

People with disability negotiate a complex identity that involves both physical difference and social stigma. Excluded from other identity-based areas of inquiry, and encouraged to pass as unimpaired by human rights models (*see the ability*), media representations purporting to offer empowerment may actually perpetuate the biomedical model of disability as it discursively situates disability as deficit. Drawing on work undertaken by Schell and Duncan (1999) this article critically examines current affairs programming (*60 Minutes* and *Australian Story*) leading up to the 2008 Paralympics Games to highlight the role the media plays in reflecting and reinforcing social disablement. I will likewise explore the way aspects of these profiles, which foreground the relevance of impairment and disability to the lives of people with disability, potentially advance social understandings of disability.

## Introduction

In a *Today Show* interview screened on Australian television on 27 June 2008 sports “guru” Cameron Williams suggested to Australian paralympian John Maclean that he had singlehandedly taken the word “disabled” out of the Australian vocabulary. Maclean replied:

One of my focuses going forward is to try and delete that word. I would encourage people to use more empowering words, when you say someone’s disabled or has a disability that has a negative connotation associated with it. So my focus in doing iron mans [and] swimming channels is to see myself as equal, and if I could do that, then in generations to come, we can hopefully have words in place that are more user friendly.

His contention that as a society we should start thinking about “level of need” signals toward a social model of disability where disability is (re)defined as society’s unwillingness to meet the needs of people who have impairments. Whether or not Williams understood the nuances of Maclean’s social comment is debateable however because the initial question rested on the dualism that positions disability as separate from society. By encouraging Maclean to deny the existence of the word “disabled”, Williams was perhaps perpetuating the cultural tendency to individualise disability and “ignore any special provisions or accommodations that individuals with disabilities might need” (Schell and Duncan 1999: 29). Stories of super human achievement divert attention away from the social causes of disability.

Described by Barnes (1992: 12) as the “super cripple” this stereotype attributes magical or superhuman qualities to people with disability. Paralympians fit neatly into the super cripple paradigm due to their elite sporting abilities. While arguably super human qualities are attributed to all athletes regardless of (dis)ability, the effect on the disability community as a whole is more profoundly seen (Schell and Duncan 1999: 33) as audiences seek to reassure themselves that if the disabled person tries hard enough they can appear normal (Barnes 1992: 13).

Disability is a social, cultural and political category (Goggin 2008: online) that must negotiate physical difference along with social stigma (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 3). However, despite its similarity to other identity-based areas of inquiry, disability does not fit neatly into these groups, being positioned as the “real limitation from which they must escape” (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 2). Indeed disability is routinely neglected by other marginalised groups and presented as a marker of weakness or vulnerability (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 2, Ellis 2008: 1, Dowse and Meekosha 1997: 54). Current disability human rights models (adopted by the media in response to guidelines such as the Australian Journalists Association (AJA) Code (Bowman 1990: 54) and those released by disability organisations (see Scope 2005)) seemingly offer new versions of the disabled self. While the focus on ability in these texts is problematic, changing media representations as they introduce narrative accounts of social restriction acknowledge disability as more than a medical issue.

Popular human interest stories present disability as a personal tragedy that occurs at random to individuals, requiring them to adapt (Barnes 1992: 20). Drawing on Longmore’s (1987:72) contention that images of disability are an exercise in social

functionalism to reassure able-bodied audiences of their normality, Schell and Duncan (1999: 29) interpret the human interest story in two ways:

On the one hand, such stories might be understood as positive representations of people with disabilities who are capable of succeeding in this world. On the other, these stories might be viewed as mixed messages about people with disabilities—that they must exert superhuman efforts to succeed or that they deserve our pity or fear because of their terrible limitations.

Throughout this article I draw on this observation and expand the discussion around the mixed messages present in two media profiles of athletes with disability. After exploring the way these profiles individualise disability and contribute to the super cripple stereotype, I will highlight the way aspects of these profiles, which foreground the relevance of impairment and disability to the lives of people with disability, may potentially advance social understandings of disability. This article seeks to build on our understanding of disability as socially constructed through an examination of profiles of selected Paralympians that aired on *60 Minutes* (Channel 9) and *Australian Story* (ABC) prior to the 2008 Paralympics Games. *60 Minutes* profiled Kelly Cartwright and Kathryn Ross in a story entitled *Beating the Odds*. Ross appeared again the next night on the ABC in the *Australian Story* profile of her rowing partner John Maclean – *The Finish Line*.

#### **“Disability is the negative social reaction to [impairment]” (Sherry 2008: 21)**

Super cripple profiles of elite athletes with disability on Australian television prior to the 2008 Paralympics appear to offer disability pride; however, empowerment may be offered via a denial of physical difference. Although impairment is an important aspect of the disability identity, both the social model of disability and human rights models of disability deny the relevance of impairment to the lives of people with disability. An interrogation of the media’s focus on ability reveals disability as culturally specific.

While social factors have been recognised in discussions of other minority groups in Australia—particularly race, gender and sexuality—disability has remained outside questions of discourse, culture, communication and meaning. Indeed feminist perspectives about the body and physical activity have become integral to sports sociological research while assumptions about disability are yet to be routinely challenged (DePauw 2000: 358). Disability has long been considered as suited only to a medical field of inquiry, not something to be interrogated by scholars in the humanities and social sciences (Goggin and Newell 2003: 1). The major in-built assumption of this individual model is that disability is an individual’s medical pathology, where personal attitude has the greatest impact on their quality of life.

Social critiques of this model are an attempt to improve the situation of people with disability who have been stigmatised against and regarded as less than human (Cumberbatch and Negrine 1988: 94). While disability is often presented in the media as a marker of vulnerability (Sutherland 1997: 18), like Beckett (2006: 3) I describe people with disability as a vulnerable group in society, not because of their physical limitations but due to the potential to experience social exclusion. The media has an integral role in both reflecting and reinforcing social disablement and imagining people with disability as a vulnerable group. The representation of disability, and what

it means to be disabled, is usually through stereotypes (Norden 1994, Barnes 1992, Darke 1998).

While the media has the power to perpetuate individualised images of disability, it also has the power to change people's perceptions (Schell and Duncan 1999: 28). As disability has always been represented in the media, *how* disability is represented needs to be changed, not *how much* (Norden 1994: 1). Media coverage of athletes with disability constructs boundaries of normality by deemphasising disability. In their analysis of the way athletes with disability were portrayed in British print media during the 2000 Sydney Paralympics, Thomas and Smith (2003: 170) discovered four recurring themes, including medicalised descriptions, comparisons to the Olympic Games, portrayal of impairment and finally a greater coverage of male athletes over female athletes.

These themes also reappear throughout the profiles under consideration in this article. The significance of disability is often simultaneously minimised, and portrayed as fundamental to the social identity and experiences of the athletes in question. Integral to my analysis is a call to incorporate the body into discussions of a social model of disability. Increasing dissatisfaction with the restrictive nature of both the medical and social models of disability has led to a reconsideration of ability as dynamic and articulated along socio-cultural lines (Fitzgerald 2005: 45).

**“They shall not place unnecessary emphasis on [...] disability” AJA Code (Bowman 1990: 54)**

Australian disability human rights models and the social model of disability approach the question of disability from opposing angles. While human rights models seek to emphasise the ability of people with disability, the social model argues that, if disability is a social construction, there is no such group as people with disabilities (Darke 1998: 224). However, a shared experience of stigmatisation that is at the centre of the social model may not be enough motivation to develop a disability community or culture (Dowse and Meekosha 1997: 65).

While the social model of disability sets up an empowering disability/impairment dualism similar to sex/gender and race/ethnicity, the lack of focus on impairment has been increasingly criticised (Shakespeare 2006: 38, Corker and French 1999: 2; Duncan et al. 2005: 154). For the social model, disability resides in an inaccessible environment rather than the body. Mitchell and Snyder (2000: 167) broaden the scope of an inaccessible built environment to the media. Scope provides disability services throughout Victoria (Australia) with the aim of changing attitudes and creating a more accessible and welcoming community for people with disabilities. Scope (2005: 4) encourages media practitioners to “portray a person as they are in real life ... apart from having a disability, they may also be a parent, a professional, student, or Paralympian”. Their media and communication tips stress ability over disability.

The Australian Press Council likewise encourages Australian media producers not to view people with disability as a discrete group. Their guidelines attest that “people with disabilities are most empowered when they are treated as fully participating members of the wider community” (Jakubowicz 2003: 107). These guidelines again individualise disability and do not consider *how* people can become fully participating members in a community that is not structured to meet their needs. These guidelines, although aiming to improve the position of people with disability in society, may perpetuate the

assumption that people with disability do not deserve any accommodations in order to operate on an equal level with able-bodied people. People with disability should not be expected to ignore their disability in order to fit in; the physical difference should be recognised and respected (Schell and Duncan 1999: 29).

Ian Parsons (1999: 12) finds that the lack of “pride” in identity is a feature almost exclusive to the disability rights movement when compared to other human rights movements within Australia. He connects pride with accentuating the things that make a person different from the rest of society. While the gay and lesbian human rights movements privilege their difference from the mainstream, the disability movement almost suppresses it as evident through the “see the ability, not the disability” focus:

The women’s movement does not [...] emphasise the “maleness” of women. The aboriginal movement does not [...] emphasise the “whiteness” of aborigines. The gay and lesbian movement does not [...] emphasise the “heterosexualness” of gay men and lesbians. But the disability movement does, it seems, very much emphasise the “ableness” of people with disabilities. (Parsons 1999: 12).

This emphasis on ability within the human rights model of disability denies the importance of social factors such as an accessible built environment on the quality of life of people with disability. Like Parsons, Gill (1994, cited in Schell and Duncan 1999: 29) takes exception to the focus on ability in the context of empowering people with disability and encourages people with disability to stop claiming that they are just like everyone else, believing this framework positions people with disability in a more vulnerable position. Fiona Kumari Campbell describes this focus on ability as “compulsive passing, wherein there is a failure to ask about difference, to imagine human be-ingness differently” (2008: online). In order to gain access to provisions or accommodations, disability must be acknowledged.

Although narratives of triumph over adversary in the context of disability are common place on *60 Minutes* and *A Current Affair* they take on greater significance around the time of the Paralympics Games where national sporting pride is at stake. Sport is integral to how Australians define themselves as a nation. Towards the end of the twentieth century people with disability began to be taken seriously in sport and the image of the Australian nation (Goggin and Newell 2005: 74-75).

When the Paralympics athletes prepared to leave Australia, news reporters were at the airport. Such media attention has transformed the Paralympics games into a major sporting event (Howe 2008: 135). However, news media coverage of the departure invoked a charitable discourse with Channel 10 news describing these athletes as just happy to be going rather than aiming for a gold medal. Corresponding vision of the athletes highlighted their impairments and hence difference from the Olympic athletes we had previously been watching on our television screens for the two weeks prior.

Schell and Duncan (1999: 35) found a similar tendency in CBS’s coverage of the 1996 Paralympics where commentators often implied competitors should be simply “grateful for the Paralympic experience”. They describe this as patronising and a process of othering. While Smith and Thomas (2005: 57) attribute this to a certain degree on the use of sport in physiotherapy to restore fitness in people with disability,

David Hevey (1992: 3) cautions strongly against invoking such charitable discourse, finding it is a barrier to the recognition of disability as socially created. Media descriptions of elite athletes with disabilities usually invoke medical terminology that locates the cause of disability in the body (Smith and Thomas 2005: 52, Thomas and Smith 2003: 170, Howe 2008: 143, Schell and Duncan 1999: 29, DePauw 2000: 359). Further, the discourse of disability criticism has not been able to articulate a mode of critique that recognises the relationship disability and ability have with history.

## The Individualisation of Disability

I now turn the discussion to profiles that appeared on *60 Minutes* and *Australian Story* on the 7 and 8 September 2008 respectively. Both programs hold a prominent position on the Australian current affairs landscape. *60 Minutes*, commissioned by Channel 9 as a way to directly compete with the ABC (Flew 2002: 177), has been described as “influential” by Goggin and Newell (2004: 53). On the other hand *Australian Story*, with its mix of entertainment and journalistic exposition, rates highly for the ABC and has won a number of Logies (Bonner and McKay 2007: 641). Both cross over between the genres of information and entertainment and reach a large number of ordinary Australians.

The introductions to both *Beating the Odds* and *The Finish Line* set up the achievements of the individuals in question by making comparisons to the Olympic Games:

We thought we'd had our share of triumphs. Seen the fastest, the strongest, the greatest athletes in the world. Well, let us tell you, you ain't seen nothin' yet.

- Peter Overton, introduction to *Beating The Odds*

After two weeks of the Olympics you may think that you've seen it all. But hang on a moment. Tonight's *Australian Story* is about a great sportsman who takes my breath away.

- Dawn Fraser, introduction to *The Finish Line*

While the Olympics and Paralympics are officially considered to be parallel events, the Paralympics are frequently referred to as the poor cousin of the Olympics (Kell et al. 2008: 70, Goggin and Newell 2005:80) and receive less government funding and media interest. Most Australian media interest in Paralympic athletes invokes what Smith and Thomas (2005: 53) describe as the “awww factor” where sporting success is trivialised. When sporting success is covered, the focus is on emulating able-bodiedness.

As people with disability strive for social acceptance, they may attempt to emulate able-bodiedness as much as possible and in doing so deny that disability is part of their identity (Thomas and Smith 2003: 175). This can be seen in *Beating the Odds* in the scene where Ross and Cartwright meet the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, and his wife, Therese Rein, at the team's official launch. Rudd and Rein proceed to discuss the way Australians are inspired by people who “say no to obstacles” and “blast through them”. Clearly they are not referring to sporting prowess, instead individualising disability. While Cartwright remains silent Ross “speaks for the both of them” when she replies that she doesn't feel that she has “an obstacle”. Peter Overton then comments that both Cartwright and Ross have “overcome incredible odds to wear the green and

gold". By focusing on the inspirational qualities of the athletes in overcoming their disabilities rather than their sporting abilities such stories reflect an obsession with able-bodiedness (Thomas and Smith 2003:169).

Camera framing, as it has the power to both obscure and emphasise disability, offers important insight to an understanding of how people with disability are presented as inferior by visual media (Ellis 2008: 63, Norden 1994: 1). *Beating the Odds* begins with Cartwright at a photo shoot. Through Peter Overton's introduction the audience has already been made aware that this is a story about Paralympic athletes; however, Cartwright looks like a perfect human specimen with the camera framing her face and upper body only. We gaze on Cartwright for almost two full minutes before the camera moves down to her amputated leg and athletic prosthesis. Throughout the rest of the story Cartwright is constructed as a beautiful teenage girl interested in teenage things such as formals, shopping and wearing shorts. Questions emphasise her femininity. For example Overton asks her if vanity was the primary reason for her apprehension and fear on the day she had the operation to amputate her leg.

There is greater media interest in male athletes with disability than females (Thomas and Smith 2003: 177, Goggin and Newell 2005: 87). In relation to the media hierarchy of acceptable disability and super cripple characterisation, men in wheelchairs are most frequently present in mainstream media (Goggin and Newell 2005: 87-88), so an image of a female athlete is in some ways progressive. The production of the gendered body through fitness and the struggle that women with disability experience when trying to fit into an idealised image of femininity can be acutely seen in the images of Ross and Cartwright. In *Beating the Odds* Ross and Cartwright's personal lives are of greater importance than their athletic abilities, while in *The Finish Line* MacLean is definitively positioned as an elite athlete. The profile explores both his physical challenges and his sporting abilities and demonstrates disability as an embodied experience that oscillates between environmental, physical and emotional aspects. An inclusion of the experience of impairment to the social model of disability, explored in the next section, will open up this model and further discussion around navigating an able-bodied world with a disability. Likewise I will advance the argument that disability theorists must explore the nuances of the representation of disability in the media rather than condemn it (Shakespeare 1999: 165) via a consideration of these works as they force audience recognition of a human experience that is too often marginalised (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 5-6).

## Recognising impairment in the social model of disability

Deborah Marks (1999: 611) argues that by excluding personal experience from the cultural analysis of disability the social model contributes to the individualisation of disability. She defines disability as "the complex relationship between the environment, body and psyche, which serves to exclude certain people from becoming full participants in interpersonal, social, cultural, economic and political affairs". This complex relationship is evident in Maclean's description of the satisfaction he felt when competing against (and beating) athletes without disability, especially because the kayak he raced in obscured his need for a wheelchair:

For a lot of these people, they had no clue that the guy in the back of this boat that's out the front is in a wheelchair. It was quite interesting when I

recall looking back at that time that my wheelchair was waiting for me at the finishing line and we had beaten many competitors. And just the look in the other competitors' eyes when Johnno gave me a hand to transfer from the boat into the wheelchair, knowing that it was actually a guy in a wheelchair who beat us. So it was a sense of being competitive and it was nice to be back into that game.

The social model of disability must respond to these narratives and find a place for them within its framework because impairment is central to the experience of all people with disability. Human interest stories, through a focus on the individual, have been accused of medicalising the experience of disability and perpetuating damaging stereotypes (Barnes 1992: 23). However, despite best intentions life is, at times, stereotypical (Wain: online). Clearly, being competitive is important to Maclean, particularly as he experienced the complex identity (re)negotiation of discovering who he was as a person with disability in an able-bodied world. Tom Shakespeare (2006: 43) draws on these critiques to argue that the social model must engage with impairment because it is not neutral and while it does lead to disadvantage it also "lead[s] to opportunities: for example, to experience the world in a different way".

Maclean's struggles with these advantages and disadvantages is clear as he makes reference to meeting a man with terminal illness who told him that getting hit by a truck was the best thing that ever happened to him:

When I was told that getting hit by a truck was the best thing that's ever happened to me, that was a pretty big statement to make. And I look back now, all these years later and sure all those things have happened. But I miss running. I loved running and I can't say that's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

Under the social model of disability Colin Barnes (1992: 19) offers a somewhat contradictory analysis of how to represent impairment on television. His main concern is that stereotypes are a misrepresentation of the realities of disability yet he frequently discourages any connection between disability and impairment. While cautioning against paying undue attention to impairment he also cautions against a denial of impairment via a focus on ability. Cartwright acknowledges the nuances of a disability identity that includes impairment when she comments in relation to wearing shorts that expose her amputated leg: 'It's what I've got and what I have to live with – so why not let people see it.'

Impairment in general is difficult to watch on screen as it reminds audiences of their own mortality. Images which highlight the intersection between disability and impairment are particularly confronting as they force audiences to consider their role in the social disablement of people who have impairments. Likewise audiences must admit the possibility they too may one day become impaired.

While images of Paralympic athletes are often framed in photographs to hide the disability in order to make the person look more capable of sport (Thomas and Smith 2003: 176), Hevey (1997: 213) claims the first step to offering adequate representations of disability is to include images of impairment that are difficult to look at. Although the first image we see of Cartwright hides her impairment and aestheticises it by focusing on her physically appealing qualities such as her model looks and perfect teeth, later images force the audience to acknowledge that she has an impairment.



Her comments, such as the one above, highlight the need to make audiences feel uncomfortable in order to acknowledge the existence of disability in society.

While Ross' interviews in both profiles reek of the super cripple aesthetic, she also discusses experiences and issues of identity integral to the exclusion of disability from Australia's major nationalising project – sport. Australians are encouraged to participate in sport for a variety of reasons (e.g. health, future citizenship) from a very young age. However some, notably the disabled, are excluded from this form of social recognition (Goggin and Newell 2005: 75). Social exclusion from sport made an impact on Ross' life as the excerpts from both stories demonstrate:

Every time I think about it, it's like a knot in my stomach that works its way up; it's an unbelievable feeling. I never thought I'd ever make it to something like this. I've gone from someone who had to learn to walk a million times over and someone who was never really picked for certain things at school.

- Beating The Odds

This is our time to shine and Kathryn coming from Warrnambool, and she said something to me a while ago that she was the last to be picked in classroom sports and school sports, and here she is now.

- The Finish Line

According to Vic Finkletstein (1996: 11), one of the founders of the social model of disability, a focus on experiences signals a return to medicalised oppression. However, Fitzgerald (2005: 43) argues the insights of young people with disability are integral to the inclusion of people with disability in sport and by extension changing notions of ability. Narrative accounts of disability provide the link between individual and social models of disability and “identify the oppressive nature of disablism” (Marks 1999: 614). These comments emphasise the disablism Ross has experienced throughout her life as she has negotiated physical difference and social stigma.

Schell and Duncan (1999: 33) argue that blame and the medicalisation of disability is integral to framing notions of acceptability of disability in the hierarchy of television coverage of paralympic athletes. Whether people with disability are considered acceptable relates directly to the ability to look less obviously disabled. A tragic and unexpected accident or illness also helps. By situating both Cartwright and MacLean as athletes before they became disabled, the programs present identities of athletes that “identify more easily with nondisabled athletes”.

A belief in body and health stability is “one of our most tenacious cultural fantasies” (Garland-Thompson 2007: 114). Both of these stories medicalise disability by concentrating on “what happened” to the athletes. Goggin and Newell (2005: 90) suggest that this enables society to cope with their difference from what is considered “normal”.

First doctors diagnosed growing pains then a cyst but the reality was much, much worse. Kelly had synovial sarcoma in her right leg – a rare and aggressive form of soft tissue cancer.

- Beating The Odds

When [Kathryn] was two, she was accidentally run over by a ride-on mower driven by her father. To this day, her right leg is virtually useless.

– Beating The Odds

[A]nd was hit from behind by an eight-tonne truck which had broken my back in three places, my pelvis in four, my right arm in two, fractured sternum, broken ribs, punctured lungs, bilateral haematomis.

– The Finish Line

When serious physical injury happens in a culture that takes health for granted, it is a shock that makes the body unfamiliar to the individual and thus brings about a total re-imagination of the “self” (Nettelbeck 2008: 164). These experiences recounted by Cartwright, Ross and Maclean highlight the difficulty experienced by people with disability who reject a new subjectivity and identity following impairment, as they attempt to redefine themselves under able-bodied parameters. These athletes do, however, reject the straight-forward cultural connection between disability and social inferiority (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 4). While the British Council of Disabled People encourages depictions of people with disability that deal with a full range of emotion (Barnes 1992: 22), it discourages representation that deals with will and determination. However, a lack of emotional recognition is a form of oppression (Marks 1999: 617). Narrative accounts of disability that acknowledge causality can enrich the social model of disability rather than invalidate it (Marks 1999: 624). While acknowledging the cause of impairment may function to reassure the audience of their normality as Goggin and Newell suggest, they also reveal the tenuous stability of a non-disabled identity and acknowledge the emotional mediation of impairment in the lives of people with disability.

## Conclusion

Disability reminds us of our vulnerability; that we will die (Dawidoff 2003: vii). Often representation of disability in the media seeks to reassure a predominantly able-bodied audience of the stability of their non-disabled identity (Longmore 1987: 67). Human interest profiles of paralympians as an exercise in social functionalism follow the super cripple format of disability representation as identified by Barnes (1992: 12) and Goggin and Newell (2005: 88). Such media representations purport to offer new identities for people with disabilities, but may actually perpetuate the biomedical model of disability as it discursively situates disability as deficit. By locating disability in the body and emphasising the personal attitude of these individuals with disability, these profiles individualise disability. However, they also force the general population to acknowledge the existence of people with disability in society and via imagery of impairment recognise impairment as a central and structuring part of the experience of disability. The social model of disability must respond to rather than condemn such imagery.

Integral to the social model of disability is the separation of disability (socially created) and impairment (biological). As a way to maintain political significance, this model has been dedicated in its adherence to this separation, refusing to consider the impact of impairment on the lives of people with disability for fear it would weaken the

model. However, pain and impairment are very real aspects of the lives of people with disability and this must be acknowledged within any model that purports to empower this group. Throughout this paper I explored the way two human interest profiles of paralympian athletes individualised disability as a personal tragedy *and* provided a link between the social and individual models of disability revealing disability as a combination of social stigma and physical difference. Insights into the experience of impairment offered by the athletes in these stories must be responded to by the social model otherwise it will outlive its relevance and like the individual model of disability continue to position people with disability as a vulnerable group due to social exclusion.

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