“I am proud of my back”: An ethnographic study of the motivations and meanings of body modification as identity work among athletes with spinal cord injury.

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Abstract

Little is known about why disabled athletes choose to modify their bodies and the meanings that these modifications have for them. Drawing on data from a larger 4-year ethnographic study, we focus on the motivations and meanings of five athletes who had become disabled due to spinal cord injury (SCI) for tattooing their bodies in specific ways. Our analysis illuminates the following key themes as being significant in the body modification choices of those involved: re-inscribing identity, subverting the ableist stare and embodying disability pride, articulating gendered identities, and enabling the process of narrative mapping between pre- and post-spinal cord injury periods. In considering these themes we reveal some important contrasts between ablebodied and disabled forms of engagement with body modification practices.

Introduction

Body modification refers to a list of practices involving a visual aesthetics that include, tattooing, piercing, and inserting implants to alter the appearance and form of the body (Carmen, Guitar and Dillon, 2012; Featherstone, 1999). A number of scholars have noted that not only has tattooing become more accepted for men and women in contemporary Western mainstream culture but also that this practice is now popular with an increasingly heterogeneous range of enthusiasts. As Atkinson (2003) notes, the clients of tattoo artists now include men and women, people from all ethnic backgrounds and social

classes, and individuals possessing divergent sexual orientations, religious affiliations, and ideological beliefs.

Not all tattooed bodies, however, are equal. The acceptance of tattoos is context based and varies according to the social or sub-cultural category to which the person belongs. This is particularly so in relation to gender norms whereby for women the outcomes of having certain kinds of tattoo on certain parts of the body may be more stigmatising than they are for men because they transgress the ideals of heteronormative femininity (Inckle, 2007; Leader, 2015; Mun et al., 2012; Roberts, 2012; Yuen-Thompson, 2015).

Regarding the general motivations for individuals choosing to permanently modify their bodies, Carmen et al. (2012) suggest that across centuries these have tended to fall into the same three categories. These are (a) a symbol of an important past event, love, or friendship, (b) group membership, and/or (c) a marker of individuality. Some of the categories named above are fleshed out in the work of Atkinson (2003), Roberts (2012), and Sweetman (1999, 2012) who draw on Shilling's (1993) notion of body projects that conceptualises the contemporary body as a plastic, changing resource, and an ongoing unfinished project that individuals work on over their lifespan. From this perspective, tattooing as an example of redesigning body projects, can be seen as having the effect of transforming the exterior surfaces of the body in line with the designs of its owner in ways that can allow for the transformation of the body and self along these lines.

According to Sweetman (1999, 2012) for many tattooees, their chosen motifs are

expressive of personal interests and their own biographies. They are seen as markers of individuality, as acts of self-creation, as permanent and indelible reminders of particular periods or events, as ways of constructing a coherent personal narrative, and also as an anchor of the self over time. Others felt that their tattoos could tell a story. Similarly, based on their analysis of portraits of contemporary tattooees published in *Tattoo* magazine, Oksanen and Turtainen (2005, 114) suggested that such markings, both individually and in combination can act as a map that 'helps subjects to narrate their lives'. For them, the tattoo narratives found in the magazine 'are construed as powerful existential experiences, where life events are integrated into a narrative form via the body' (p.127).

The views above are supported by the findings of Atkinson (2003), Mun et al. (2012), Sweetman (2012), and Yuen-Thompson (2015) who proposed that tattooing, in particular, by transforming the skin into a social billboard, may function as a documentary history of the self providing reference points that can mark and maintain memories in ways that assist in the construction of a coherent personal self. In their studies, a number of the participants stated that their tattoos acted as permanent reminders of, or connections between, particular periods or significant events and transition in their lives. Tattoos, therefore, have the potential to act as an anchor and a permanent diary that provided a resource for individual and collective storytelling about the embodied self over time.

As Leader (2015) points out, whether the motivation for getting a tattoo is deeply meaningful, or relatively fleeting, the work itself is a lived experience, a permanent change in one's external appearance and, perhaps, one's sense of self. Choosing to

engage in various forms of body modification can also be an act of resistance, subversion, and transgression against prevailing normative body standards. As Sweetman (2012) argues, contemporary forms of body modification that deliberately mark the body can be seen as acts of counter-hegemonic self-description. For him, such acts differ from and challenge practices such as dieting and aerobics, 'in moving the body further away from, rather than closer towards, the youthful, slim and *unmarked* body which is the contemporary western ideal' (p. 354).

There are, therefore, multiple motivations for choosing to modify the body just as there are multiple meanings given to the modified body by those who inhabit it and those who observe it. As Kosut (2000) and Mun et al. (2012) illustrate, these meanings are not fixed in time, but are dynamic, evolving and are open to change over a person's life span. The tattoo selected by the 20 year old to communicate an aspect of self can take on a very different meaning 30 years later when life events and experiences may have resulted in changes to their bodies and sense of self. In such circumstances, Kosut and Mun et al. suggest that people go through a type of reflexive negotiation or revision process where new meanings are added to tattoos or entirely different meanings are developed that replace the original meanings. They also note that when these new meanings are incompatible with ideas about the changed self, people may wish to have their tattoos removed or altered.

The scholars cited above have provided important insights into what motivates people to modify their bodies and the meanings they give to these modifications over time. It is significant, however, that the majority of the people in their studies seem to be ablebodied and, as Inckle (2007) points out, all bodies are assumed to be normative prior

to being marked with tattoos. However, anyone who watches the Paralympics or disability sports will see athletes in action who have visibly modified their bodies using tattoos. These body modifications only seem to become of interest when they are deemed problematic. For example, in May 2016, Paralympic champion swimmer Josef Craig, aged 19, was disqualified from a race at the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) European Championships for failing to cover up a tattoo. Josef had a motif of the Olympic rings on the left side of his chest, which breached advertising regulations of the IPC that does not allow any 'body advertising,' including the Olympic rings. If he had covered up this tattoo for the race, Josef would not have been disqualified. Significantly, in the media coverage of Josef's disqualification, whilst attention was given to the legal position of the IPC in coming to its decision, the issue of what the tattoo meant to Josef as a disabled athlete, and why he had it put on his chest in the first place, seemed to be of little interest. This is a significant omission in the media coverage of disabled athletes that is replicated in the academic literature.

Currently, we know little about why people who have acquired a physical disability choose to modify their bodies and the meanings that these modifications have for them in constructing or reconstructing their identities over time. Despite an extensive literature review we have not been able to find any scholarly research on this topic. This is surprising if, as Peace (2001) suggests, tattooed people and disabled people have much in common in that they violate social norms and call into question basic cultural conceptions of the body in Western society. In relation to this, Jeffreys (2000) makes reference to body modification by disabled people, but only in order to critique the practices which she considers to be 'self-mutilating,' and most likely to be practiced by

socially vulnerable groups, thereby reinforcing the social stigma and inequality that she claims to draw critical attention to[1]. In contrast, Stephens (2011) discusses how the phenomenon of 'transability' that involves the desire to transition from binary understandings of being ablebodied to disabled could be productively positioned as a form of body modification, and a powerful form of body art, that embraces the visibility of disability as a valued aspect of identity, subjectivity and personhood. While such work offers glimpses into how disabled people *might* engage with body modification it is significant to note that Peace, Jeffreys, and Stephens did not actually engage directly with disabled people themselves to seek the meanings that they attributed to their body modifications. That is, they have spoken *about* disabled bodies but not *with* those who inhabit them.

We know even less about how, and why, athletes with acquired disabilities choose to modify their bodies and the meanings they give to these modifications. To begin to develop our knowledge about such choices and experiences, and given the contextual backdrop provided in our introduction, in what follows, we offer what we believe to be the first study that focuses on the motivations and meanings given by a group of disabled athletes, due to spinal cord injury (SCI), for choosing to be tattooed and the identity work these tattoos perform in various settings and at different times in their lives.

Methodology

The data in this article are drawn from a four-year, ethnographic study in England that explored the experiences of people who had become disabled through SCI and the meanings they gave to their subsequent involvement in disability sport as part of a

process of reconstructing their body–self–culture relationships over time (Brighton, 2015). Given that the methodology for this study was detailed in a previous article published in QRSEH and elsewhere (Sparkes, Brighton and Inckle, 2018a, 2018b), we will only provide a brief overview here.

Following university ethical approval, James Brighton contacted a number of governing bodies in England to facilitate access to disability sport clubs and individual disabled athletes. Following this, he conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a wheelchair basketball club and a wheelchair rugby club who competed in their respective national leagues. During his initial visits, James introduced himself to the members of the club, explained the nature of the study and outlined the ethical principles involved. Importantly, James gained permission from club members to take field notes about the events, interactions and conversations that took place during his time with them. Given that ethics is not a static phenomenon, but a fluid process James regularly sought such permission throughout the fieldwork as his role changed over time. In particular, the data collection as described in more detail below involved photo-elicitation (Phoenix, 2010) that has implications for any promises made to participants about anonymity. Accordingly, guided by the British Sociological Association Visual Sociology Study Group statement on ethics, James discussed the dissemination strategy for the study with the participants and the risk that photographs of their tattoos might pose to their anonymity (see www.visualsociology.org.uk/about/ethical_statement.php). All the participants accepted this risk and gave their permission for us to use the photographs included in this article.

During the four-year duration of study that involved weekly visits to the two disability sports clubs, James, an ablebodied researcher, adopted a number of field roles ranging from passive observer (e.g., watching practices from the balcony), to active helper (e.g., setting up and putting away equipment), and on to more central roles (e.g., taking part in practices as an able-bodied player in a wheelchair, coaching younger players, socialising with players after training and games, and becoming a registered playing squad member).

Adopting such roles enabled James to integrate himself into the settings, legitimise his usefulness to participants in a tangible way, and increased his physical and cultural capital within the clubs. Importantly, his prolonged immersion in the field also created opportunities to share embodied experiences and to get up close and personal to conversations and actions on court and off it at social events and occasions (Brighton, 2015, 2016). This also provided the opportunity for James to engage in the process of checking his preliminary interpretations of the data with the participants and also to invite their reflections on his emerging analysis (for further methodological and ethical protocols for the study plus a discussion of goodness criteria, see Sparkes, Brighton and Inckle, 2018a).

Whilst the presence of bodily modifications became evident early in fieldwork through their visibility on the publicly displayed body, the meanings and importance of these practices and the performance of the marked body only emerged as a result of the open and trusting relationships that were developed with club members over time. For example, as James increasingly developed rapport with the players and became accepted as part of the social landscape he was able to observe behaviour in both public and more private spaces,

such, as the male changing rooms. Here, whilst assisting players remove and put on clothing, and use the toilet, he was able to open up conversations in relation to tattoos on various parts of their body. Indeed, when James was helping remove clothes, for example, the athletes themselves would often ask him for feedback on their new or existing tattoos and those of others in the club who were tattooed.

Clearly, James did not access the female changing rooms. However, he was involved in helping female players remove and put on clothing during training sessions and games, as well as observe them playing matches where their tattoos were also visible. Conversations about these tattoos, therefore, emerged naturalistically as part of these social interactions. At other times, conversations about tattoos came about outside of the club setting. For example, on entering her house to conduct an interview for the study, James noted that the female participant was watching *L.A. Ink*, a reality TV programme about body modification. When he commented on this, she said that it was her 'new obsession' and that she always watched this programme. This led to part of the interview being devoted to her body modifications and an invitation to her to discuss them in greater detail in further interviews as part of the study.

Given that his own, non-tattooed, body was on display during training sessions, matches, and in the male changing room, as part of these discussions James also shared aspects of his own embodied history that included his decision not to become tattooed (Brighton, 2016). Such sharing located James as the 'learner' and the participants as the 'expert' in interactions that focused on the topic of body modification that encouraged them to take the lead in explaining their tattoos to him.

For ethnographers, as Wolcott (2005, 60) recognises, 'intimate, long term

acquaintance' is essential in building deep emotional and affective bonds and fostering a rich 'depth of human understanding' during field work. The development of such bonds by James was evident in that the participants were happy for him to take photographs of their tattoos in public social spaces, such as, the courtside or in the café. Alternatively, the players themselves took photos, often in their own homes, and sent them to James to assist their discussions during interview.

Data collection

The first phase of data collection involved a combination of what Phoenix (2010) describes as a dual process of researcher led photo elicitation (where James Brighton took photographs) and participant led photo elicitation (where participants supplied photographs they had taken). These photographs provided the focus for a series of semi-structured interviews with the participants in which they were invited to reflect on when, and why, they chose to have their tattoos, what these meant to them then and now, and how others perceived their tattoos. The interviews were conducted in a place of the participants' choice, lasted between two to four hours, were digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

The interview data were subjected to a thematic analysis as described by Riessman (2008). Here, primary attention is given to content, of *what* is said rather than 'how,' 'to whom,' or 'for what purposes.' Such an approach, according to Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016) is useful for identifying patterns of meaning across a qualitative data set. For us, this involved James Brighton and Andrew Sparkes separately conducting multiple

readings of the transcripts to become intimately familiar with their content. Each made notes on what they felt were the key themes in the reflections provided by the participants in their interviews. James and Andrew then came together to discuss their notes and agree on those themes that they felt were central to making plausible interpretations of the motivations and meanings the participants gave to their body modifications. Next, these themes were discussed with Kay Inckle in her role of critical friend as described by Sparkes and Smith (2014) who acted as a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, alternative explanations and interpretations of the data. This process led to the identification of the final five themes: re-inscribing identity; subverting the ableist stare and embodying disability pride; articulating gendered sexuality; and narrative mapping. Before rich data are provided to demonstrate the prevalence of each theme, brief body-modification biographies of the participants are provided centred on their body-modifications.

Participants

- *Steve (*male, white, age 36, wheelchair basketball). *Tattoos:* Armband around upper left arm with grey eye in the middle as he is 'addicted' to girls with 'grey and blue eyes,' inked at age 25 prior to SCI. Post-SCI at aged 35 Steve was inked with: i) a large black Christian cross on upper right arm/shoulder inscribed on background beams of light with the word 'confident' etched above and 'naughty' below, and the dates of acquirement of SCI and subsequent strokes where he has been 'bought back to life' integrated into the pattern, ii) a large blue eye on the underside of right arm, iii) a picture of his cousin who visited him every day when he was in hospital. He now has a total of 7 tattoos.

- *Jenny* (female, white, age 23, wheelchair rugby/athletics). *Tattoos*: Small angel wing around right ear, small paralympic logo behind left ear, line of five small swallows on left forearm, and 'Life is fate' tattoo written in Arabic on right wrist. All inscribed post-SCI.
- *Jack* (male, white, age 64, wheelchair athletics). *Tattoo:* Has competed in a number of Paralympics and world championships in track and field during a career lasting over 20 years. Jack had the Olympic rings surrounded by the lion's crest of the Great British Paralympic Association and the letters 'GB' on his right arm on his 60th Birthday[2].
- *Alex* (male, white, age 27, wheelchair rugby*). Tattoos*: A tri-coloured shamrock (which was subsequently covered up) on his left arm, a large tattoo over the contours of the vertebrae in his neck and back, and a full sleeve of tattoos on his left arm including Satan's face. All modifications made post-SCI in his early 20s as Alex was only 14 years old when he broke his neck.
- Matthew (male, white, age 25, wheelchair basketball). *Tattoos*: Matthew wished to have a large back tattoo starting at his neck, going over his spine showing the 'metalwork' of surgical procedures to vertebrae. Living at home his parents will not support this action so he will get it 'the day he moves out'.

Re-inscribing Identity

Contemporary body modifications can be seen as a way of taking control of the body and, in certain circumstances, reclaiming the body, especially in response to traumatic experiences (Inckle, 2007; Kosut 2000; Pitts 2003; Sweetman 2012). Our participants

suggested that modifying their bodies allowed them to actively make, and inscribe, identity choices rather than simply remaining docile in the face of the negative identities imposed on them as a result of their disabilities. For Steve getting a tattoo was important as it allowed him to assert a level of control over his body and the destiny of his identity. He felt that many previously self-valued forms of identity were untenable to him as a disabled man, whereas gaining tattoos afforded him some level of *ownership* over his current physical identity and connected him to aspects of his former self. Steve stated:

> I just want a tattoo, something different because there are so many things that I just can't do anymore… I mean, so many other identities are no longer available to me now I'm disabled really. I'm no longer known as a man but a disabled man, no longer a footballer but an ex-footballer. At least by having tattoos I can make choices about my own sense of who I am, personal to me, in ways that I want. Tattoos offer that, even though they reflect what was important to me in the past as well. These things were important to me then as well as now I'm disabled if that makes sense.

Similarly, Alex confirms that, for him, being tattooed was a performative act of taking control of aspects of his identity and inscribing it on his body. He notes that this could be done in other ways but that the permanence of ink imbues tattoos with more meaning than alternative forms of bodily adornment:

> I suppose if you look at it objectively you are controlling what is going on with it [body modification] like...but I mean you do that with your clothes, you buy the clothes you like; you buy the shoes you like and put them on. Tattoos just last a

bit longer than a pair of shoes I suppose.

Tattoos were also used as a way to display a sports identity. These type of tattoos were often undertaken as a *singular* act of body modification, a 'badge' confirming the level of one's sporting ability, undertaken as part of a rite of passage on being selected for the national team. For example, Jack's only tattoo on his arm was of the Olympic rings surrounded by the lion's crest of the Great British Paralympic Association and the letters 'GB'.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

For Jack, this tattoo symbolised his enduring athletic identity, even though he retired from elite disability sport 15 years previously:

> This is sort of my badge. This is who I am. This is *me*. And I love the summer because I can wear a vest and people ask, people do ask. And I still like to tell people who I am and who I was. And the older I get the better I fucking was mate!

Jack's tattoo and others types of body modification that symbolise disabled sporting ability and participation at the elite 'supercrip' level (Silva & Howe, 2012), are worn with a sense of pride and act as a visual marker of a strong athletic identity to self and others, challenging perceptions of disabled bodies as weak, passive and 'tragic'.

In all of these instances the tattoo is used as a mark that inscribes, or in some cases re-inscribes, identity and status that the individual felt to be compromised by the onset of a visible, physical disability. Steve, Alex, and Jack all use their tattoos to remake

their identity-status though either the tattoo itself, or via the depiction of a successful sports identity. For these disabled athletes, therefore, the tattoo is not so much about reclaiming an identity – since it would be difficult to reclaim an able-bodied identity when occupying a visibly, physically disabled body. Rather, the tattoos mark an attempt to re-inscribe markers of identity-status such as control (Steve and Alex) and success (Jack).

Subverting the ableist stare and embodying disability pride

Feminist writers have highlighted the ways in which the male gaze functions to render women subordinate objects to male power and desire. Building on this, Garland Thompson (1997) argues that if women are subject to and subjected by the gaze, then disabled people are subordinated and stigmatised via 'the stare' that is an intensified form of gaze which 'creates disability as an oppressive social relationship' (p. 26). The stare is the means by which visibly disabled people are made other, stigmatised and reminded that they are socially accountable for their existence and/or the specific formation of their body.

According to Renwick et al. (2018), although many individuals with physical disabilities experience being stared at then they are in public places, this act is typically seen as uncomplicated and something to be 'ignored.' Against this, they note that such acts have consequences for the person being stared at and the staree that are often context dependent. The act of staring at disabled bodies, therefore, is not a unitary phenomenon. As Garland Thompson (2006) reminds us, it is a complex, nuanced, and meaning-laden social interaction that can take many forms, with each form defining a different

relationship between disabled and ablebodied individuals. For example, the initial common form of intense looking can be called *arrested* staring.

> Here, the starers' surprise and confusion in response to a visual conundrum is expressed through arrested comportment and frozen astonishment. Such interpretive and embodied fixedness – commonly thought of as gawking – is considered unseemly social behavior. (p. 186).

A second form of staring identified by Garland Thompson (2006, 187) is *separated* staring that involves a visual fleeing and, 'often the wide-eyed, looking-over-one's-shoulder retreat of the fearful.' When this form of staring is born of fastidiousness, it is a visual pushing away by easily repulsed 'who cannot bear the surprising particularities of stark human embodiment' (p. 187). In its most virulent form, Garland Thompson notes, separated staring can expand into revulsion while in its most malignant form it can shift to hostile spectatorship.

In contrast to separated staring, Garland Thompson (2006) notes that sometimes the arrested stare can shift positively to a look that is enlivened with intent so as to become a form of *engaged looking or staring*.

> The intensity of engaged staring arises not from hostility, curiosity, or enforced distance but rather from a pressing need to know, to make sense of the epistemological challenge before one's eyes. Engaged staring reaches out rather than shrinks back. It meets rather than dismisses. It intrudes, most often benevolently, because it is on an urgent mission for knowledge. (p. 188).

Significantly, Garland Thompson (2006) and Renwick et al. (2018), gives examples of how disabled people use a variety of strategies in public spaces to hasten the movement away from the arrested stare towards an engaged stare that the disabled person *intends* their audience to direct at them. In doing so, the disabled person as the object of the stare (the staree), can take charge of the encounter and gain greater (but not total) control in determining the structure and outcome of the staring engagement. This allows them to transform a potentially discomforting interaction into an unexpected opportunity for mutual transformation.

Located within the complex webs of different kinds of staring described above, a number of the participants were aware that visually striking tattoos operated as a performative strategy to challenge the power of the ableist stare in its arrested form, redirecting it towards the elective and higher status aspects of their embodied identity e.g. the tattoos. Alex stated:

> I guess what you could say is that they [the tattoos] draw people's attention away from the wheelchair if you want to look at it in that way. I mean people come up to me and instead of saying oh, you know…like before I had people saying, people would come over to me if I was in a pub or out and about and people would say, 'What happened to you? Did you get hit by a car? Did you have a car crash?' They were the two most common questions…But since I got the sleeve [full arm tattoo, see Figure 2], people are like, 'Wow, that's a cool tattoo, when did you get that done? How long did it take? Why did you get it done? Have you got any other tattoos?' And people kind of forget about the wheelchair, they don't

ask questions about it, or it takes them kind of about 10 minutes to ask about it. So I suppose you could say it is kind of distraction.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

For Alex, his 'sleeve' was important in subverting the arrested and ableist stare through manipulating the tyrannies of perception and perfection. Rather than the stare of able bodied others centering on Alex's disability and making associated negative meanings (the tyrannies of perception), he creates artwork on his skin that is expressive of his 'cool' masculine identity and appeals to a different form of 'bodily perfectionism' that challenges normative ideals about how disabled bodies are supposed to look and express themselves. The arrested stare is, therefore, refocused from his disability and the stigmatising signifier of the wheelchair towards his body as an art form. In this process, an ontological space opens up for Alex offering him an alternative identity position to occupy within the social interaction which provides him with a sense of greater control over the process whilst also presenting him with the possibility of shifting the arrested stare towards an engaged stare.

For Pitts (2003), in choosing to permanently mark his flesh in the ways he has, Alex is able to use his body as a potential site of action, protest and mutual transformation rather than just a site of discipline and normalisation. For Alex, this involves him using one set of identity categories to subvert another. Thus, he draws on the strong masculine identity expressed by his full arm, sleeve tattoo, to displace and redirect the ableist stare from his disability. While this is a form of resistance at one level, it needs to be recognised that at another level, by enacting an accepted version of masculinity via the sleeve tattoo on his arm, Alex also reproduces and is disciplined by a

gender norm associated with certain kinds of male bodies framed within Connell's (1995) notion of hegemonic masculinity. For Alex, therefore, and other disabled athletes like him, this means that an action that is intended to transgress and challenge certain normative ideals in any given situation can simultaneously operate to reinforce, replicate, and sustain others.

One of the major motivations for undergoing body modifications reported in the literature is to create and maintain a self-identity that is special and distinctive from others (Atkinson, 2003; Leider 2015; Sweetman 2012; Wohlrab et al. 2007; Yuen-Thompson 2015). This is true for our participants who also wanted their body modifications to be distinctive and unique, positioning them as different from the markings of others. Alex said, 'I guess my tattoos kind of reflect who I am'. As indicated above, however, our participants are already marked out as distinctive by virtue of their visible physical disability. Therefore, rather than simply marking individuality, the disability itself becomes the centrepiece of the tattoo and thus reworks a mark of pathology and stigma into a mark of individuality and pride. Thus, Alex reflects on his full spinal tattoo (see Figure 3) that includes the 'cracked' vertebrae at level C5 that caused his disability as follows:

> I saw this girl with angel wings on her back. I was like, that looks really fucking cool. That is awesome. So I started looking for a big back piece, a one-off back piece. And the next thing I thought of was, 'Oh, I'll get my spine tattooed down my back'. I went down to my physiotherapist a few days later and I got the big chart off the wall, one of the ones with the big close up of the spinal column. 'Can I borrow that?' and he was like 'Why?' I told him. He was like, 'That would be

> fucking cool!' So I just grabbed it and went into a tattoo shop in town and spoke to the guy and he said, 'Yeah! That's one of the best ideas I have ever heard and I have been tattooing for 14 or 15 years. I'll start tomorrow if you want.' So he was really into it and so was I. I just thought 'Fuck it, let's go for it'. Then the next day we started it. It was something that was unique to me. I checked it out on the net the next day, making sure no one else had one or anything like that so, it was just something that was unique to me and I hadn't seen it around, so it ties in well, if you want a tattoo to have a meaning then that is a pretty good one.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

In his quest for originality and uniqueness, Alex, like Jenny and Steve who also had multiple body modifications, appear to be celebrating the alterity of their bodies through emphasising difference and the uniqueness of their disability. Their choices could be taken as an indicator of their active decision not to be reduced to the 'ugliness' of their impairment and mark out a specific form of disability pride. Several participants directly stated that their body modifications were a statement of their pride in themselves as a disabled person. For example, in the following interview extract, Matthew describes the kind of tattoo he hopes to have on his body in the future.

> Matthew: I want a couple [of tattoos]. I want my spine drawn with all the metal work and that showing.
>
> Interviewer: Why do you want that?
>
> Matthew: I am proud of my back – I like it. I want it up my neck, starting from

> just where I can't feel all down my spine, showing the metal work. I want some of my ribs shown as well. Then on my arms I want linked flames all the way up, with the English flag, obviously because I am English. And because my Granddad was Welsh, I want the Welsh flag tattoo on the other arm, which will be quite cool.
>
> Interviewer: Is that important to you then, having that tattoo and showing other people?
>
> Matthew: Yeah, that I am proud of it. That it has not put me down. You have got to be proud of what you have got, not what you haven't got. I'm not afraid of it [SCI].

The tattoos desired by Matthew are designed to draw attention to and celebrate his body, including his SCI – which may well be an anathema to mainstream norms and values. His tattoos will be a visual marker of pride in his disability identity. In announcing this through his tattoos he can be seen to be resisting and defying commonly held medico-tragedy models of disability and visibly demonstrating agency and defiance towards paternal medical authority and disability stigma.

Alternatively, Alex gains pride through the mutual understanding of the meanings of his tattoos from those who, like him, have experienced SCI as opposed to those who have not. As the following quote highlights, Alex recognises that his tattoos can be subjected to various reading depending on the social context:

> If you're in a nightclub or whatever people will think you just have a big cool

> tattoo down your back because they see it and nothing else. But when you're in rehab or playing games and people know about spinal injuries a little bit, they instantly recognise it as the spine and are like 'Fuck, shit, you have your spine tattooed down your back!' I'm like 'Oh yeah!' That is nice. I get a bit of self-satisfaction I suppose showing people who know when I do show them.

Just as body modification for disabled athletes has been shown to operate differently from those with ablebodied identities in terms of re-inscribing rather than reclaiming identity, differences in terms of the individualising imperative are also evident. Here, body modifications are a means by which ableist norms and values, encapsulated by 'the stare', can be subverted and individual pride in disabled embodiment can be experienced and expressed. Alongside this, it is important to acknowledge that the tattoos displayed on the bodies of disabled athletes can also operate to reproduce and confirm ableist and normative ideals associated with those involved in disability sport. This issue is highlighted in the following section.

Articulating gendered sexuality

Disabled bodies are often portrayed as non-gendered and asexual (Sparkes, Brighton and Inckle, 2014). Acting against this, tattoos can operate to reassert and confirm masculine and feminine identities in specifically sexual ways, as indeed tattoos often do for ablebodied men and women. This is especially so when they are associated with specific disability sports, such as, wheelchair rugby that has earned a reputation for being aggressive and violent in nature. Unsurprisingly, the tattoos chosen by male participants in this study accentuate core aspects of hyper-masculinity and hegemonic masculinity. As

Jenny explained during interview when the discussion turned to the heavily tattooed body of Mark Zupan, the USA wheelchair rugby captain, member of the gold winning medal team at the Bejiing Paralympic Games, and star of the film *Murderball*:

> He looks like he's an athlete I guess. He looks like he's a bit of an *animal*, because he has got tattoos and stuff like that... Yeah, a lot of the guys [who play wheelchair rugby] do have tattoos but then maybe that's the sport they play. I don't think it has anything to do with the fact they are in a wheelchair.

Alex agrees that 'the big tattoos, it's quite a masculine sport, so, I suppose tattoos are quite a masculine thing to have or whatever'. This view is supported by ethnographic observations of the wheelchair rugby club included in the study. During training and in the changing rooms as clothing was disregarded, the body surfaces exposed revealed a range of 'masculine' looking tattoos. For example, patterned Celtic bands or Maori spearheads that represent 'courage and fight' were visible on the arms of a number of the male players which acted as further signifiers of heroic, violent and warrior like aspects of masculine athletic identity.

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

Jack emphasised the masculine significance of his tattoo on his upper right arm. Tensing his biceps muscle at the end of an interview he exclaims how he presents his body and his tattoo is an important part of the symbolic representation of a hegemonic masculinity he values:

> You think you've got good guns [biceps], these are 64 year old fucking guns! I'm sixty bloody four now, but I still look fucking good! I always make sure I wear a

> tight t-shirt with short sleeves when I go to the park in the summer to show off my arms and tattoo.

Compared to the discussion earlier in which tattoos were used as a potential form of resistance to subvert the ableist stare, the comments above by Alex and Jack indicate how the very same tattoos can be used differently in an act of compliance with normative ideals of what have been described as hegemonic, orthodox, and expected sporting masculinities (Anderson, 2009; Connell, 1995; Wellard, 2009). Such compliance, as Shuttleworth, Wedgwood and Wilson (2012) point out, is one option contained within the complex inter-sectional relationship that exists between disabled men and masculinities. Thus, drawing on the three types of relational responses (reliance, reformulation, rejection) by disabled men to hegemonic masculinity as outlined by Gerschick and Miller (1994, 1995), the use of tattoos by Alex and Jack in this instance can be seen as forming part of a reliance response that continues to internalise and embrace dominant ideals of masculinity (e.g., physical strength, athleticism, and independence) into their sense of self (also see, Sparkes and Brighton, 2019; Sparkes, Brighton and Inckle, 2018a; Sparkes and Smith, 2002)

In contrast, even though Jenny participates in the masculinised sport of wheelchair rugby, her tattoos were different to those of the men. For example, she has a small tattoo of the Paralympic logo behind her left ear (see Figure 5) that is not visible unless she wears her hair tied back. Jenny had this inked after winning a medal at the 2012 Paralympic Games as it 'acted as a mark of my achievement. I chose behind the ear as it's fairly discreet and I can cover it with my hair. I have the other one (of the angel wing) behind the other ear too so it's symmetrical.'

Jenny also has the words ‘Life is fate’ in Arabic tattooed on the underside of her wrist (see Figure 6). When asked why she chose Arabic lettering for the latter tattoo, Jenny firstly highlighted the aesthetic appeal of it and, later, the significance of its meaning for her post-SCI life. She stated: ‘Shallow I know. But I like it as it looks pretty. It is a pretty looking language. I had someone check the meaning for me before I had it done’. For Jenny these tattoos were important in developing personal meaning about her gender, but she was also aware that this meaning contrasted with more traditional (i.e. her father’s) expectations of femininity:

> The tattoos are pretty and they make me feel pretty and feminine. They are small and are personal to me. I wish I could cover them up more, especially from my Dad. People can interpret them how they want. They are not for others, but hold private meaning for me and who I am.

The type of tattoo, and its location on the body, both shape and are shaped by gender norms. As Author (date), argues such modificatory practices can play an important role in asserting gendered identities that individuals may feel are threatened by the acquisition of disability. In this context, normative gendered symbols are used creatively in the service of producing a disabled body aesthetic that reaffirms gender and sexuality. Thus, in much the same way as ablebodied body modifiers choose tattoos in relation to norms of gender and sexuality – to either subvert or conform to them – so too do disabled athletes, whose body marks reiterate heteronormative gender and sexuality. According to Lindemann and Cherney (2008), the display of tattoos on their disabled bodies by Alex, Jack, and Jenny are communicative acts that can serve various functions. For example, they can challenge ableist views of disability and transform the stigma associated with their condition via

enactments of traditional forms of masculinity and femininity. At the same time, Lindemann and Cherney recognise that these displays can reify patriarchal notions of gender as well as validate traditional, often ableist, norms of masculinity and femininity that complicate the social meanings of tattoos for disabled athletes.

Narrative mapping

Leader (2015, 3) talks of people with tattoos as 'walking books that have aesthetic merit and narrative content'. She reminds us that the tattoo 'is an active agent in lived experience, and in the narrative that agency is reinforced in the telling' (p. 4). In this process, the meaning of any body modification can change over time and also in relation to the context in which the telling takes place. Our participants with multiple body markings (Jenny, Alex, Matthew, Steve) recognised that these constituted both the meaningful events and views of the world at that point in their lives.

Although Alex and Matthew gave alternative rationales for their provocative spinal tattoos, they acknowledged that such markings represented permanent reminders of epiphanous moments in their lives that they wished to embody and engrain into their identity. Alex comments on his spinal length tattoo as follows:

> It's basically the bones of the spinal column, done from C1 done down to the very last one, right down the bum. Then on the 5th and 6th vertebrae there is the crack, the crack tattooed in to show where I broke my neck like, that is pretty much it…I guess the crack shows what happened to me…It's kind of a nice memento to have.

Another participant in the study, saw Alex's tattoo on a television documentary and in social media, and subsequently began to think about using this type of tattoo to mark the

occasion of his own SCI. He stated, ‘There’s this guy, he has a tattoo down his spine showing his injury on his neck, I want to get one like that, to remember it. I also want to get the date of my injury at the bottom of my back to mark the day I did it.’ Tattoos, therefore, can become a way for individuals to re-narrate their life-changing SCI through another permanent change to their corporeality.

Body modifications did not, however, just symbolise important events in the lives of participants that happened in the past. They were also used to explain to themselves and others how they understood the world through their bodies at particular moments, including the present. For example, as noted previously, Jenny had the words ‘life is fate’ in Arabic tattooed into the underside of her wrist in order to embody the philosophy she holds to life post-SCI. Discussing the significance of this tattoo she states that they mark: ‘who I am...what I *now* think of the world.’

Modification practices were not only undertaken to mark a previous sense of biography, but also actively assisted in constructing coherent personal narratives in the present. This is evident in the following comment from Alex where he explains why he got one tattoo covered by another:

> Being Irish, the first ever tattoo I had was of a tri-coloured Shamrock on my left arm, I have had it covered it up since (with a Japanese themed tattoo). The second one I had done, I suppose when I was thinking of the next one getting done, I was quite careful about where I got them placed strategically, and what they meant to me at the time, that's when I thought of the spine tattoo.

This reconstruction of meanings associated with a tattoo is also evident in Steve’s reflections on a tattoo he had done prior to his SCI:

> I'm two people. I'm my 'old self' what I class as a bad boy, an absolute womanising wanker. But now I have gone the other way. I got to somehow get in the middle, but I don't know how to get in the middle, maybe this [tattoo of a girl in provocative pose on the side of his torso] will help...It's who I was, a reminder and important to me, but it's marked on me now.

Steve's comment illustrates how body modifications can be given different meanings over time and how they can used constructively and creatively in the process of narrating a different and more positive sense of self post-SCI. The tattoo reminds Steve of his former misogynist self that he feels he has moved away from as part of his development and growth as disabled person towards a better self. In this process he constructs a coherent life narrative that integrates a variety of selves from the past, present, and the future as part of his ongoing body project.

In terms of constructing future senses of self via the use of multiple tattoos, it is interesting to note how Alex also incorporates both spiritual and mechanistic notions of the body:

> Alex: On my left arm is a Japanese theme, so on the right arm I want to get a Pacific theme, like a Maori cross. On the left, I want to get, from the knee down, I want to get a Catholic theme done, and on the other one I want to get kind of a biomechanical look, like if you peel the skin away you can see all the kind of machinery working, like a mechanical theme. So for me, that would be my perfect set of tattoos on myself like.

> Interviewer: Why the biomechanical theme?
>
> Alex: I like to think, the way I have it my head is if you look inside me all the fuses are blown and the wires are hanging out, and if they are repaired it would help me walk again, so that is the idea of the theme behind getting the biomechanical tattoo…Although it's related to my injury, it is not, if you know what I mean? It's like the spine and the cracks in my spine with the injury. Whenever I think of it, I think of a piston, and there is a crack in the piston and there are wires coming out of a fuse box or something like that.

As Sullivan (2001, 19) emphasises, tattoos need to be understood as a process (rather than an object) in and through which the 'ambiguous and open-ended character of identity and of meaning is constantly (re)negotiated in and through relations with others and with a world'. For her, therefore, any tattoo will generate different meanings depending on the embodied history of the person, who interprets, and also on the relationship between them and the tattooed person. These meanings, as evidenced in the comments by the disabled athletes above, draw on the dominant discourses regarding the body in western cultures and share many purposes with the narrative maps marked out by tattoos on ablebodied bodies. However, the narrative map and self that is inscribed by these marks is always in dialogue with the post-SCI body and therefore suggests identity-specific attempts to construct a future-directional narrative map within the constraining structures surrounding a disabled identity.

Closing Remarks

The motivations expressed above by our participants for modifying their bodies post-SCI are consistent with those noted for the wider population by Atkinson (2003), Carmen et al. (2012), Sweetman (2012), and Wohlrab et al. (2007), in that they deliberately had tattoos to mark not only the specific event of their SCI as an epiphanous moment in their lives that they wished to embody and engrain into their identity but also, as with Alex, the exact level (C5) at which his SCI occurred. Such body modifications, as a lived experience involving a permanent change in their external appearance served, therefore, as an indelible connection with a specific period in their lives that initiated a dramatic change in their body-self relationships and attendant identities.

Besides marking the event of their SCI, the reflections offered by our participants also show how their choice to modify their bodies post-SCI was part of process of re-inscribing their identity that involved agency, ownership, distinctiveness, uniqueness, and a sense of control over their body and the construction of their newly acquired identity as a disabled person. This was especially so in relation to the development, confirmation and integration into their sense of self of an athletic and sporting cyborg identity (Apelmo, 2017; Sparkes, Brighton and Inckle, 2018a). In combination, these coalesced to generate a sense of 'disability pride' in their body-selves in relation to their physical prowess as skilled, strong, and dynamic performers.

Despite feeling proud of their bodies and their sporting achievements post-SCI our participants were not exempt from the ableist stare in its various forms. Here, in common with other disabled people the visible tattoos of our participants were used in certain contexts to divert the stare away from their disability and towards different, more salient and relevant, aspects of their embodied identities. This strategy affords a greater

level of control over the interactional processes with ablebodied people than might normally be available by allowing disabled people to reclaim an identity of their choosing whilst simultaneously challenging stereotypical ableist perceptions of disabled people as weak, passive and a 'tragedy.' As part of this challenge there is the possibility of shifting the arrested gaze of the ablebodied person towards an engaged stare that has the potential to reconstruct a potentially discomforting interaction into an opportunity for the mutual transformation of both starer and staree (Garland Thompson, 2006; Renwick et al., 2018).

Of course, the performative use of tattoos by disabled persons as a strategy to divert the attention of the ablebodied starer away from their disability towards other salient aspects of their identity still takes place within an interactional space infused by the power differentials associated with ableism and its privileges. Thus, while the disabled person may gain a greater level of control over the encounter, and is better able to determine the structure and outcome of the staring engagement, such control is not total. Rather, this relative control is tenuous and contingent on the reaction of the ablebodied starer. Thus, the disabled staree always remains vulnerable and cannot guarantee the outcome of this diversion strategy. As Garland Thompson (2006) reminds us unpredictable things can happen when people stare at other people. This is particularly so, when separated staring is involved that has expanded to revulsion or shifted to hostile spectatorship. Indeed, attempts to use tattoos as part of a deflection strategy in this instance may open up the possibility of the disabled person being subjected to what MacGregor (1974) calls an 'aesthetic rejection' of both their disabled body and the tattoos they have been chosen to mark it.

In terms of the types of tattoos chosen by our participants, and their location on

the body, the gendered dynamics of body modification operating in the wider society as described by Atkinson (2003) and Roberts (2012) are in evidence. Thus, Jenny opted for a small angel wing tattoo surrounding her right ear, a small tattoo of the Paralympic logo behind her left ear, and had the words 'Life is fate' in Arabic tattooed on the underside of her wrist. The size and discreet location on her body of these tattoos are in direct contrast to, for example, the large full sleeve tattoo on Alex's left arm and his full-length spinal tattoo all the way down his back. As pointed out earlier, within prevailing discourses of heteronormative femininity and masculinity, the location on the body and the type and size of tattoos inked are read very differently for women when compared to men.

Finally, in telling stories about their tattoos our participants illuminated the significance of their body modifications and how they worked alongside the adoption of other sports related identities, to provide not only a narrative map of their body-self relationships before and after SCI but also a sense of narrative coherence regarding these different periods, as described by Linde (1993), by weaving together tales of occupying multiple identities over time. For Becker (1997), this ability to construct narrative coherence following disruptive life events, such as SCI and becoming disabled, can play a crucial role in how people give meaning to their lives and influences the possibilities for positive psychosocial development and well-being.

Set against the points made above we would also point out that tattoos like Jack's (Olympic rings surrounded by the lion's crest of the Great British Paralympic Association and the letters 'GB') not only provide a signature of enduring devotion to athletic culture and values, but it can also suggest that some elite disabled athletes readily accept and submit themselves to discourses of ability, nationalism, and Paralympism. Although the

Great Britain and Olympic Rings logo and that of the Paralympics *can* create a collective identity through emphasising exclusiveness, such tattoos as markers of 'distinction' and 'superiority' can equally create divisions and undermine others deemed to be 'lower' in the ability hierarchy of disability sport in particular, and disability sport more generally.

In closing, we would also point to some limitations of our study. The umbrella term 'disability' encompasses a broad range of physical, sensory, psychological, and cognitive capacities and variations whose boundaries are fluid, changing, and expanding. In this regard, our study has focused narrowly on a small group of people who have acquired their disability due to SCI and who have then chosen to participate in wheelchair sports which requires high-level mobility technology for performance. This raises questions about how people with acquired disabilities, both visible and/or invisible, and who opt to involve themselves in sports that require little technological aid engage with and give meaning to body modifications. Equally, what about the place of body modification in the lives of people with acquired visible and/or visible disabilities that do not become involved in sport?

Questions can also be asked about how people with disabilities since birth or early childhood engage with body modification practices should they become involved in sports or not. In addition, given that our participants were British, white and heterosexual, we need to know more about how disabled people from different nationalities, ethnicities, and sexual orientations engage with body modification practices whether or not they become involved in sport. Clearly, our study raises more questions that it can possibly answer. We hope, however, that our findings are a first step in addressing the gap in research about disabled athletes and body-modification, and that it inspires further

interest in, and research about, body-modification with disabled people, as well as the complexity of disabled embodiment, identities and life-courses more generally.

Notes

[1] Much of Jeffrey's work is problematic in this regard, particularly in relation to trans people as well as disabled people.

[2]Jack's choice of this emblem for his tattoo is historically located and was inked in the 1990s before the Paralympics chose their own unique logo in 2003.

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