

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Beyond disability and ethnicity challenges: Narrative of a Paralympian**

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**This study reports a narrative which highlights the cultural influences over sporting experiences and focuses on the challenges in overcoming the barriers. The narrative provides a synopsis of the dynamics of ethnicity, culture and athleticism of an Islamic woman from the Islamic state of Malaysia. With an unstructured interview, the narrative was acquired and analyzed using Foucauldian discourse analysis in conjuncture to feminist poststructuralist theory. The results indicated the athlete to have experienced insensitive attitudes of people towards her participation in a strength sport like powerlifting. The analysis also revealed that the Paralympian was also subjected to the initial disagreement toward her participation in sports owing to her physical condition and womanhood. This study describes the pathway of successfully overcoming the challenges to compete in major sporting events.**

**Key words:** Powerlifting, ethnicity, culture, disability, Foucault, Islamic women.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study explores the experience of an Olympic physically challenged athlete and seeks to understand the cultural impact on overcoming challenges on the athletic experience. This study extracts a brief account of a particular cultural context from the narrative of an elite Paralympic athlete. The Paralympic games are the world's second largest sporting event, second to the Olympics. It first began in 1960 in Rome, Italy with 400 athletes from 23 nations. Paralympic games include the participation of athletes in 21 sports, many of which are played in wheelchairs (Woods, 2007). Specifically considering Paralympic powerlifting, powerlifting is a sport associated with athletes who are physically challenged. This sport involves the athlete to perform only bench press, thus it is the ultimate test of upper body strength. Powerlifting was first introduced in 1964 in the second Paralympic games in Tokyo. Initially, it was called weightlifting but later changed to 'Powerlifting'. Disability sport refers to a sport which is specifically practiced by athletes with disabilities. Semerjian (2010) defined disability as physical impairments that interferes with the performance of an activity of daily living and limits the individual abilities to perform physical tasks they desire to execute. The different types of disability sport include:

Deaflympic, Paralympics or Special Olympic games. Deaflympics includes physical challenges such as deaf or hearing impairment (Lauff, 2007) while Paralympics includes elements such as amputee, visual impairment, cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, les autre and spinal cord injury (Accessibility.com.au, 2009). Disabled people were considered as minorities. They were either discriminated or segregated from the rest of the 'normal' people in the society (Coakley, 1998; Woods, 2007). This perhaps, may be due to lack of knowledge that was common in the society earlier. However, the scenario has changed over the years wherein the society is witnessing a shift in the attitude of people.

Many physically challenged individuals are looking forward for a career through sport participation (Woods, 2007). According to Coakley (1998), Woods (2007) and Semerjian (2010), technology has advanced to a great extent that individuals with disabilities utilize technologies out of necessity. It is with these technologies such as wheelchairs, prosthetic and crutches that athlete or physically challenged non athletes, challenges to participate in sport and exercise of their choice. This technological advancement has elevated the confidence of every physically challenged individual's such that they

feel confident and 'capable' as able-bodied individuals. To lend support to this statement, researches conducted in the nineties (Asken, 1991; Paulsen et al., 1991) compared the profile of mood states results and measures of self efficacy result of able-bodied and disabled bodied athletes. The results indicated that there were similarities between able-bodied and disabled bodied athletes in terms of the psychological and mood profiles (Semerjian, 2010: 264). A comparison study done on wheelchair and disabled non athletes by Roeder and Aufesser (1986) found that wheelchair athletes depicted higher levels of self-esteem and physical orientation than disabled non athletes.

Similarly, Henschen et al. (1992) found differences in psychological mood states such as anger and tension were low among those athletes who qualified for United States wheelchair basketball Paralympics team and those who were not qualified. Therefore, these studies indicated that despite being physically challenged, a disabled athlete tend to consider themselves to be as normal as an able bodied athlete by courageously overcoming the physical struggles and participating in sports that is best suiting their physical make up and capacities.

## **SOCIO-CULTURAL INFLUENCES**

Semerjian (2010) posited that there is an increased attention given to the study of disabilities from early times; however, researchers have rarely engaged in cultural aspects within disability sports. Snyder and Mitchell (2001) stated that "within the cultural belief system, the 'normal' body provides the baseline for determinations of desirability and human value". Sparkes and Smith (2002) researched disability from a sociological perspective. They researched on how disability is experienced and understood within the lived body among people with spinal cord injuries. The results highlighted that prior to their injuries, these individuals had not considered how masculinity was compared to their physical abilities; however, after their injuries, they were more conscious of their body type and questioned their masculinity. The focus on the experiences of embodiment, race and gender issues has lacked specific attention by the majority of researchers considering disability in sports (Semerjian, 2010). Hughes and Patterson (1997) had written that "disability is experienced in, on and through the body....most importantly, the (impaired) body is not just experienced: it is also the very basis of experience". Disability not only marks an individual's identity and experience within a social context but also by race and gender (Semerjian, 2010). This study is explained within the cultural context of an Islamic state in Malaysia.

On 1st October, 2005, Kelantan was officially declared as an Islamic state in Malaysia and Kota Bharu, as the

Islamic city. This title was bestowed by the Sultan of Kelantan, Tuanku Ismail Petra based on the observations of authenticity in the Islamic principles incorporated in every aspect of daily life among the Kelantanees (Hilley, 2001; The Star News, 2005; Kota Bharu Municipal council, 2010). The rules and regulations imposed by the Kota Bahru Municipal Council in this state is based on Islamic law which results in certain limitations to both men and women in terms of their representations, actions, reactions and behavior in the society. Particularly, women within the Islamic state are seen to have more limitations when compared to men. For example: The Kota Bahru Municipal Council discourages females from wearing indecent attire such as body hugging outfits that would reveal the body shape, blouse that show the navel, transparent blouses, mini-skirts and tight pants. Kelantanees culture requires all Muslim women to wear a headscarf and they are restricted in participating in water sport activities such as swimming and diving. The rule states that those caught for dressing immodestly may be fined up to RM 500/- (Ringgit) which is approximately 100 Euros (Hilley, 2001). A common misconception among most Islamic families about sport is: 'sport is masculine in nature' (Birrell, 1983; Bryson, 1994; Murray and Matheson, 1993; Willis, 1994; Yuka, 2002). Hall (1988) outlined that he identified 70 published articles, thesis and conference papers between the year 1965 to 1987 that profoundly highlight issues of femininity being challenged within the sport domain (Walseth, 2006). Those women who are physically challenged felt that they could not embody their femininity due to their lack of mobility (Semerjian, 2010). Although, some of the researchers have identified gender issues in sport (Hall, 1988; Walseth, 2006; Gill and Kamphoff, 2010) and some studies have pointed out that there has been limited amount of research done on the ethnic minority women on able-bodied (Carrington et al., 1987; De Knop et al., 1995; Johnson, 2000; Rowe and Champion, 2000; Scraton, 2001; Walseth, 2006) and disabled bodied athletes (Semerjian, 2010) which has led to a low participation level in sport or physical activity.

To understand the cultural turn (Ryba et al., 2010) of an athlete with physical impairments, Foucauldian theory (Foucault, 1977) together with the feminist poststructuralist theory (Weedon, 1997) were used for identifying the discourses within the narrative of a Paralympic powerlifting Muslim woman from Malaysia.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Foucauldian concepts has a profound impact within sociology of sport (Cole et al., 2004; Markula and Pringle, 2006) and cultural sport psychology; especially the feminist are most attracted to this because it deals with historically specific discursive relations and social practices (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). According to

Weedon (1997), women's bodies are a site of discourse production. It is central to the constitution of social norms of femininity; its governance of patriarchy over women and their exclusion from most aspects of public life. Thus, the main motive of feminist cultural studies is to identify the mechanism of power; how it is produced, reproduced and resisted (McGannon and Busanich, 2010). In order to explore this, Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon (Foucault, 1977: 200; Cole et al., 2004; Markula and Pringle, 2006) explained in Foucault book of Discipline and Punish (1977) was used as the theoretical framework. Foucault explains that the body is 'docile' which can be manipulated through effective means of discipline (Foucault, 1977) such as the Panopticon (Foucault, 1977). Bentham's model prison was based on an architectural figure (Foucault, 1977: 200; Markula and Pringle, 2006) for such power relations. The model consisted of a guard tower at the center of the prison cells. The supervisor kept watch over the prisoners and the inmate were made to believe that they were under constant surveillance (Foucault, 1977; Cole et al., 2004; Markula and Pringle, 2006).

Foucault's (1977: 201) arrangement made the prisoner behave and take responsibility of their own actions (Markula and Pringle, 2006). Using the prisoners as an analogy, Foucault referred that the power dynamics is not exclusive to prisons but its effects can be found in everyday situations as well (Foucault, 1977: 201). While majority of the research has relied on disability in sport, very limited knowledge exist from sociological aspects such as race, gender and ethnicity (Semerjian, 2010). Therefore, to fill the void within the sport and exercise psychology field and cultural psychology field, the current study attempts to explore the subjective experience of a physically challenged woman competing at major competitions.

## METHODS

### Research approach

This research follows qualitative research methods wherein narrative inquiry was adopted as an interview method to collect the data. With feminist post structuralism as a theoretical framework, in conjunction with Foucauldian discourse analysis (Willig, 2008), discourse(s) were unravelled within the narratives of the Paralympian. In particular, Foucauldian discourse analysis (Willig, 2008) has a significant role in identifying the discourses embedded within the narratives. Its main focus centres on giving attention to mechanisms of power relations within the cultural context which will highlight the different subjective positions and subjective experiences experienced by a Paralympic powerlifting athlete from Malaysia.

### Participant

The participant in this study was Saba (pseudonym), a female aged 35 years of age representing the country at 'Paralympic powerlifting competitions'. She has been competing in powerlifting for

approximately 10 years at an elite level. She belongs to the Islamic state of Malaysia and practiced Islamic religion.

### Procedure

Prior to the study, frequent visits were made to the powerlifting training venue during their training period to enhance interaction and develop a good rapport. The visits helped to establish a good rapport in a short span of time which enabled a good level of trust and open communications with the athlete. A written consent form was gained from the participant as maintenance for ethics in research. To guarantee anonymity, pseudonym was used to identify the participant.

### Data collection (interview guide)

As stated previously, narrative inquiry was used as the methodology to collect the data from the Paralympian. The interview remained unstructured and audio taped for acquiring the desired information on the subjective experience of being a paralympic powerlifting athlete belonging to the Muslim community in Malaysia. The interview began with a simple question: 'tell me your story to being physically active in Malaysia.' This interview was conducted for approximately 75 min and above which was later transcribed verbatim.

### Data analysis

The data of the elite Paralympian was transcribed verbatim from an audio taped interview ranging to an approximately 75 minutes and above with a total of 20 single spaced pages. Foucauldian discourse analysis (Willig, 2008) was adopted to analyze the interview transcripts individually by using a six step method adopted by Smith (2008). Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) (Willig, 2008) was a notable work of Michel Foucault who was interested in exploring the relationship between language and subjectivity. It builds on the theoretical backdrop that focuses upon the language and its significance within the constitution of social and psychological life (Smith, 2008) of the individual. The analysis started by looking at the different stories as a whole, identify the object within the context and the different discursive constructions that makes up the object. This guided into the unravelling discourse (s) in relation to the subject position and subjective experience within the context. To briefly explain the six step procedure of FDA explained by Willig (2008) is as follows:

#### Stage 1

**Discursive constructions:** The first stage involved in identifying the different ways in which object within a spoken topic are constructed.

#### Stage 2

**Discourses:** This stage involved in locating the various discursive constructions of the object within wider discourses.

#### Stage 3

**Action orientation:** In the third stage of analysis, closer examinations of the discursive context are examined. Here I looked at what is gained from constructing the object in a particular way at

a particular point in the text as well as, we looked at what is its function and how it related to other constructions produced in the surrounding text.

#### **Stage 4**

**Positioning:** After having identified the various discursive construction and discourses, I identified the subject position within the discourse. Subject position is the location of the individual within the rights and duties that provide meaning to the object that is spoken about.

#### **Stage 5**

**Practice:** This stage is concerned about the relationship between discourses and practices. It explores the ways in which discursive constructions and subject position open or close down opportunities for action. In other words, it looks at what can be said and done by the subjects positioned within the context.

#### **Stage 6**

**Subjectivity:** The final stage of analysis explores the relationship between discourse and subjectivity; that is the way of being in the world and the way of seeing the world. It is more concerned with individual's feelings and emotions that could be experienced from the subject position held within the context spoken.

Data credibility was strengthened with the discussion until a consensus was reached. The categorization process was constantly reviewed by an expert researcher in qualitative research methods to make sure that the information that was collected was authentic.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Ethnicity and athleticism**

The purpose of this study is to describe the subjective experience of a Paralympic powerlifting athlete of Malaysia. The result derived was exclusive to one participant named Saba. This research also identifies the different barriers she encounters as a Muslim woman when she is involved in a strength sport such as powerlifting. Saba's narrative provides a synopsis of the dynamics of ethnicity, athleticism and culture. The results discussed in this paper uses Foucauldian's lens of the Panopticon to explore Saba's personal experience as a woman and as an Olympian. Saba originates from the Islamic state in Malaysia. She is currently a 'Paralympian' who is representing Malaysia for 'powerlifting'. She discloses that people from the Islamic state of Malaysia are still believed to have conservative thoughts. Many continue to have an attitude that sport or physical activity is not female dominated. In her narrative, she explains that when she first decided to pursue a career in sports, her father disagreed to her participation as he believed that powerlifting is a masculine sport. This is evident from the following statement:

"You know, when I first told my father that I want to be a part of the powerlifting sport, the first thing he told me was; how can you go for that sport. It is not meant for woman....Only a man can lift the weights and you are a girl..... but later I made him understand and finally he said ok."

She also mentioned that when she disclosed her decision to her relatives and in-laws, they reacted negatively towards her participation. For example:

"... My relatives said: "why do you want to go for such sport." My in-law's also did not give me the support at first. They said: "what will you achieve out of this? Powerlifting is not for women. Everyone said something or the other because I am a woman and I have this condition of disability. But I believed in myself and my husband supported me. So I proved myself in the trials and other such things and now am part of the national team today and everybody in my family is very happy and proud of me."

Although, Saba was dejected from the negative reactions from her close friends and family members, she has successfully overcome the barriers of society's conservative attitude of exclusion towards Muslim women and is currently representing Malaysian in major international events.

From a Foucauldian point of view the aforementioned context points out that the power (Foucault, 1977) workings of conservative attitude that continues to prevail among people even today have a significant role in discouraging women's participation in sport. Looking from a feminist perspective, it indicated indifferent attitudes of male members towards the females. In other words it signifies gender discrimination. From her narrative, I found that she expressed her disagreement and unhappiness over society's insensitive attitudes toward women participating in sport. This is evident from the following statements:

".....How can you go for that sport.... Only a man can lift the weights and you are a girl....What will you achieve out of this?..... Powerlifting is not for woman....".

This result of conservatism was profoundly highlighted in the previous researches done by Birrell (1983), Bryson (1994), Murray and Matheson (1993), Willis (1994) and Yuka (2002). Analyzing from Saba's narrative, I derived Saba to hold a subjective position of an empowering woman who believed in her abilities and challenged society's misconception by being successful in her participation in 'Paralympic powerlifting'. It is clear from the context that Saba was unhappy with the way her father, relatives and her in-laws reacted. Understanding, from a feminist point of view, I analyzed that she does not appreciate the society's old misconception that 'sport is masculine in nature' that is: sport is meant for man and

not for a woman (Birrell, 1983; Murray and Matheson, 1993; Bryson, 1994; Willis, 1994; Yuka, 2002) thus leading to gender exclusions in sport. This is evident from the following statement:

“Everyone said something because I am a woman and I have this condition of disability but I believed in myself. So I proved myself in the trials and other such things.”

This shows that women are considered inferior to men and disabled people are discriminated to participate in many activities because of the mindset of most people that physically challenged people are less privileged than able-bodied individuals. This result is similar to the researches done earlier by Coakley (1998) and Woods (2007). Although, Saba did not receive the support and encouragement she required from her relatives initially, she overcomes the barriers as a physically challenged woman from an Islamic community and proved to be successful at major Paralympic sport events. This is proven from her statement:

“Everyone said something because I am a woman and I have this condition of disability, but I believed in myself and my husband supported me. So I proved myself in the trials and other such things and I am in the team today and everybody is very happy and proud of me.”

This shows that Saba was a determined and a competent athlete for Malaysia.

### **Female embodiment and athleticisms**

Another issue that Saba highlighted in her narrative was on female embodiment and ethnicity requirement or a Muslim woman. Saba notifies that the main reason as to why she was objected from powerlifting participation was because powerlifting was a ‘strength sport’ which requires muscle development. Such developments would make a woman look more ‘masculine’. She provides a reference from her narrative in the following statement:

“..... The main reason why my father restricted in the beginning was because in powerlifting we need to build muscles for lifting the weights. So muscles will make me look manly and you see I am a woman.”

Saba belongs to 82.5 kg category. She notifies that her upper half of the body is more muscular than her lower half of her body. She emphasized that initially she felt shy to do her sport because of the kind of tight clothing attire that she has to wear which revealed her shape. This led to major distractions during her practice sessions and during competition events; however, she became more comfortable with her body type eventually and learnt to disassociate from unwanted distractions. The following statement from Saba’s narrative explains the

above-mentioned:

“.... For the first time I felt very shy to train because you see I have a big upper body that is carefully maintained to suit my category. So when I wear the sports wear for powerlifting, it reveals my shape and I used to feel very shy..... but later on I became more comfortable with my body.... I learnt to ignore it when I am training or when am in a competition.”

With regards to her head scarf (also called ‘tudung’) in Malaysia, she outlines that initially it was a distraction for her to perform her lifts during a competition situation as there is a tendency that it could move or detach from the head during the performance. She affirms that this could hamper her performance. Hence, for major competitions she risks ethnicity by removing the tudung so that it could benefit her performance. This is evident from the following statement:

“..Actually I am uncomfortable to wear the tudung and lift the weight because if it suddenly comes off, it will become a distraction for me and I will not win. So for competition like the Paralympics, I decided that I will remove it and after my performance I will put it back.”

Analyzing from a Foucauldian lens, I understood that the power (Foucault, 1977) dynamics of female anatomy in association with a woman’s perception to the environmental situation have a significant role in Saba’s natural ‘female’ tendency to feel shy about her body image. I outlined Saba to hold a subject position of a woman who manifests feelings of awkwardness, embarrassment and uncomfortable feelings with her body type which is a natural tendency of a woman. This is evident from the following statement:

“....So when I wear the sportswear for powerlifting it reveals my shape and I used to feel very shy.”

From this context, it is clear that initially Saba was very conscious of her body type such that she felt shy, awkward and embarrassed to wear tight sport wear that is required for powerlifting. Nevertheless, today she has learnt to dissociate from such distractions and learnt to focus on her performance. She is also found to risk ethnicity as a Muslim woman by drastically considering of removing her headscarf during a competition for her benefit and for the benefit of medal prospects to the country. Thus, she claims that she is currently comfortable with her body type and comfortable to perform her lifts without the tudung.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the present study provides an understanding of the cultural turn of an athlete with

physical impairment and the discourses embedded within the narrative of a Paralympic powerlifting athlete from an Islamic community in Malaysia. Considering the result of this study, it was found that Saba as a woman was restricted initially to be a part of powerlifting owing to her physical condition and an old misconception that sport is male dominated. She also highlighted that as a woman she felt very uncomfortable in her representation due to the tight sport wear attire and the tudung she has to wear. Both these issues imposed as a restriction to Saba, however, her determination and realization of her abilities despite being physically impaired made her overcome such obstacles and be successfully qualified into the elite Paralympic powerlifting team.

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