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Article

Articulations of Ableism in Sport and Physical Activity

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Abstract

Disabled people continue to experience ableism in sport and physical activity in many forms. Operating as a form of privilege, ableism encompasses a complex and enduring network of beliefs, processes, and practices that place value on nondisabled embodiment and shape our collective understandings of the self, our bodies, and our relationships, and how we perceive, and are perceived by, others. However, the breadth of ableist tendencies, attitudes, and practices prevalent within sport and physical activity are not clearly articulated. This study draws on data generated from eight focus group interviews with 50 participants from across the sport and active recreation sector in Aotearoa New Zealand to paint a fuller picture of how able-bodied privilege operates. Working back-and-forth between theory and data, we expand empirically on the concept of ableism in sport and physical activity, exploring covert and overt articulations of ableism expressed by sports practitioners, while locating them within a broader framework of able-bodied privilege and power. In so doing, we provide a sensitizing framework to identify different forms of ableism present in sport: from neoliberal, institutional, and enlightened attitudes through to benevolent, apologetic, aversive, and abject responses to disability. In illustrating these contemporary manifestations

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of ableism, we hope to develop a shared language for both understanding and challenging ableism in sport.

Keywords
able-bodied privilege, ableism, sport, physical activity, attitudes

Introduction

Disabled people typically experience various forms of *disablism* (Campbell, 2008), in which they are subject to forms of social oppression, exclusion, and the undermining of their well-being (Thomas, 1999). Disablism, while widespread, can be considered as a practical manifestation of a broader system of power and privilege that centers around a culturally embedded notion of "normality." This system of privilege is *ableism.* In its simplest definition, ableism is an ideological framework that privileges certain types of abilities over others. As Campbell (2009) argues, it comprises a "network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body" (p. 44), with wide-ranging implications. Operating as a form of subjection, ableism encompasses often hidden beliefs and standards that promote ableist normativity or a "normate" subject (see Garland-Thompson, 2001). Ableist subjection captures "how we know ourselves as subjects through these systems of meaning and control—the ways we understand our own bodies, the things we believe about ourselves and our relationships with other people and with institutions" (Spade, 2015, p. 6).

That ableism *exists* in sport, physical activity, and physical education is well established, with research consistently highlighting its harmful and systemically violent effects on disabled people (e.g., Ball & Haegele, 2024; Giese & Ruin, 2018; Peers et al., 2022 *inter alia*). Research has highlighted how ableism inherent in broader societal attitudes results in the devaluation of disability sport (Goodwin & Peers, 2011), and reduces participation in sport and physical activity—either through indirect or internalized forms of ableism (Brittain et al., 2020) or through systemic and structural barriers (Ives et al., 2019). Other research has illustrated the structuring effects of performance-driven, ableist logic on high-performance sport discourse and practice (see Townsend & Cushion, 2022), and also in physical education environments in which disabled children are positioned as "outsiders" (see Alves et al., 2022, 2025). Together, these studies highlight the difficulties in providing inclusive opportunities for disabled people in social environments that are implicitly and explicitly shaped by, and shaping of, ableist values, norms, and expectations.

The empirical study *of* ableism and *how* it manifests in sport and physical activity is less well understood, with scholars suggesting that ableism itself lacks conceptual depth or specificity (Alves et al., 2022; Peers et al., 2022). Peers et al. (2022) argue that ableism encompasses such a broad range of exclusionary processes that the accepted definition fails to capture the breadth of ableist tendencies, attitudes, and practices that are prominent within sport and physical activity. For example, nuanced articulations of ableism are evidenced in the production and consumption of Paralympic media narratives, all of which sustain the logic of *neoliberal* ableism (see Pullen et al., 2020). Neoliberal-ableism celebrates athletes with the "right kind of disability'' (Pullen et al., 2020, p. 719) and marginalises those who cannot emulate able-bodied norms. Furthermore, research has drawn on the notion of "*enlightened*" ableism (see Lyons, 2013) to examine how disability is positioned in adapted physical activity discourse (e.g., Peers et al., 2022) and in disability sport policy (e.g., McBean et al., 2022), arguing that the adoption of inclusionary rhetoric often masks the continuation of exclusionary practices in sport.

Thus, the contention that ableism is articulated in multiple, overlapping, and nuanced ways across sport is the starting point for this inquiry, and this is echoed in broader research that draws on critical disability studies. For example, ableism can be *institutionalized*, particularly in educational structures (e.g., Brown & Leigh, 2018), where policies, regulations, and practices work to marginalize and discriminate against disabled people. Ableism can also manifest at an interpersonal level, through *hostile*, *aversive*, *ambivalent*, and *paternalistic* attitudes and interactions towards disabled people (Nario-Redmond, 2019), as well as in uncritical or distorted understandings of disability (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017), termed "*dysconsciousness*." It can also be expressed in feelings of compassion, inspiration, and *benevolence* (Nario-Redmond, 2019) towards disabled people due to lowered expectations of their capabilities. The potential of sport, therefore, to reflect a range of forms of disability prejudice is significant.

Aims and Purpose

This research builds on the call to understand "what does ableism look like? What are its common manifestations?" (Nario-Redmond, 2019, p. 10). Our aim is to expand empirically on the concept and explore the overt, subtle, nuanced, and covert articulations of ableism within sport and physical activity. Importantly, developing an understanding of and challenging ableism requires a critical interrogation of "those most advantaged by and disposed to employing it" (Scuro, 2018, p. xxii). Hence, our research shifts the gaze *away* from disability and difference (and thus, disablism), to "what the study of disability tells us about the production, operation and maintenance of ableism" (Campbell, 2009, p. 4) and able-bodied privilege within contemporary sporting cultures.

Context

Despite heightened attention and awareness given to inclusionary rhetoric and policies in sport, active recreation, and play in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) (McBean et al., 2022), enduring inequalities remain in disabled people's physical activity participation and in health outcomes (Wilson et al., 2023). NZ has a relatively complex and fragmented sport landscape (McBean et al., 2022), characterized by a largely uncoordinated and differential commitment to disability from "mainstream" sports organizations, and a plethora of community-based specialist disability sport organizations competing for attention and funds to deliver to disabled people (McBean et al., 2022). This means that practitioners are situated within and across a sport and physical activity system that not only lacks cohesion but also perpetuates structural forms of ableism by positioning disability sport as peripheral rather than integral to the national sport system (McBean et al., 2022). Moreover, the lack of coordinated national leadership means that practitioners often lack clear pathways for professional development in disability sport, perpetuating gaps in knowledge, confidence, and critical reflection around inclusion (McBean et al., 2022). Given these systemic challenges, the New Zealand sport and physical activity landscape is a critical site for inquiry into ableism, providing a valuable context in which to examine how fragmented sport provision, institutional cultures, competing policy priorities, and social relationships collectively shape the marginalization of disabled people.

In providing critique, we are necessarily advocating for inclusion. Here, we conceptualize inclusion broadly as the access to, and opportunity for, participation in sport, noting that the "integral aspect of inclusion is that disabled people have the choice to participate with whom, how and where they want" based on their individual requirements and preferences (Christiaens & Brittain, 2023, p. 1049). Inclusion thus represents a process of negotiating space within sporting environments in which ableism is articulated across multiple layers of sporting practice (Christiaens & Brittain, 2023), and efforts to include that do not push the bounds of existing (ableist) systems are closer to "inclusionism" than true inclusion (Mitchell & Synder, 2020). It is necessary, therefore, to develop a shared language for both understanding and challenging ableist systems and practices in sport and physical activity to create space for true inclusion. It is in this space that the research sits.

Methodology

Background

In this article, we present some original qualitative data drawn from a wider three-year program of research that explores the extent to which underlying ableist discourses may infuse attitudes, policies, and program delivery across sport and physical activity. Institutional ethical approval was obtained, and the project was developed in collaboration with disabled young people from "pre-proposal" through to the translation of research (see, e.g., Carroll et al., 2018). Our research involved through the use of a disability advisory structure[1] at all stages of the project, and involved the leadership of disabled people as co-researchers. Our collective backgrounds reflect deep engagement with disability through personal experience, scholarship, advocacy, and community-based work. This diversity of perspectives has shaped our approach to the research, including the design, data collection, and interpretation.

Procedure

This article is based on the analysis of transcripts of eight focus group discussions held with 50 sports practitioners from across the sport and physical activity sector. These discussions were a final component of a wider study of ableism and were designed to critique the robustness and relevance of an ableism framework developed in earlier phases of the research. In brief, a theoretical framework informed by the scholarship on ableism outlined above was developed following a phase one investigation of the viewpoints held by participants on the sports participation of disabled people. The participants were purposively sampled, including physical education teachers, coaches, volunteers, and policy makers in leisure and sports organizations, including disability sports, at club, regional, and national levels. Q-methodology, combining a Q-sort[2] and associated semi-structured interviews, were used to investigate the viewpoints of the participants.

Our preliminary reading of ableism literature resulted in the identification of *neoliberal*, *institutional*, *enlightened*, and *dysconscious* forms of ableism, and these concepts became the starting point for developing an analytic framework. A recursive series of discussions by the research team following analysis of the Q-sort data (including interpretations of the "sorts" and a close reading of a range of interview transcripts) identified additional attitudes and discourses not covered in the preliminary framework, such as *pragmatic* and *benevolent* forms of ableism.

In the second phase of the research presented in this article, the framework was "workshopped" through a series of eight focus groups with 50 (22 male and 28 female) participants. These participants were situated variously in National Sports Organizations (NSOs), disability sports organizations, active recreation providers, schools, and local councils, and held roles ranging from teachers, coaches, administrators, sport development officers, chief executives, and board of trustee members. The purpose of the workshops was to "test" and refine these conceptual labels, resulting in further refinements to capture the nuance of these discourses (e.g., *aversive* ableism and *pragmatic* to *apologetic*), and the addition of *anti-ableism* as a counter discourse (Figure 1).

These participants were all purposively sampled, using a network-based approach including new and existing contacts in schools, disability-specific sports organizations, and wider national and regional sports organizations, leisure and sports providers, and the wider networks of the research team. Each focus group comprised between five and 10 participants, lasted between 2 and 3 hr, and was facilitated by members of the research team. These focus groups were helpful in establishing a range of viewpoints and understanding group commonalities and differences (Morgan, 1997).

Analysis

Analysis involved an iterative process of inductive and deductive reasoning. Coding the raw, unstructured data was undertaken with reference to the ableism framework developed by the research team, with greater emphasis on how these different variants

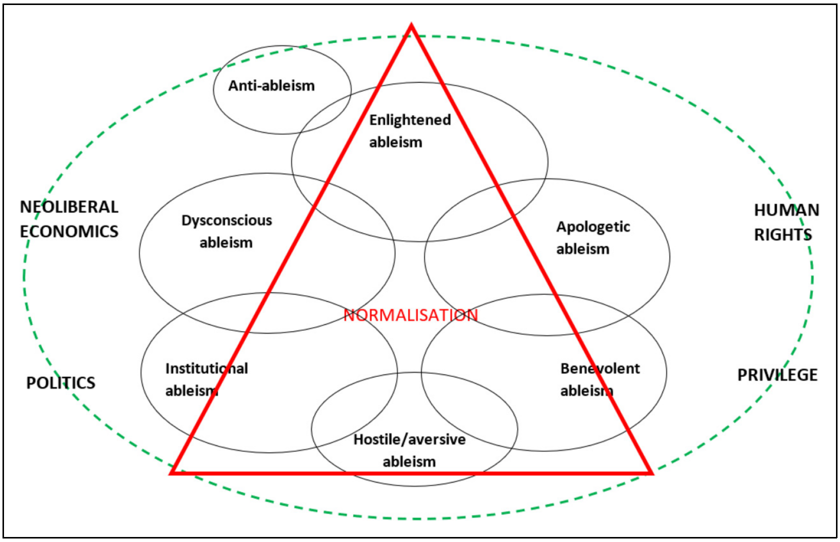
Anti-ableism
Enlightened ableism
NEOLIBERAL ECONOMICS
Dysconscious ableism
Apologetic ableism
HUMAN RIGHTS
NORMALISATION
Institutional ableism
Benevolent ableism
POLITICS
PRIVILEGE
Hostile/aversive ableism

Figure 1. Preliminary variants of the ableism framework.

of ableism played out in policy and practice. In guiding our thinking, we were specifically interested in the institutions, attitudes, beliefs, and social relations "that presume able-bodiedness, and by so doing, construct persons with disabilities as marginalized … and largely invisible 'others''' (Chouinard, 1997, p. 380) within sport and physical activity. These analyses resulted in further refinement to the conceptual labels used to describe the specific articulations of ableism present, and are discussed below.

Results and Discussion

In the following discussion, we provide some insight into the different forms that ableism can take across sport and physical activity in NZ. Our starting point for the research was that ableism operates at multiple levels affecting personal self-perceptions, interpersonal interactions, and intergroup relations, as well as institutional structures (Nario-Redmond, 2019). Therefore, while we necessarily tease apart the nuances of ableism below, we stress that these ideas and manifestations can and do interact.

Neoliberal-ableism

While there are many forms of neoliberalism, in critical disability studies, it is generally argued that neoliberalism sustains and nourishes ableism through the interpellation of a "particular kind of citizen: an adaptable, self-sufficient, autonomous labouring individual" (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019, p. 236). While it is not possible to fully elucidate the power and reach of neoliberal-ableism here, neoliberalism transmits preferences for idealized subjectivities centered on able, productive, adaptable, laboring, and aesthetic (healthy, fit, and independent) bodies (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019), thus cultivating forms of inclusion and exclusion that shape the extent to which disability and disabled people are prominent and visible across sport (Pullen et al., 2020)—hence *neoliberal-ableism*.

In the context of sport and physical activity provision in NZ, neoliberal-ableism places disability within a shifting political sporting landscape in which economic uncertainty, a precarious workforce, adherence to international and national policy, changing governmental priorities, and finite resources interact to shape inclusive sports provision:

> You've got so many different priorities, when you're running a sport. One week it's this. One week it's that. Next week it's something else. As a sport, you cannot cope with that. So, you start going down one priority, and then you're told there's another priority and you haven't finished that path, and now you've got to change paths or widen the path on the same resources, be it people, finances, whatever. And it's because it's the ad hoc nature that it's coming down the pipeline, sports are going, well, we're halfway down here, we've invested in this, we've got a commitment to that, it doesn't matter what else comes down the pipe, we can't do it. (Workshop W1)

As the above quote illustrates, neoliberal-ableism creates a hierarchy of priorities in which disability is positioned as "extra to" the core functions of an NSO and, therefore, a burden for practitioners. Here, the data is indicative of a dominant construction of disability as non-normative, and as such does not fit in a neoliberal sport sector that prioritizes opportunities only fit for normative citizens:

> We're very new on the (inclusion) journey and haven't taken very big steps at all, and I'll be honest, the disability space hasn't been historically prioritised probably as much as it should have. It doesn't feature in our strategic plan, like *core business* is delivering football and futsal, mainly traditional winter 11 v 11 football, that's core business, their *core business* is football, they're a football club. (Workshop A1, *our emphasis*)

In positioning disability inclusion as not "core business," neoliberal-ableism structures the demographics of a majority nondisabled sporting sector–spaces and opportunities that are built for nondisabled people and in which disabled communities are positioned marginally. Furthermore, neoliberal-ableism powerfully shapes organizational practices that result in the unequal allocation of resources and structures organizational responses to disability:

> If I'm in a sports organisation, I'm struggling and I'm in a mostly volunteer-led organisation, I'm struggling to cater for the majority and then I get one person that has special needs and I don't understand how to do that and I don't have time to go and find out how to do that. But if

> they come with a support person or somebody from an agency that can go, “They want to play. This is how you can include them,” then I’m probably more open to that rather than being proactive.
>
> And I think that’s the thing, our sport scene is getting hit with so many things that aren’t right, that we are not doing well, and so, unless it comes with some tools or strategies or some real tangible go tos, people will be like this is not a thing we’ve got to worry about and we’re not doing very well, and we haven’t got enough time to fix it. (Workshop H2)

These data throw into stark relief how neoliberal-ableism can be reified and institutionalized, with disability provision positioned as “nice to have” and external to the core functions of sports organizations and clubs, and only operationalized when specifically resourced or mandated:

> If Sport New Zealand said, “we want everyone to have a disability strategy or plan,” every sport would say, “We need more money to do it.” Yet every sport should be doing it in their current plan because all the documentation, all the strategies, all the work and all the investment and all the legislation has always said sport for everyone. But they’ve chosen to not do everyone. (Workshop W1)

Interrogating such non-disabled space is critical, as well as the mechanisms and processes by which non-disabled spaces become reproduced and protected. In the next section, we trace how ableism is institutionalized within sport, through the demographics of the workforce and the distribution of resources for inclusive and adaptive programs.

Institutionalized Ableism

Institutionalized ableism is one of the better understood forms of ableism, referring to the ways in which institutions within society create and maintain large-scale disparities between disabled people and nondisabled people. These disparities can be evident in terms of educational attainment, employment status, healthcare, as well as other indicators of societal and community participation, such as participation in sport and physical activity.

As we have started to show, institutional ableism is shaped by the assumptions of neoliberalism, and is evident in the lack of readiness and capacity of sports organizations and practitioners to *be* inclusive. Indeed, participants consistently identified a lack of institutional knowledge, competence, and resources and support as a key barrier to working with disabled people, for example:

> … our organisation hasn’t had any experience (in disability) … where we’re at in this part of the journey is that the number of participants that are coming into our sport with a disability is limited, some people are doing things and getting people on the water, they’re enjoying it, but

> it's still so new that we haven't really figured out how to make this long-term and how do we embed that so that it just becomes the norm, I guess? (Workshop A1)

These sentiments serve to displace and transpose the issue of inclusion from an individual into the broader organizational culture, and thus legitimizing existing inequalities, especially when resources are scarce.

The creation and maintenance of demographically nondisabled spaces in sport is a critical area of analysis in its own right and a core feature of what Tilly (1999) termed "opportunity hoarding"—a process by which certain groups (intentionally or not) monopolize access to valuable resources or positions. For example, a recent sector workforce survey commissioned by Sport New Zealand (2024) highlighted that only 3·4% of the sport sector workforce is disabled; a stark illustration of how ableism can be institutionalized. For many participants, the absence of disabled people in positions of power and leadership was common, with organizational practices inadvertently reinforcing inequities for disabled people over time:

> … we just don't have any practical kind of policies or practices I guess in place around that to make it an inviting organisation and space to work in … I would love to know what we could do better because I would love to have more Paralympians working (here). I would absolutely love for that to happen.
>
> I've worked in sport for thirty years and I don't think I have ever, I'm pretty confident that I have never worked with anybody in a wheelchair. And that's in all of the sporting organisations that I've been in. And that's not every person with a disability is in a wheelchair of course but you know what I mean. We need to be better at employing people with disability so that they (others) actually understand what it's like to be disabled … if you had somebody who understands what it's like to live their whole life with disability, then they can put themselves in the shoes of somebody whose applying for a job. (Workshop A4)

Here, institutional ableism is evident in both the (lack of) institutional knowledge and power to address inequities related to disability, which are further reinforced by the exclusion—intentional or not—of disabled people from positions of power and leadership. Once institutionalized ableism is established, it becomes embedded, tacit, and taken-for-granted. Disability inclusion is considered optional, or separate from, the core assumptions and practices of sports organizations. As a consequence, people working within the sport sector may justify exclusionary practices or mask their continuation through a dispersal of responsibility or recourse to the need for structural or policy change to initiate inclusion. This subverts even the most well-intentioned policies by maintaining existing cycles of exclusion, and thus masking the broader cultural failure to recognize institutional ableism is a discursive system of *enlightened* ableism (Lyons, 2013), which is explored below.

Enlightened Ableism

First developed by Lyons (2013), "the rhetoric of enlightened ableism presents a rational, modern, well-informed view of the world, yet allows the continuation of practices that marginalize people with disabilities" (p. 240). At the heart of enlightened ableism is the disconnect between explicit and rhetorically non-ableist ideas, policies, and discourses, and the long-standing and taken-for-granted practices that perpetuate exclusion and segregation (Peers et al., 2022). Simply, enlightened ableism describes how nondisabled people employ a rhetoric of inclusion and equality related to disability, but may unintentionally continue with practices that marginalize and discriminate, as the following extract demonstrates:

> Looking at mainstream sport, (NSOs) don't get what they need, they just don't get the funding, knowledge, the tools, the resources they need to actually make the policies come off the paper. So, we 100% need policies and practices to make the environment welcoming not just to work but to participate in our sport … that's going to be a big challenge of ours, changing the perception that netball can be a space for people with disabilities to be able to participate and ensuring that when they get there that they have a good experience. (Workshop A4)

This quote is indicative of how enlightened ableism can manifest as an organizational avoidance of change tactic, whereby strategies for inclusion are not "followed through," without the provision of institutional supports and resources for staff to *be* inclusive. Instead, the responsibility for inclusion often lies with one person—often dubbed "inclusion champions," rather than embedded across the entire organization:

> We have got a policy in place. It was out of date and we had staff turnover and we lost the person who was doing and driving the mahi (work) that was in that space. And it just wasn't picked up so we have capacity issues … that space of ownership, of drive, of whose going to push something forward. So the policy component is one part I feel but the other bit is about probably to that piece around the people side of things. Who is actually going to take that policy forward? Who's actually going to push that?
>
> Talk is cheap. You have policies that talk about we're going to do this for people with disability etc, etc. … they're useless at being set up for people with disabilities. So, and again that comes back to funding and resourcing, so it's a major issue. (Workshop A4)

Enlightened ableism therefore uses the underlying politics of even the most-well intentioned or rights-based policies to justify the existing order of things, placing disability alongside other forms of difference, and therefore a problem for practitioners to navigate:

> Organisations or individuals go "I have to cater for people who are physically disabled, have to cater for people who are autistic, I have to cater for people with intellectual disabilities, I have to cater for the rainbow community, I have to cater for the new migrant whose English is

> not fluent yet, I have to cater for the kid who's from a home with no resources" so they need a whole lot of extra support … And so, I think organisations are kind of going, "I've got to do this and this and this and this and this," and it's all too much. (Workshop W1)

These data invoke a zero-sum game in which the inclusion of disabled people is positioned in such a way that it might also compromise the inclusion of other inequitably positioned groups. Enlightened ableism creates a lens through which equity initiatives are interpreted, evaluated, and enacted, and thus increasing implicit opposition to disability inclusion.

Teasing apart neoliberal, institutional, and enlightened ableism inevitably shines a light on the complexities and politics of organizational commitments to disability inclusion and equity. Ableism, however, is not just held by, and evident within organizations. Importantly, disability encompasses sets of cultural meanings which resource social relationships between disabled people and stakeholders in sport and physical activity. It is to these that our attention now turns.

Benevolent ableism

In extending our understanding of the multiple interrelational manifestations of ableism, Nario-Redmond et al. (2019) argue that ableism can be experienced in a range of dehumanizing and negative ways. Attitudes towards disability can often be negative, at times provoking aversion, hostility, or contempt. However, in sport, a dominant cultural imagination of disability is that disabled people are a source of inspiration:

> Seeing disabled people achieve is inspirational. I think because it can inspire other people who are disabled or just anyone. It doesn't have to be because they're disabled thinking like if they've done something cool. It's cool because they're disabled. So like disabled people can do cool things. (Workshop A2)

That disability sport is a critical platform for challenging internalized forms of ableism and promoting positive outcomes for disabled people is without question. However, for a non-disabled audience, the notion of inspiration carries a dual meaning in that it can also be based on the presumption that disability is inherently tragic and that admiration should be contingent only on certain behaviors or attributes. Together, this can lead to benevolent attitudes towards disabled people, which can drive low expectations and result in attitudes conveying "pity, paternalistic protection, and unprovoked praise for everyday activities" (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019, p. 727).

Benevolence is a useful lens for examining how sports policy, institutionalized practices, and practitioners' beliefs and actions converge to maintain inequities for disabled people (cf. Thorius, 2019). Specifically, benevolence refers to the socialization into, and enactment of, disability sport as an inherently "paternal, caring, protective, helping, and fixing field" (Thorius, 2019, p. 325), in which practitioners embody notions of "enlightened guardianship" (Miller & Gwynne, 1972):

> With these intellectual (learning disabled) kids we work with, I think that is the main thing is for that individual is finding that happy place. Not sport. Not performance, what have you. Where can they feel … if you identify a happy place for those kids with a disability of ableism or whatever you want to call it, the happy place—the key point where sport can be the happy place, or participation could be the happy place. I think the happy place is the key point for a young, struggling individual.
>
> I think you've just named the campaign, "My Happy Place."
>
> Yeah. I think it is the way to go. Find a happy place so you don't have to look too hard for what suits that individual as well. (Workshop H2)

Benevolence thus provides an evaluative framework in which disabled people are portrayed in reductive, dependent, and belittling ways, driving low expectations for minority groups and provoking astonishment at the accomplishment of sports performance—a situation derivative of the supercrip discourse (cf. Silva & Howe, 2012) and more broadly of inspiration porn (Grue, 2016):

> I mean, I think the absolute best thing the Commonwealth Games did was they had the para athletes at the same time as the able bodied athletes. Alright, we've got 100 metres in the disability category of whatever. I was like, holy shit these people are fast! (Laughs). And then that's when I saw the cerebral palsy athletes, I was like, Jesus! (Laughs) And like, that was so inspirational, Holy shit. I knew they're awesome. But I've got a whole new level of respect for them. I've seen enough people in the Ironman you know, stop at the aid station and remove their prosthetic leg and put ice on the stump for 10 minutes, and then put the leg back on and start running again. You know, you've got a problem, you've got sore legs, this guy hasn't even got a leg. (Workshop A2)

Simultaneously, the field of sport and its practitioners are framed as good, caring, and that providing disabled people with access to sport is an improvement from historical patterns of exclusion:

> I've got a kid who's non-diagnosed but clearly autistic, he'd been passed around 3 or 4 teams, he's a nightmare, he falls on the ball, (and other coaches say) "I don't want him in my team." Well, luckily I'm 15 years in this sector and he found my team. (Workshop A3)

The paternalistic nature of benevolence may be the most difficult to disrupt, as Peers et al. (2022) argued that ableism can be present in even the most supportive, well-meaning actions, beliefs and discourses of practitioners, but which place practitioners in positions of superiority and appraisal of disabled people, thus reinforcing these same systems of able-bodied privilege and power:

> I've got one kid who comes in every week. He draws me cartoons. He's highly intelligent. He's definitely on the autism (spectrum). Lovely kid … probably can't do any other sport because he's so lacking in normal … Well, I just can't see him in a team environment, because he will just be off on a tangent, but such a cool kid. (Workshop H6)

Addressing benevolence as a form of ableism requires careful and critical questioning of the dominant norms that shape responses to disability, and how practitioners construct their roles and responsibilities towards disabled people. In positioning disability as different and binary, benevolence reinforces exclusionary notions and practices, that, while regrettable, may well continue unchallenged.

Apologetic Ableism

Closely associated with neoliberal, dysconscious (see below), and benevolent forms of ableism, apologetic ableism recognizes that ableism exists and is regrettable, but insoluble. Such apologism is secured by a pragmatic stance, in which efforts to include disabled people are inhibited in a myriad of practical and "commonsense" ways. For example, one form of apologism located disability alongside the wider social problems and complexities associated with addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion in sport:

> I think the problem that we find in the sport sector is how do we cater for people—and not just related to disability—in terms of a cost barrier or different ethnicities or diversity of gender, I guess we see a lot of those that the sport sector's grappling with. It's really hard to find. I think at the moment they're all a bit overwhelmed with how do we even cater for anybody really unless you've got the means and the ability to do things and sport suits you, how do we reach those other groups? (Workshop H2)

Apologetic ableism is thus anchored in the pragmatics or the "difficulties" of inclusion—everything from the "realities" of sporting codes, to managing classrooms, balancing students' needs, safety concerns, to limited budget, resources, and time:

> You couldn't really throw someone with significant disability into a rugby game against able bodied that would just be a health and safety bloody nightmare. If we're talking about a cyclist, if they do have severe balance issues then they need to have a tricycle which there's a few of them around … you see them at races they're pretty awesome. But they can't necessarily race in the same groups that others race in. Shit. I don't want to have a bloody health and safety lawsuit against me. (Workshop A5)

> I think the challenges are where we talk about integration. So, when we talk about having able-bodied athletes and athletes who are disabled participating in the same sport together, how do we meaningfully include everybody without separating people based on ability? And that's where I think PE is a struggle for teachers because they might have a child with a physical disability, they might have a child with autism, low vision, whatever it might

> be, or a group of students who have different needs, and then kids that we class as normal and go how do you meaningfully create an environment where all these kids can feel that they're valued and succeeding? How do you do that in a class of thirty? I get it hundred percent. I totally hundred percent agree with it, but a teacher, one teacher, class of thirty… (Workshop H1)

Importantly, these attitudes both rely on a narrow form of disability inclusion (i.e., integration) and locate disability as the "problem" and residing in the individual, to the extent that it is considered "unrealistic" to include them:

> … I think part of the challenge though is the workforce in New Zealand exists on hugely passionate volunteers that have a limited bandwidth to be able to learn and develop and the time, and it's the "yes, I'm doing my best, but geez, I can't take them on anymore." And we have got lots of "everything's important" approaches. (Workshop W2)

These data represent the more subtle forms of apologism, in which practitioners are unequivocally supportive of disability inclusion, but recognize disability through the ideologies and technologies of neoliberal-ableism—through *acceptance* and *acknowledgement* of the status quo, and overlooking the ideological forces that structure and contribute to absence and exclusion. It is worth questioning, therefore, at what point apologetic ableism is an "easy gesture," or a form of cheap talk, which releases individual practices from a state of accountability.

Dysconscious Ableism

In 1991, Joyce King published an essay entitled "Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity, and the Miseducation of Teachers." In this essay, King presented the notion of "dysconscious racism" (p. 133), defined as "the limited and distorted understandings" (p. 134) that preservice teacher candidates have about the nature of societal inequities grounded in race and racialized identities and experiences, distortions that "make it difficult for them to act in favor of truly equitable education" (p. 134). In this work, dysconsciousness is an "uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that depoliticises inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (King, 1991, p. 135). As such, dysconsciousness is both created by and supports "mainstream" ideologies, and is considered a normative framework for thinking that has applications beyond the original analyses of race. Dysconsciousness is not characterized by the *absence* of a disability consciousness, but by the limited and distorted understandings practitioners may have about the nature of inequity and disability, one that tacitly accepts dominant ableist norms and privileges. For example, a form of dysconsciousness was evident in practitioners' notions of inclusion. These conceptions more closely reflected *integration*, in which the presence of disabled people in "mainstream" contexts were perceived to threaten or challenge opportunities for non-disabled people:

> I get a lot of people saying you should do everything together, and we'd really love to, but if you're playing a game with rules and one person who has intellectual disability and they just hold the ball, then you can't really play it. It just doesn't work. It's just the same with able-bodied people trying to include disabled people. Quite tricky sometimes.
>
> While we're thinking about this, remember the able-bodied people have the right to reach their potential as well. So, that complicates the whole thing. We don't want to lose sight of that either. (Workshop H1)

> We have our traditional Special Olympics competitions and we talk about being really inclusive, but are we really? Can I go play basketball with our athletes? No. So, I'm not included. Is that right? Is it wrong? (Workshop H2)

Embedded in dysconscious ableism are ideas about disability that reflect conservative (medical model), rather than liberal or radical (social model) beliefs about disability (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017). This means that dysconscious ableism identifies certain characteristics or intentions *on behalf of* disabled people. One such assertion is that disabled people have no competitive motivations in sport, and this characteristic is presumed to justify a lack of competitive pathways:

> I think in some ways providers might find it easier to cater for those individuals that have an impairment that want to participate rather than those that want to compete. Sport is one of those things that says you have to be a certain way and perform a certain way if you want to be successful in a competitive kind of environment or pathway. What we see amongst our sector partners is often a struggle to cater for those who want to compete, and that's often the more formalised participation, than those who just want to be involved and play socially or at a participation level. (Workshop H1)

Such attitudes implicitly support able-bodied privilege and the existing order of things, a commonality shared with apologetic forms of ableism. Dysconsciousness, however, is more concerning as it is closely related to privilege and is based on a normative way of thinking and naming the disability experience, which enables ableism to exist.

Aversive Ableism

Positioned as a form of subtle "everyday prejudice" (Friedman, 2018), aversive ableism refers to the internalization of negative societal and institutional views of disability, which lead to feelings of discomfort and aversion towards disabled people:

> So, people don't not include people because they're being horrible. I think they do it because they're completely lost as to how to do it.

> We're all a little bit nervous that we're going to say the wrong thing in general, right? And that's come from a good place too, but it's really hard to because people don't want to offend. You don't want to be insensitive.
>
> It's not an "I don't want to engage with you, you don't matter to me." It's "I don't want to offend you." (Workshop H1).

Aversive ableism is far more prevalent than explicit, hostile ableism, as "social norms dictate it is not acceptable to discriminate (at least overtly) against disabled people—people would look 'bad' doing so" (Friedman, 2019, p. 4). In this case, aversive ableism was evident in practitioners whose attitudes do not reflect "anti-disabled sentiment," but rather pro-nondisabled (Howe, 2017, p. 8) preferences:

> I: Would you feel confident to work with an athlete with particular needs, like a visually impaired athlete, like someone with severe cerebral palsy, or someone with autism?
>
> Not confident, unless I knew that they were able to look after themselves to some degree. That's probably the level to which I'd be comfortable with. I mean, if someone was an amputee, obviously, I think that's a different thing again, because they've probably learned to deal with their disabilities quite well. And they've been forced to but someone who's maybe got learning difficulties and autism and stuff like that might be a bit different. I'm probably not set up sufficiently for that sort of thing. If someone emailed me and said, "Hey, I've got severe autism…" I probably haven't got the time to commit to what they need to give them the feeling that they're getting the most out of me as a coach.
>
> And that's I suppose underpins this ableism right, I think until you're confronted with this space you are unaware, you are not aware of what your predispositions towards disability are because they're based on what you see the world as, not through somebody else's lens.
>
> Coaching somebody, teaching someone with a disability, they (coaches) don't know what to say, they don't know how to like present themselves. (Workshop A5)

The data reflects a particular characteristic of ableist prejudice, which Tringo (1970) identified as a hierarchy of preference in which social attitudes toward certain impairment groups are more favorable. Here, the data illustrates the preference for athletes with physical impairments over those with seemingly more complex or demanding sensory, intellectual or neurodevelopmental impairments. This highlights that practitioners do not necessarily treat disability as a homogenous group, but can draw on stereotypical and stigmatized conceptions of disability to justify exclusion.

As Thorneycroft (2020) suggests, in unpacking the antecedents of aversive ableism, it is helpful to draw on the theory of abjection associated primarily with the work of Julia Kristeva (1982). Practitioners with a lack of experience or exposure to disability often drawn on disability stereotypes to render disabled people into abject states, displaying feelings of ambiguity, discomfort, or anxiety despite a lack of overt disability prejudice. For Kristeva, the abject is "what disturbs identity, system and order … that which 'does not respect, boundaries, positions, rules: The inbetween, the ambiguous, the composite'" (1982, p. 4). The abject embodies a challenge to the illusion of stable, contained, and predictable sporting spaces and evoking a "fear of the unknown"—heavily rooted in disability stigma:

> I remember the first time that I spoke to one of the riders that had a brain injury. It was hard understanding what he was saying, and I was nervous. I didn't know what to say.
>
> People experience it when they're presented with deaf people, and they've got to sign. They go into freeze mode because they can't communicate.
>
> With blind people as well, the first time you don't know what to do…
>
> And some of that attitude is borne of a fear of… nobody likes being presented with a problem that they know absolutely nothing how to do and everybody else is watching them and they don't want to make a fool of themselves. (Workshop H1)

The assumed difference and "challenges" presented by disabled people to a nondisabled audience exposes the fundamentally normative paradigm (see Neoliberal-ableism above) that underpins the delivery and provision of sport. Sport thus constitutes a set of normative conditions in which disabled subjects "are rendered unintelligible according to regulatory norms" (Thorneycroft, 2020, p. 5):

> At the grass roots level it's specifically attitudes and like a confidence in delivery, heavy volunteer base, it's scary, it's scary to probably have to coach a team of kids let alone kids with individual needs which you can try your best to deliver a positive experience but for a lot of volunteers it is scary.
>
> We've had the opportunity to work with disability players or participants in the past, sometimes I'm unable to do it myself, and I throw it out to my coaching team and again, they shy away from it because they're not comfortable doing it. It's that comfort, being comfortable because I've not done it enough that I'm not comfortable in terms of working with all the disabilities or being able to overcome problems. (Workshop A3)

The harmful effects of aversive ableism can be felt not only in terms of the reduction of opportunities for disabled people, but also defining roles and reinforcing stereotypes of disabled people (Friedman, 2019) and thus subjecting them to, at best, ambivalence and, at worst, avoidance. Thus, aversive ableism may sit with benevolence as one of the more problematic to address. Aversive ableists rationalize or disassociate their beliefs as not inherently tied to the devaluation of disabled people (Friedman, 2019) and in so doing reinforce non-disabled preferences and privilege.

Conclusion

Importantly, while we have presented these forms of ableism separately, many of these variants overlap and connect, as central to the maintenance of ableism are two core elements; “the notion of the normative (and normate individual) and the enforcement of a constitutional divide” (Campbell, 2009, p. 6) between abled and disabled identities. This research has illustrated how ableist *subjection* operates across multiple layers of sporting practice—from the design, governance, and delivery of sport to the beliefs, assumptions, and everyday practices that shape interpersonal relations. This is important, as the multiple faces of ableism—its benevolent, apologetic, aversive and dysconscious forms—collectively reinforce the harmful impacts of exclusion and sustain environments where disability is devalued and inclusive efforts are largely symbolic. While neoliberal, institutional, and enlightened forms of ableism overlap to contribute to a sport sector that reproduces and justifies forms of structural exclusion.

While we necessarily highlight these different forms of ableist subjection, it is important to note that many practitioners demonstrated capacity for reflexive, anti-ableist thinking; for disrupting the system of privilege that maintains the current sport and physical activity culture. The challenge for researchers, then, is to continue to expose how ableism can manifest itself in a field which functions primarily as a “showcase for able-bodied performance” (McRuer, 2002, p. 393) as a means of anti-ableism awareness. What is clear is that there is a continued need for critical, reflexive education and training for practitioners to recognize, interrogate, and dismantle ableist assumptions embedded in sport systems, practices, and cultures. Without such education, practitioners risk perpetuating exclusionary norms—even unintentionally—by failing to challenge the structural and attitudinal barriers that limit disabled people’s participation.

Approaching ableism with theoretical precision is important, therefore, if we wish to work towards anti-ableist praxis, and we encourage researchers to further excavate and examine the production and maintenance of ableism, particularly as it intersects with other forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, colonialism, classism, or homo/transphobia. Capturing and understanding this is crucial if we wish to work towards “transforming and dismantling the foundations of oppression” (Peers et al., 2022, p. 44). Furthermore, if we seek transformation that is more than symbolic and that reaches those facing the various manifestations of ableism, we must acknowledge how essential participatory movements that center the leadership of people facing the most direct harms from systems of ableism are.

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Notes

1. Our advisory structure ensured the systematic involvement of disabled people in all aspects of this specific research, including study design, data collection, conceptual development, and co-authorship on this article.
2. Q-methodology and the method of Q-sorting provides a unique approach to the study of attitudes, emphasizing collective rather than individual viewpoints in a statistically rigorous way, and thus was an ideal tool for our initial inquiry into ableist beliefs about disability across the sport, physical education, and active recreation sectors (see Carroll, Opit, & Witten, 2024).

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