Discourses of the "Too Abled": Contested Body Hierarchies and the Oscar Pistorius Case

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Using Foucault’s ideas about discourse and the body, this study explores coverage of Oscar Pistorius’s quest to compete in the 2008 Summer Olympics. The authors used textual analysis of coverage in *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine, two popular and influential general-interest U.S. publications, to interrogate fairness as the primary rationale in discourse about Pistorius. Journalists also privileged a medical view of disability, used descriptions of prosthetics to reflect cultural assumptions about "normal" bodies, and reinforced fear of the “cyborg.” Media discourses around Pistorius, as contested sites for meanings inscribed on the body, reinforced the body hierarchy and positioned progress for athletes with disabilities as threatening to the institution of sport and its values. The authors suggest alternative discursive strategies, such as those that question the Paralympic/Olympic divide or focus on the rights of athletes with disabilities to compete, as ways to radically challenge the exercise of biopower reinforcing the status quo.

*Keywords*: disability, disability sport, Foucault, Paralympics

Elite disability sport is a relatively new movement that has worked toward changing perceptions of disability and promoting athletes with disabilities (Gilbert & Schantz, 2008). The Paralympic Games (or Paralympics)—elite disability sport’s signature event—occur every 4 years, just weeks after the Olympic Games, in the same facilities Olympic athletes just used. The Games began in 1952 as the International Stoke Mandeville Games for wheelchair athletes, but the Rome 1960 games are generally recognized as the first Paralympic Games. Over the past half-century, the games have expanded to include more athletes participating in classifications based on their functional abilities (Howe, 2008).

The Paralympics do not entail or imply an inferior form of athletic performance; however, elite able-bodied sport—especially at the Olympic level—is elevated as the cultural ideal for athletic excellence (van Hilvoorde & Landeweerd, 2008). Because rewards, too, are generally greater for elite able-bodied and Olympic competition, it is not surprising that athletes with disabilities have striven (both before and after the introduction of the Paralympics) to participate in these more culturally
valued and visible events. Occasionally, elite athletes with disabilities—athletes who (at least today) would generally participate in disability-sport events like the Paralympics—compete against elite able-bodied athletes. George Eyser won three gold medals in gymnastics while competing on a wooden leg at the 1904 St. Louis Olympic Games (van Hilvoorde & Landeweerd, 2008). More recently, seven-time Paralympic medalist Marla Runyon, the Olympics’ first legally blind competitor, placed eighth in track and field’s 1,500-m final at the 2000 Sydney Games (DePauw & Gavron, 2005). Natalia Partyka, a Polish table tennis player whose right arm is severed below the elbow, and South Africa’s Natalie du Toit, who swims the 10-km marathon with one leg, both competed in the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Dickinson, 2008; Seyd, 2008). Generally, the participation of these athletes in able-bodied sporting events has occurred without controversy. In other instances, elite athletes with disabilities have met resistance from sporting authorities. In 1984, rivals of Neroli Fairhall, the first wheelchair user to compete in the Olympics, suggested that her seated shooting position for archery gave her an advantage (Associated Press, 2006).

South African sprinter Oscar Pistorius, a double below-the-knee amputee, is perhaps the most high-profile case of a Paralympian seeking Olympic inclusion. The world champion in the 100-m, 200-m, and 400-m Paralympic events, Pistorius competes on a pair of prosthetics called Cheetahs designed for athletes in elite disability sport. Beginning in 2007, Pistorius garnered media attention by competing with able-bodied athletes to qualify for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. His performance in able-bodied events was met with suspicion. Accusations concerning “performance enhancement, unfair advantage, and probable ineligibility” circulated (Cole, 2009, p. 3). In January 2008, after scientific testing, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), track’s international governing body, ruled Pistorius ineligible for the Olympics on grounds that his prosthetics gave him a clear mechanical advantage (IAAF, 2008b). Four months later, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) overturned the decision. However, Pistorius failed to qualify for the Beijing games (Cole, 2009).

Pistorius’s case provides a unique discursive space for contested meanings inscribed on the human body, both in the context of sport and in the broader culture. As sociologist C.L. Cole (2009) suggests, “The Pistorius case exemplifies how meanings attributed to sporting embodiment are routinely contested. . . . Pistorius’s eligibility relies on the processes of normalization that locate and classify his body as normal—or not” (p. 3).

This study examines coverage of the Pistorius case in The New York Times and Time magazine, two popular and highly influential general-interest publications in the United States, using Foucault’s conceptualizations about discourse and the body as a theoretical lens. Our textual analysis of coverage during 2007 and 2008 suggests that although media coverage of the Pistorius case did open the door slightly for critical reflection on sport and the body, the discourse was grounded in ableist cultural assumptions. Framed around a discourse of fairness that drew on sport’s powerful normative assumptions and ideals, media accounts described Pistorius’s prosthetics in ideologically loaded terms that, in and of themselves, structured interpretations of the case. Furthermore, a privileging of medical discourse, particularly reliance on “the experts,” normalized the able-bodied, while prominent cyborg imagery further marked Pistorius as deviant and even dangerous.
Literature Review

The Paralympics take place 2 weeks after the Olympic Games in the same facilities Olympic athletes just participated in. From 1964 to 1988, the Games were not held at Olympic host sites because cities were either unwilling or unable to support and finance the event, and the International Olympic Committee did not consider matters of accessibility in the bidding process for candidate cities. Today, an Olympic host city must accommodate athletes with disabilities and host the Paralympic games (Kell, Kell, & Price, 2008).

Derivations and understandings of the term Paralympics, particularly those bearing on the event’s relationship to the Olympics, are historically specific and contested (Bailey, 2008). More recent understandings of the Paralympics as an inclusive event, separate but equal to the Olympics, are misleading. As Kell et al. (2008) point out, the sanctioning of the Paralympics as a “parallel system to the Olympic movement” has “institutionalized exclusion” of bodies that deviate from the socially constructed norms of able-bodied elite athletics. The “attitude of the Olympic movement is one of compete on our terms [and] compete in your own games” (Kell et al., 2008, p. 157). Consideration of financial support, the career structures of elite athletes, and media coverage all expose this illusion of parallelism. For purposes of this research, we consider the lack of parallelism in media coverage of the Paralympics and the Olympics.

Disability Sport and the Media

Media coverage is significant to studies of sport—especially disability sport—because mediated sport “reflects the dominant values, norms, and standards of the culture in which it operates” (Hardin & Hardin, 2003, p. 5). Major U.S. media outlets have largely ignored disability sport. As Hardin (2006) wrote, “It is easier to find a poker or billiards game on ESPN than to find coverage of disability sporting competition” (p. 578).

At the 1996 Atlanta Paralympics, a joint effort by cable’s Sports South and CBS provided the first host broadcaster for the Games (MacDonald, 2008). Coverage, though, consisted of just 4 hours of competition aired after dozens of hours of Olympic coverage (Schell & Rodriguez, 2001). Although coverage has increased over the past 15 years, recent games have garnered similarly paltry media attention (Schantz & Gilbert, 2008). For instance, the 2002 Winter Olympics were aired on NBC during prime time; the only part of the Paralympics to air on NBC was its opening ceremony, 2 days after it had occurred. The cable and satellite channel A&E did, however, create and air 1-hour highlight segments for 8 days during the games (Hardin & Hardin, 2003).

Discursive Framing of Disability Sport in the Media

When media coverage is afforded to disability sport, it is often discursively framed in a trivializing manner. Schantz and Gilbert’s (2008) analysis of French and German newspapers concluded that coverage of the 1996 Paralympics did not take the Games “seriously as a sporting event” (p. 49). Coverage located in a lifestyle section of the newspaper, framed as human-interest pieces, or focused on news values
like controversy and technology (rather than sport-specific values like results and strategy) recontextualizes disability sport outside of a sporting context. When this happens, the event or athlete’s sporting accomplishments are trivialized (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Schantz & Gilbert, 2008). Journalists’ general lack of understanding and knowledge of disability sport as competitive ventures may contribute to this coverage (Hardin, 2006; MacDonald, 2008). Coverage focused on general rather than sport-specific news values perpetuates the public’s lack of knowledge about and appreciation for disability sport (Schantz & Gilbert, 2008). Discursive framing of disability sport—intentional or not—draws on cultural assumptions about knowledge and interest.

Mainstream media’s coverage of disability sport commonly falls into one of two broad models: traditional or progressive (Hardin & Hardin, 2003). The traditional model portrays athletes with disabilities as disabled first and athletes second. Rather than emphasize their athletic achievements, stories revolve around how they have managed to cope with or overcome their disability. This framing is known as “supercrip” (Shapiro, 1993). CBS’s coverage of Paralympian Hope Lewellen during the 1996 Summer Games serves as an example. Schell and Duncan (1999) found segments dedicated to Lewellen focused on “her ‘struggle’ to overcome her disability and become a champion wheelchair tennis player” (p. 130). Alternatively, the progressive model for coverage uses a cultural-pluralism framework to recognize disability as a social construction and seeks to position disability not as the focal point of coverage but within an athlete’s larger sporting identity (Hardin & Hardin, 2003). This model, however, is rare.

Cultural Models of Disability

Traditional and progressive models for media coverage reflect and reinforce cultural models outlined in disability-related literature. The medical model (consistent with traditional coverage) defines disability primarily in biological or medical terms and as a problem of the individual (Bailey, 2008; Hargreaves, 2000; Jespersen & McNamee, 2008; Thomas & Smith, 2009). Disability is viewed as “an inherent, unchanging medical condition resulting in the disabled person’s deviation from the ‘normal’ body” (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 177). So, for the medical model, an individual’s disability is rooted in his or her deviation from bodily norms—his or her abnormality. This, of course, presupposes a “normal body.” Medical intervention is framed as a way to “restore or develop normal functioning,” providing some deviant bodies with an escape from abnormality (Jespersen & McNamee, 2008, p. 91).

The normative implications of this model are subtle but profound. As Jespersen and McNamee (2008) explain, “In one sweep, what is normal thus becomes what is desirable” (p. 91). Conversely, that which deviates from the norm becomes undesirable. Paired with stereotypes, the bearers of unenviable attributes assume the burden of stigma. “Normals” take the stigmatized to be not quite human, and they engage (or do not engage) with those individuals in various subtle, discriminatory manners (Goffman, 1997). As Bailey (2008) explains, “The humanity of individuals becomes subordinated to their disability” (p. 4). The point, ultimately, is that the medical model—far from operating outside the field of observation—is constitutive of the cultural meanings we inscribe on the body.
The social model of disability (reflected and reinforced in more progressive coverage) grew out of scholars’ desire for an alternative to the medical model, one that recognized the role of social relations and environmental constraints in the experience of disability (Bailey, 2008; Hargreaves, 2000; Jespersen & McNamee, 2008; Thomas & Smith, 2009; Tremain, 2005). Proponents of the social model contend that impairment (e.g., paralysis, amputation of a limb) must be distinguished from disability. As Bailey explains, “impairment becomes a disability when the organization of society prevents them from participating fully. . . . Effectively, society causes the disablement” (p. 4). As such, the social model is a “necessarily political concept” (p. 4). Furthermore, because environments and social contexts vary, the social model argues for a contextual or relational understanding of both abilities and disabilities; what may be a disability in one context could pose little to no impediment in another (Jespersen & McNamee, 2008). Although the impairment experience (such as pain or difficulty with movement) should not be discounted, the social model draws attention to the socially constructed ideas about bodily norms and ideals that are the real source of discomfort in disability’s stigmatization.

Foucault, the Body, Discourse, and Disability Sport

As Tremain (2005) points out, Foucault’s ideas about the body and power provide a lens on disability that questions both the medical and the social models for imagining it.

Studies of disability and of sport lend themselves well to Foucauldian analysis because of the centrality of the body (Andrews, 1993; Giulianotti, 2005; Hargreaves, 1987). For Foucault, the body in modern society “represented the contested terrain over which political and personal struggles are fought” (Andrews, 1993, p. 153). For governing establishments, “people become embodied objects to be known, administered, ‘normalized’ and governed” (Giulianotti, 2005, p. 103); such governance is reified through a surveillance of bodies that normalizes the process of individual self-regulation. Foucault likened this relationship of policing and subsequent self-policing to the function of a panopticon (Duncan, 1994).

Foucault’s focus on the body as a site for political struggle is expressed in his concept of “biopower” (Tremain, 2005). Essentially, biopower is the articulation of power on knowledge, and vice versa, in the regulation of bodies. Bodies are studied and classified in scientific processes, producing knowledge used by both institutions (e.g., to make rules about participation and exclusion in activity) and by individuals (e.g., to define, understand and regulate themselves). The regulatory mechanisms at the institutional and individual levels, then, reify a “logical” division and hierarchy of bodies as natural. Knowledge is pursued and organized around this understanding (Tremain, 2005). Back to the earlier discussion of the social model of disability: A Foucauldian would argue that the idea of recognizing an “impairment” (as the social model of disability suggests) is itself the product of regulatory practices that define, classify, and marginalize a group (Foucault, 1973).

Consideration of impairment and disability illuminates another key idea of Foucault’s: Power is grounded in discourse, “a group of statements that provides a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Hall, 2001, p. 72). In other words, power, which produces both what we deem repressive and what we deem liberating
in our reality, is exercised in the way we agree to talk about our bodies (our assumptions, what is naturalized, what is challenged, the expression of our knowledge).

**Biopower and Sport**

Applying the concept of biopower to our lens on the Olympics and Paralympics allows for scrutiny of their function in the understanding and governing of bodies. Both events—subject to the rules of governing bodies charged with defining and protecting their (hierarchical) difference—can be seen as apparatuses of biopower. They legitimimize the classification and separation of individuals in ways that are generally viewed as natural: We expect able-bodied athletes, whom we have classified as the ideal, to compete in the Olympics; athletes with disabilities (determined by their discernible deviation from the norm) compete in the Paralympics. The Paralympics Games are, for athletes with disabilities, both opportunity and constraint—where “power functions best” (Tremain, 2005, p. 4).

**“Fairness” in Sport**

Much of the rationale for the analysis and categorization of sporting bodies (e.g., by gender, weight, or age) is guided by sport’s logic of fairness in competition. Loland (2002) argues that the goal of sport is the measurement or comparison of “athletic performance”—an unfixed concept, variable from sport to sport (Jones & Wilson, 2009). Sports competitions are structured to measure athletic performance as observed in the attainment of benchmarks such as height, time, or goals (Jones & Howe, 2005, cited in Jones & Wilson, 2009). This provides sport’s “internal logic” (van Hilvoorde & Landeweerd, 2008).

Factors that do not contribute to a sporting community’s understanding of athletic performance are controlled for. This, in essence, is where performance-enhancing drugs, technological aids, and other matters of “unfair advantages” are broached. As Jones and Wilson (2009) explain, “advantages may be considered unfair inter alia if they are not available to all competitors equally, if they are not the product of the athlete’s own efforts, or if they are somehow unnatural or synthetic” (p. 127).

Sport’s seemingly empirical, natural logic carries normative weight. First, some unfair advantages are classified as cheating. Second, by promoting fairness through the elimination of unfair advantages, sport advances its normative conceptualization as a level playing field. This concept connects the internal logic of sport to broader egalitarian ideals. The level playing field suggests that although broader relations may be unfair and unjust, because all competitors are subject to the same rules and regulations in sport, fairness and justice can be expected on the field of play (Marqusee, 2003).

**Classifications and Body Hierarchies**

Efforts to classify advantages as fair or unfair evaluate more than practices and behaviors. Classification systems based on assumptions about the abilities of different bodies are taken-for-granted mechanisms in sport. Cultural assumptions about weight, gender, and ability justify classifying groups of sporting bodies; these
assumptions are informed by the production of knowledge that reifies classificatory power relations. The biomedical industry around which sport’s classification systems are organized studies the body and makes scientific truth claims. As Kane (1995, p. 97) explains, the grounding of sport in scientific notions of biological reality makes its construction generally “impervious to challenge.”

The resulting hierarchy privileges the athletic participation of some groups; the “ideal body” (the physically powerful, able-bodied male) is naturalized and exalted, while marginalized bodies are subject to “stigmatization and alienation” (DePauw, 1997; Howe, 2008). The classification system is considered so naturally and essentially authoritative that to consider the plight of intersex athletes (such as Caster Semenya), the possibility of mixed-sex competition in traditionally sex-segregated sports (such as in the comments of NBA Commissioner David Stern about women in the NBA), or the possibility of an Olympics with athletes with disabilities (such as Oscar Pistorius) is disruptive. When discourses like these emerge though, the taken for granted in cultural discourse about what is natural, which, consequently, underpins assumptions about what is fair, ruptures.

These classification-challenging discourses open the door to alternative conceptualizations of fairness centered on concerns of inclusion, opportunity, and justice. Drawing on Rawlsian moral justice, Edwards (2008) suggests that a principle of fairness in opportunity demands that access to social positions “must be made on the basis of consideration of morally relevant properties . . . [e.g.,] how well he/she is likely to fulfil the role” (p. 121). The segregation of Major League Baseball, then, violated this understanding of fairness in that skin color is not a morally relevant ground for barring participation.

Furthermore, some argue that “undeserved” disadvantages (i.e., the result of social lotteries like family wealth or natural lotteries like physical constitution) should be compensated for in institutional decision making. In a sporting context, compensating for undeserved disadvantages places strain on sport’s natural logic of fairness in competition. As Edwards (2008) explains, “Any attempt to ‘equalise’ the competitors to ensure a fair competition seems doomed to failure. They will not be physically identical.” (p. 123). This, ultimately, provides the tension in Oscar Pistorius’s efforts to participate in able-bodied competition. If Pistorius’s Cheetahs are situated as compensatory, perhaps advantageous, our two broad principles of fairness clash, setting the stage for a discursive struggle over the meanings inscribed on sporting bodies. We turn to the Pistorius case for contextualization.

The Case of Oscar Pistorius

Oscar Pistorius has been a double amputee since he was 11 months old. Born without fibulas in his lower legs, he has walked only with prosthetics. Pistorius participated in rugby, water polo, tennis, and Olympic wrestling while growing up in Johannesburg, South Africa. He began sprinting in 2004 while recovering from a rugby injury and entered the South African Disabled Championships. At the age of 17 he advanced to the 2004 Paralympics in Athens and won gold in the 200-m (Davies, 2008).

In 2004, Pistorius began competing against able-bodied sprinters in IAAF-sanctioned events, winning a 100-m race in Pretoria and finishing sixth in the 400-m at the South African Championships. For 2 years, Pistorius continued training
but also concentrated on his education. In 2007 he returned to competition, winning second place in the 400-m at the South African Championships. In March, however, an amendment to IAAF Rule 144.2 was introduced, prohibiting "use of any technical device that incorporates springs, wheels or any other element that provides the user with an advantage over another athlete not using such a device in track and field" (IAAF, 2008a, p. 100). Critics allege that the amendment was designed to prevent Pistorius from competing (Cole, 2009), and, indeed, the IAAF withdrew Pistorius’s invitation to the Norwich Union Glasgow Grand Prix under the amended rule. The IAAF later reversed its decision, citing a need for “scientific evidence that his prosthetics gave him an advantage.” An Italian sports laboratory’s analysis of Pistorius’s stride length and prosthetic-to-ground contact in videotape from a July race in Rome proved inconclusive. The IAAF then turned to Peter Bruggemann of the German Sport University in Cologne to conduct a biometrical analysis. In November, over a 2-day period, Bruggemann tested Pistorius’s prosthetics and measured his biometrics against able-bodied athletes. In December, based on results from Bruggemann, the IAAF ruled that Pistorius’s prosthetics violated Rule 114.2(e), making him ineligible to qualify for the Olympics (Cole, 2009; Pistorius v. IAAF, 2008).

Then, in May 2008, the CAS overturned the IAAF ruling on grounds that Bruggemann’s study did not “determine whether or not Mr. Pistorius’ use of the Cheetah Flex-Foot prosthesis provided him with an overall net advantage or disadvantage” (Pistorius v. IAAF, 2008, p. 14). The CAS ruling was based not only on the Bruggemann study’s lack of conclusive evidence but also on Pistorius’s presentation of results from testing by a Houston laboratory. As the CAS reasoned, because “a mechanical advantage provided by a prosthetic leg would be expected to lead to a metabolic advantage for a runner,” the lack of metabolic advantage for Pistorius would discredit the proposition of a mechanical advantage (Pistorius v. IAAF, 2008, p. 16). The CAS also pointed out that although the prosthetic used by Pistorius had been in use for a decade, no sprinters with disabilities had posted times comparable to able-bodied sprinters until Pistorius (Cole, 2009; Pistorius v. IAAF, 2008).

Literally back in the running, Pistorius had 64 days to post a qualifying time but was unable to do so, a disappointment he blamed partially on the training time he had lost to his reinstatement battle (Bandini, 2008). Pistorius won gold medals in the 100-m, 200-m, and 400-m events at the Beijing Paralympics (Associated Press, 2008).

This Research

Our aim in this research was to examine the “compelling discursive mechanisms” (Duncan, 1994, p. 52) in coverage of Pistorius, relating them to our understanding of body and power as explained by Foucault. Discourse analysts must discern the implicit meanings in texts—a process Meyers (1997) describes as “reading between the lines.” Meyers explains, “These implied meanings, although not outwardly stated, draw on consensual understandings and stereotypes so that they need not be stated out loud to be understood” (p. 14).

In this light, we were interested in the cultural assumptions embedded in media discourse. “Cultural assumptions demonstrate how power constitutes certain
practices as normal, while marking others as deviant” (Dworkin & Wachs, 1998, p. 5; Foucault, 1978). By reading between the lines, then, we hoped to be able to discern how discursive mechanisms draw on cultural assumptions to reify understandings of sporting bodies.

We do not, however, assume that texts carry the same meanings for all readers. Although media messages have “preferred” meanings built into the texts by their producers, they can certainly be read in multiple, even subversive manners (Duncan, 1994).

**Method**

We used textual analysis, an approach used to uncover meanings in a text (Fairclough, 2003; Meyers, 1997; Paek & Shah, 2003; Potter, 1996). As Gill (2006) points out, quantitative content analysis does not distinguish between levels of meaning embedded in the use of words and phrases. For example, a content analysis might have helped us determine the number of times the word *cyborg* appeared or how often a writer used a narrowly defined notion of disability, but this is of limited value in our understanding of how terms are used to create meaning. Furthermore, our attention to themes in the text is not necessarily a concern with frequency but, rather, an attention to patterns (Charmaz, 2006). For our purposes, then, we sought to uncover patterns in the relationships between discursive mechanisms and cultural assumptions about able and disabled bodies in sport.

Following Potter’s (1996) description of textual analysis, we took an iterative approach. We wrote self-memos throughout the research process as a means of acknowledging and confronting our own biases as American, able-bodied researchers with an interest in sport- and disability-related issues (Maxwell, 2005). Furthermore, we did not seek to produce or present our analysis as the most accurate “retelling” of the texts. Instead, we viewed “criticism as an argumentative activity in which the goal is to persuade the audience that [our] knowledge of a text will be enriched if they choose to see a text as [we do]” (Dow, 1996, p. 4).

After background reading on the Pistorius case and discussion aimed at exploring our preliminary expectations and assumptions, we each read the articles (the sample is discussed in more detail in the following section). This first reading was performed without detailed coding to observe general, macrolevel themes. To guide our initial thematic development, we approached the articles with three “big picture” questions: How is fairness situated? How is the normal or ideal body envisioned? How are sport and its associated events situated? Beginning from such questions—without formulating a priori theoretical propositions—allowed us to generate theoretical formulations more or less organically throughout the coding and analysis process (Potter, 1996).

This practice proved particularly useful in that our first collaboration generated nine tentative themes, some of which reflected our big-picture questions, others of which strayed considerably from their structure. For instance, this first collaboration—largely through our collective surprise—drew attention to the rich and troubling cyborg discourse in several media accounts (this theme is discussed later). We returned to the articles again for individual, detailed coding, this time with our themes in hand but still with open minds. Using our self-memos, we aimed to produce detailed coding for each theme during this phase, complete with
exemplary and contradictory instances from the articles. On further collaboration, these accounts aided our eventual selection of four themes. We debated the prevalence, relevance, and conceptual dimensions for each theme, returning to examples and counterexamples for contextualization.

Sample

Nineteen articles published in 2007 and 2008—16 from *The New York Times* and 3 from *Time* magazine—were drawn from an extensive search of several databases including Lexis Nexis, ProQuest, America’s Newsmagazines, and SPORTDiscus. Hundreds of articles were written about Pistorius during this period. For instance, a Lexis Nexis search of major world newspapers for articles containing the name *Pistorius* within five words of any derivative of *Olympi* (e.g., *Olympics, Olympic, Olympian*) returned 235 newspaper articles from across the globe; however, such a broad collection of data was deemed unwieldy for the close analysis of texts we felt necessary to “flesh out” the discourses concerning Pistorius’s run at the Olympics.

We recognize that the sample size for this study is small given the worldwide media attention afforded Pistorius; however, our goal was not to generalize about surface-level framing of Pistorius but to examine “discursive mechanisms” (Duncan, 1994, p. 5) and relate those to wider cultural discourses about the body and power relationships. A small sample size, then, seemed appropriate for our aims. Likewise, our admittedly skewed distribution of articles from each publication is of limited concern. Examining a larger or more evenly distributed number of articles would not necessarily have provided greater insight into how discursive mechanisms articulate knowledge and power, nor was it our intention to compare publications.

*The New York Times* and *Time* produced nearly as many, if not more, feature articles on Pistorius than publications from other countries (including South Africa, Pistorius’s home country). These publications have among the highest circulation in the U.S., providing the potential to set the agenda for discourse about the Pistorius case. During 2008, *Time*’s circulation of 3.4 million made it the nation’s largest newsweekly (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). *The New York Times* was the nation’s third-largest daily newspaper—1 million circulation—and its largest Sunday newspaper—1.4 million (Jesdanun, 2008). Third, and perhaps most important, these two publications exert as much, if not more, influence in the broader media landscape as comparable publications. *The New York Times* is among the “first tier” or “prestige press” of U.S. daily newspapers. In this role, it influences what smaller publications consider newsworthy. Furthermore, “second-tier” publications often reprint *New York Times* stories verbatim (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007; McChesney, 2000). *Time* has been characterized similarly (Winograd, 2005). The positioning of these publications suggests coverage indicative of mainstream discourse.

Themes in Coverage


a searing talent who has begun erasing lines between abled and disabled, raising philosophical questions: What should an athlete look like? Where should
limits be placed on technology with the right to compete? Would the nature of sport be altered if athletes using artificial limbs could run faster or jump higher than the best athletes using their natural limbs? (Longman, 2007a)

Longman’s generally critical, reflexive approach to disability, ability, and sport reflects the opportunity coverage of Pistorius presented for meaningful engagement with cultural assumptions concerning sporting embodiment. Nonetheless, the grounding of discourse about Pistorius in assumptions about fairness seemed to have thwarted any such potential. The consistent privileging of fairness as a discursive framework for understanding the Pistorius case gave order to several key mechanisms reifying an ableist body hierarchy.

**Positioning Fairness as Central to Sporting Competition**

The most prominent and explicitly normative discourse identified in the sample addressed Pistorius’s competition with able-bodied athletes in terms of fairness in competition. A *New York Times* story used a quote from sports ethicist and former Olympian Andrea Schneider to summarize the debate: “You have two competing issues—fair competition and basic human rights to compete” (Longman, 2007a). However, discussions of and questions about fairness rarely addressed the matter in terms of a social and moral obligation to include Pistorius in able-bodied competition (fairness in opportunity); rather, a discourse of fair competition emerged, drawing on both the allegations of the IAAF and the powerful normative ideals of sport.

Pistorius’s performances challenge the definition and classification of athletes with disabilities as presupposed by an ableist body hierarchy. Although this challenge occasionally spurred critical reflection on sport and the body (Longman, 2007a; Roberts, 2007), an overwhelming focus on issues of competitive advantage raised suspicions about the legitimacy of Pistorius’s performances; for example: “It’s a miracle that double amputee Oscar Pistorius can compete. Is it also unfair?” (Gibbs, 2008) and “The question of whether prosthetic limbs confer a competitive advantage over able-bodied runners remains shrouded in confusion” (Robinson, 2008a). In such instances, the question of fairness in competition emerges as the important question. Likewise, fairness played prominently in several headlines: “A Fair Race?” (Longman, 2007b), “Debate on Amputee Sprinter: Is He Disabled or Too-Abled?” (Longman, 2007a).

Given the moral weight attributed to competitive fairness in sport, it is perhaps not surprising that some articles associated the issue of fairness with a warning that sport’s (morally just) nature could be shaken to its foundation: “Pistorius’ advantage comes from what nature left out and technology replaced: his body ends at the knees, and from there to the ground it’s a moral puzzle” (Gibbs, 2008); “Would the nature of sport be altered if athletes using artificial limbs could run faster or jump higher than the best athletes using their natural limbs?” (Longman, 2007a). Sometimes the imagery was much starker. A quote from an IAAF official was repeated in three separate *New York Times* articles: “It affects the purity of sport. Next will be another device where people can fly with something on their back” (Longman, 2007a).

Each of these examples implies that Pistorius, and those that may follow him, represents a new category in the hierarchy of bodies—not disabled, not able-bodied,
but “too abled”—and, thus, a threat to sport’s values and integrity. Classifying any athlete with disabilities as too abled positions him or her as deviant with respect to sport’s powerful normative ideals of fairness and the level playing field. To underscore the point, a *New York Times* writer used a quote from a racing official implying Pistorius could be in need of discipline for violating sports’ sacred norms. “He’s innocent until proven guilty,” the official was quoted as saying (Robinson, *NYT*, 7/16/07).

**Inconsistency in Describing Prosthetics**

Inconsistent terminology was employed in the sample to describe Pistorius’s prosthetics. The descriptions varied from the elaborate (“a pair of J-shaped blades made of carbon fiber and known as Cheetahs” [Longman, 2007b]) to the extremely vague (“springy lower limbs” [Vecsey, 2008b] or “carbon fiber device” [Longman, 2007b]). Sometimes they were naturalized and embodied as “carbon-fiber legs” (Longman, 2007a), “curved artificial feet” (Vecsey, 2008b), or “prosthetic limbs” (Robinson, 2008a). More often, they were described as breakthroughs in technology: “carbon fiber blades,” (Robinson, 2008a), “state-of-the-art carbon fiber prosthetics,” (Robinson, 2008a) and “two curved blades made from exquisitely powerful and resilient material,” (Vecsey, 2008a). In one article, the author provided five different descriptions for the prosthetics: “artificial limbs,” “carbon-fiber legs,” “J-shaped blades made of carbon fiber,” “prosthetics,” and “high-tech prosthetic limbs” (Longman, 2007b).

Because journalists rarely cover disability sport, it is wholly reasonable to assume that the curious reader would be inquisitive about Pistorius’s prosthetics. Using various terminology for these prosthetics gives authors and readers alike an opportunity to “wrap their head around” Pistorius and his prosthetics. This also constitutes Pistorius as a docile body—a subject to be examined, explained, and classified. This, in Foucauldian terms, is an example of how the body’s ability to be “known” is constitutive of power relations.

To capture the cultural assumptions embedded in the various prosthetic descriptions, we examined each description’s metaphorical function. We acknowledge that the examination of metaphor in discourse analysis is somewhat unconventional (Hart, 2008); however, as an analytic tool, metaphor seemed appropriate for the case. Much of the language used to describe the prosthetics drew on analogies to concrete objects (e.g., legs, feet, Cheetahs, blades, springs). Each has ideological implications for interpreting the function—and, thus, fairness—of the prosthetics; legs are part of a normal body; cheetahs are the fastest animals on earth; springs provide bounce. The extent to which readers would make such interpretations is, again, built on implicit cultural assumptions; a “common understanding” is needed in order for the reader to “get the analogy” (Sobchack, 2006, p. 21).

Even the seemingly neutral term *prosthetic* has ideological implications. In the disabled community, prosthetics, wheelchairs, and other aids are often perceived as “extensions of the body” that become part of an individual’s identity (Iwakuma, 2002, p. 78; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). However, as Sobchack (2006) explains, in various popular and technical uses, the metaphorical process “leaves behind” the material, literal function of the prosthetic in favor of “fascination with ‘posthuman’ extensions of ‘the body’” and “hidden powers” (p. 20). How Pistorius’s prosthetics...
are metaphorically described, then, has implications for both impressions of his case and the constitution of body hierarchies.

The occasional description of Pistorius’s prosthetics as legs, feet, and limbs served to naturalize the prosthetics as “extensions” by creating analogies to the human body. Pistorius’s Cheetahs look nothing like natural human legs, so to describe them as legs implies at least a similar, more normal, function. It is interesting that these descriptions appeared most often in articles and commentaries that encouraged critical reflection on sporting bodies or that outwardly endorsed Pistorius’s position. As such, it seems possible that naturalizing prosthetics through bodily metaphors was employed as a progressive discursive strategy. Naturalizing metaphors were used sparingly, though. Pistorius’s prosthetics were more often described in terms implying a technological breakthrough. Although the Cheetahs are unquestionably a remarkable innovation in disability sport, the description of the prosthetics in technological terms pairs Pistorius (as more naturalizing discourses would not) in dehumanizing terms. Some descriptors, like _springy devices_ and _exquisitely powerful and resilient material_, explicitly reflect the cultural assumption of the “hidden powers” of the prosthetic (Sobchack, 2006). Furthermore, emphasis on the Cheetahs as a technological breakthrough (despite their use for over a decade in disability sport) puts these prosthetics in stark contrast to the stable, unchanging norms of the human body.

All these descriptors are juxtaposed against the authors’ descriptions of the legs and feet of able-bodied athletes. Authors generally felt a need to clarify that they were comparing the prosthetics to the “natural leg” (Longman, 2007a), an “actual foot” (Longman, 2007a), or “that magnificent device—the human foot” (Vecsey, 2008a). The hierarchy of bodies is constituted through such naturalizing discourses; by highlighting the naturalness of a human foot, the unnaturalness of the prosthetic (and disability in general) is implicitly conveyed and exposed for scrutiny. As the disabled body can be “known” for its difference, so too can the able body’s naturalness be constructed through knowledge-power.

**Medicalizing the Pistorius Case**

By barring Pistorius from competing with able-bodied athletes in the summer of 2007 and requesting “more information and biomechanical studies” (Longman, 2007a), the IAAF effectively suggested that scientific examination could resolve the fairness issue. Although difficulties in the process were acknowledged, demands for a scientific judgment went largely unquestioned. Even Pistorius, who maintained that running on his prosthetics posed significant disadvantages, accepted science as the appropriate judge and jury: “I think they’re afraid to do the research. . . . They’re afraid of what they’re going to find, that I don’t have an advantage and they’ll have to let me compete” (Longman, 2007a).

This reliance on science is indicative of the traditional framing of disability in the medical model. The cultural assumption espoused by the media, the IAAF, and Pistorius was that subjecting Pistorius to the “the experts” would yield not only an answer to the fairness question but one that was definitive and objective. This standard, though, in the tradition of the medical model, demanded comparing Pistorius with able-bodied norms. The ability of Pistorius to conform to those norms under scientific testing became the standard on which the fairness of his participation would be judged.
Accounts quoted Peter Bruggemann, the supervisor of Pistorius’s 3-day biometric examination in Cologne, Germany, in 2007, saying Pistorius’s biometrics “did not necessarily translate to a general disadvantage.” The energy loss incurred by his prosthetics and his oxygen intake were identified as “more efficient” than that of “able-bodied athletes running at the same speed.” The researcher described Pistorius as exhibiting “a different type of locomotion,” and “in the 400 meters, he was able to run at the same speed as the control subjects, but his oxygen intake was much lower” (Robinson, 2008e). So, the research team did not discern any overall advantage for Pistorius, just that in specific regards, his biometrics were different from that of the “normal” human body.

A commentary by George Vecsey in The New York Times published the same day endorsed the results, saying that “Pistorius’s problem is that his prosthetic devices are far beyond the contour and function of so-called normal legs” (Vecsey, 2008a). It was at this point that The New York Times also began referring to Pistorius’s prosthetics as state of the art. The IAAF study established a knowledge claim, based in scientific discourse, that Pistorius represented a deviation from the norm.

Expressing (Fear of) the Cyborg

A final noteworthy theme, which followed logically on the dehumanizing discourse used in relation to Pistorius’s prosthetic, was the implication that allowing Pistorius to compete represented a “slippery slope” toward a sporting future potentially dominated by “cyborgs,” “transhumans” (Longman, 2007a), and the “bionic” (Robinson & Schwarz, 2008). Furthermore, the cyborg theme was used to float the possibility of strategic “self-mutilation” (Longman, 2007a) and to associate prosthetics with performance-enhancing-drug use—an association with clear normative valuations. Although the cyborg theme emerged in just one quarter of the articles, we considered it important in light of the suspicion and concept of deviance that often stigmatize those with disability.

The cyborg discourse challenge associated the sprinter with another discrete category of identity already marked in U.S. culture as deviant. Popular cyborg science fiction, including the classic novel Frankenstein and movies like The Terminator and Blade Runner, all reflect concerns about the threat of technology to the future of humanity (Pyle, 2000). It is interesting that Pistorius’s cyborg identity is implied in his nickname’s popular culture reference—“The Blade Runner.” Pistorius himself used the nickname for the title of his 2009 autobiography (Pistorius, 2009).

In the articles, several mechanisms marked the cyborg identity as deviant. Citing the concerns of ethicists, one article proposed that Pistorius’s competition could compel some athletes to have “their healthy limbs replaced by artificial ones” (Longman, 2007a). Setting aside the likelihood of this claim, the journalist then described the proposal as “sobering”—a reflection of normative cultural assumptions about the able body’s goodness and the stigma associated with bodily impairment.

Second, transhuman and cyborg possibilities were occasionally discussed in relationship to performance-enhancing-drug use. A major sports media discourse of the last decade, use of performance-enhancing drugs, including steroids, directly violates fairness in competition. Furthermore, performance-enhancing drugs are not just prohibited in sports; they are also illegal.
Finally, a recurring concern about Pistorius’s participation addressed whether his prosthetics represented a safety hazard for competitors or teammates. Although these safety concerns were generally discussed separately from the cyborg discourse, in a few cases the writers implied that Pistorius could use his prosthetics as a weapon against competitors. For instance, in one commentary, Vecsey cited “the issue” of whether Pistorius’s prosthetics constitute an “offensive weapon in close corners—like plaster casts in the old days of pro basketball” (Vecsey, 2007a; in the article, the author never mentions who has raised “the issue” or in what context it has been raised). In another article, the author notes a competitor’s description of the sound Pistorius makes while running as “like being chased by a giant pair of scissors” (Gibbs, 2008). Although not explicitly couched in the texts in the discourse of cyborgs, these safety concerns and comments do seem to reflect the popular fears of cyborgs (Pyle, 2000).

In one commentary, Selena Roberts of *The New York Times* pointed to the absurdity of the cyborg discourse. Roberts’s article was also an anomaly on a related issue: the implication of discourses concerning “fairness” in the case. Roberts wrote, “In the debate of what’s fair, Pistorius has been diminished as an athlete” (Roberts, 2007).

**Discussion**

Foucault’s notion of biopower involves the mutual reinforcement, articulated in discourse, of the social understanding (knowledge) of bodies and the exercise of power over those bodies. Our textual analysis of discourse about the Pistorius case in popular U.S. media reveals how assumptions about the body and about sport reinforce a hierarchy that constrains deviant bodies. The social model of disability does suggest a contextual and relational understanding of impairment and disability. Thus, discourses articulating knowledge and power in other disability-sport contexts may employ different discursive mechanisms or draw on distinct cultural assumptions. However, sport’s foundational discourse of fairness—with its drive to classify, know, and control sporting bodies—may serve as an entry point for thinking about biopower across a variety of disability-sport contexts.

Assumptions about the nature of sport and of the ideal body worked hand in glove in stories about Pistorius. For instance, discussions of fairness failed to question the norms of competitive sport and, more important, who was privileged (and not) by the emphasis on fair competition. The irony of positioning fair competition and basic human rights against each other was lost on journalists; the assumption that these cannot coexist is a clear signal that something is not fair. The notion that sport (in its “pure” form) ensures a level playing field for participants assumes that socially constructed obstacles for athletes, such as the stigma of disability or the marginalization of female athletes, do not exist on the playing field. In theory, the playing field may be the great equalizer, but the terrain that must be traversed to reach the playing field is perilous for athletes who have been classified as competing with inferior bodies.

**Reliance on the Medical Model**

As Kane (1995) points out, the logic of competitive sport is undergirded by the assumption that it rests on the certainty of biology. The logic of competitive
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sport—whether it be in relationship to gender or to disability—is that of the medical model: The “problem” is entirely in the individual, whose condition as outside the norm is fixed and grounded in what can be measured, classified, and regulated. The segregation of superior bodies from inferior bodies in the interest of fairness is set up as “impervious to challenge” because segregation is based on scientific certainty (p. 97). The boards and ruling bodies that govern elite sport use the rationale of science and biology to reify existing hierarchies. True to Foucault’s notions of biopower, knowledge and power mutually articulate each other in regulation of the body.

A troubling element of the Pistorius case is the failure by anyone central to the public discourse (journalists, advocates, officials, and Pistorius himself) to challenge the medical model’s role in conceptualizing and articulating power-laden bodily hierarchies. Emerging knowledge is based on existing knowledge, which has been generated in service of the status quo. The assumptions informing research that will ultimately decide Pistorius’s fate are based on a logic that greatly disadvantages him. Alternative models must be advanced, both in academic discourse (where it exists) and public discourse (where it needs to occur), if we are to progress on this front.

Pistorius’s Threat to the Olympic/Paralympic Logic

We suggested earlier that the Olympic/Paralympic configuration is an apparatus of biopower; the farce of “parallel” competition reinforces an unjust but seemingly natural body hierarchy. Pistorius, of course, is a threat to that configuration. By extension, it could be suggested that he is also threatens the nature of sport. Like the Olympic/Paralympic configuration, modern competitive sport itself is built on and reliant on the classification and regulation of bodies. So, Pistorius’s presentation in threatening, dehumanizing terms is, perhaps, not surprising. The categories justifying the exclusion of Pistorius, previously understood as impervious to challenge, were being challenged.

The answer, of course, was to create a new category that drew on sport’s powerful normative discourse of fairness in competition. In fact, the use of too abled says as much about our understandings of the relationship between ability and sport as is does about Pistorius. Implicit in the use of too abled (as in the conceptualization of disability under the medical model) is the cultural assumption that our ideals for sporting performance are defined by an exalted view of ability and that ability has stable, definable qualities. Thus, the too abled label reinforces body hierarchies rather than challenging them. It is not that Pistorius was too fast or too talented. It is that he, like other athletes with disabilities, is too different.

Further Research

The Pistorius case is likely to again receive significant media attention as the 2012 London Olympics near. Indeed, despite the CAS reversal, emerging research may jeopardize Pistorius’s intentions to participate in London (Epstein, 2009). Peter Weyand and Matthew Bundle, two physiologists from the Houston-based laboratory whose findings were crucial for overturning the IAAF ruling, argued in a November 2009 issue of the Journal of Applied Physiology that Pistorius’s lightweight
Cheetahs provide an advantage. More rapid repositioning of the limbs, the authors argue, produces a greater stride frequency (Weyand & Bundle, 2009). Such research and media accounts thereof (e.g., Epstein, 2009) serve to further situate athletes with disabilities in the medical model.

We hope this analysis provides researchers and disability-sport advocates with a useful lens through which to further explore the role of discursive mechanisms in conversations about Pistorius and other athletes who are not neatly classified as abled or disabled. Foucault’s characterization of power should lead us to a better understanding of the role of language, knowledge, and the exercise of power during specific historical moments such as these, with an eye toward activism. We also advocate Foucault’s notion of biopower in looking at the ways hierarchical categories of gender may be disrupted by the emergence of intersex athletes, such as Caster Semenya, and the ways popular discourse adjusts to such emergences. Most important, we advocate continued scrutiny of the ways institutional regulation of sporting bodies reinforces power relations that are ultimately unfair to all.

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