

Socio- Cultural Power Dynamics and Coping Functions: A Narrative Case Report of a Female Paralympian

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Received: Aug 06, 2011

Accepted: Dec 24, 2011

Key Words: Femininity; Ethnicity;
Athleticism; Coping Skills; Culture
Barriers

Abstract

Purpose: This case study explores the lived experiences of an elite female Paralympic powerlifting athlete. The focus is on restrictions and coping responses employed to manage the daily hassles within the cultural and ethnic requirements for achieving athletic excellence.

Methods: With an unstructured interview, the narrative was acquired which ranged to a total of 75 minutes (approx) and 20 single spaced pages. The data was analyzed using Foucauldian discourse analysis in conjuncture to feminist poststructuralist theory.

Results: The results highlight the issues relating to femininity, culture and ethnicity with regard to athletic career. The analysis elicits extracts from the narrative to describe the coping functions reflecting proactive coping, anticipatory coping, and preventative coping.

Conclusions: The narrative draws attention to the socio-cultural restrictions and coping functions that the athlete adopted to overcome the barriers of femininity, culture, ethnicity requirements and athleticism.

Asian Journal of Sports Medicine, Volume 3 (Number 2), June 2012, Pages: 131-138

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INTRODUCTION

Many physically challenged individuals are seeking opportunities in various areas of expertise. One such area is sports. The Paralympic Games are the world's second largest sporting event, second to the Olympics. The first games were hosted in Rome in the year 1960, with 400 athletes from 23 nations [1]. This case study explores the experiences of an elite Paralympic powerlifting athlete. The focus is on coping responses employed by a Paralympian to manage the daily hassles within the cultural and ethnic requirements for achieving athletic excellence. Powerlifting is an ultimate test of the upper body strength [2].

Disability sport refers to a sport which is specifically practiced, by athletes with disabilities. Semerjian [3] defined disability as physical impairments that interfere

with the performance of an activity of daily living and limits the individual abilities to perform physical tasks they desire to execute. Earlier, disabled people were subjected to discrimination, segregation and considered as minorities [1,4]; however, the scenario has changed with increased exposure and increased knowledge thus, making it more conducive to most physically challenged individuals.

Social and Cultural Perspective:

There is a lack of research existing that explores the cultural aspects within disability sports [3]. From a sociological point of view the focus on the experiences of embodiment, race and gender issues has lacked specific attention by the majority of researchers who have considered research on disability in sports [3]. Semerjian [3] rightly informs that disability not only marks an individual's identity and experience within a

social context but also by race and gender. Research indicated that a common misconception among most Islamic families about sport is 'sport is masculine in nature' [4-8]. Although, some of the researchers have identified gender issues in sport [9-11], some studies have pointed out that there has been a limited amount of research done on the ethnic minority' of women on able-bodied [10,12-16] and disabled-bodied athletes [3] which has led to a low participation level in sport or physical activity. Using the above as a backdrop, this narrative case study highlights the experiences and coping functions within the socio-cultural context of an Islamic state in Malaysia named Kelantan.

Kelantan was officially declared an Islamic state in Malaysia and Kota Bharu, as the Islamic city on October 1st, 2005. This title was bestowed by the Sultan of Kelantan, Tuanku Ismail Petra based on the observations of authenticity in the Islamic principles incorporated in every aspect of daily life among the Kelantanese [17-19]. The rules and regulations in this state limits both gender in terms of their representations, actions, reactions and behavior in the society; particularly, women are seen to have more limitations when compared to men. For instance, women are restricted in participating in water sport activities such as swimming and diving together [18]. The Kota Bharu Municipal Council discourage females from wearing certain types of clothing such as body hugging outfits that would reveal the body shape, a blouse that shows the navel, transparent blouses, mini-skirts and tight pants. A requirement among Kelantanese culture is that they require all Muslim women to wear a headscarf. The rule states that those caught for dressing immodestly may be fined up to RM 500/- (Ringgit) which is approximately 100 Euros [18].

Coping Function: A deliberate planned program:

Coping represents an individual's affective and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands [20]. Coping is required if the situation is perceived as harmful, threatening or challenging [21]. In recent days, coping is increasingly seen as a strategy used prior to the occurrence of stress which conceptualizes coping functions as anticipatory coping, preventative coping and proactive coping [22]. *Anticipatory coping* includes the efforts undertaken by

the individual to deal with those events which they perceive to occur in the future. *Preventative coping* aims at the individual's effort to develop resources so that they could reduce the impact of an uncertain stressful event that may possibly occur in the distant future [23]. Strategies involved in developing general resources for achievement of personal goals and personal growth may be termed as *Proactive coping* function [22]. Therefore, a coping strategy is a deliberate, planned program that helps an individual deal with persons or circumstances that are perceived as stress or anxiety related [24].

Most disabled athletes feel mentally strong because they have to cope with their existing disability [25]. This capability empowers such people with a strong sense of volition and mental toughness that would enable them to perform well during their sporting events [25]. To understand the subjective experiences of a physically challenged athlete from a cultural perspective, The Foucauldian theory [26] in relation with the feminist poststructuralist study [27] was used to identify the discourses embedded within the narrative of a Paralympic powerlifting athlete.

Theoretical Framework:

Foucauldian concepts have a profound impact within the sociology of sport [28,29] and cultural sport psychology. Using the concept of Jeremy Bentham's 'Panopticon' explained by Foucault, in his book 'Discipline and Punish' [26] he explained that the body of the individual is 'docile' and it can be manipulated through effective means of discipline [26]. Bentham's model prison was based on an architectural figure for such power relations [26,29]. The model consisted of a guard tower at the center of the prison cells and the supervisor kept watch over the prisoners. The beliefs of the inmates that they were under constant surveillance [26,28,29] made them responsible of their own actions [29].

Using the prisoners as an analogy, Foucault referred that the power dynamics is not exclusive to prisons but its effects can be found in everyday situations as well [26].

Feminists are especially most attracted to Foucauldian concepts because it deals with historically specific discursive relations and social practices [30]; how it is produced, reproduced and resisted [31].

Weedon^[27] informs that a woman's body is a site of discourse production because it is central to the constitution of social norms of femininity; governance of patriarchy over women and their exclusion from most aspects of public life^[32]. Therefore, extending from Foucault's account of disciplinary power, the narrative of a Paralympian was analyzed using Foucauldian discourse analysis to identify how the disciplinary practices within a culture regulates the individual's movements, behaviours, gestures and appearance depending upon situations and how the individual uses adequate coping functions to deal with such daily hassles.

METHOD AND CASE SELECTION

Research Approach:

Narrative inquiry was carefully adopted from the qualitative research methods as an interview method to collect the data on the lived experience of the individual. Foucauldian discourse analysis^[33] had a significant role in identifying the discourses embedded within the narrative because its main focus centers on the mechanisms of power relations within the cultural context. These discourses would highlight the different subjective positions and subjective experiences, experienced by the Paralympian.

Participant:

The participant in this case study was Niza (pseudonym), she is a victim of polio disease which led to her disability waist downwards. Niza, is aged about 35 years and she is a Malay Islamic woman from Kelantan who has represented the country in several competitions. Niza has been competing in powerlifting competitions for about 10 years. She is married with children in Kelantan. For training purposes, she stays away from her family members and resides at the athlete's hostel.

Procedure:

Frequent visits that were made at the powerlifting training venue during their training period and a few

visits to the competition enhanced the interaction and established a good rapport and trust. After having explained the aims and objective of the study, an informed consent form was signed for an audio taped interview (with guaranteed anonymity) from the participant as maintenance for ethics in research.

Data Collection (Interview guide):

A phenomenological approach was carefully considered because phenomenology considers individual experience in totality (A Gestalt approach). It involves the exploration of human lived experience and also identifies the relation of human embodiment to their personal world of experience^[34]. Therefore, an in-depth audio taped interview was conducted from a first person perspective to acquire more knowledge on their lived experience. The interview began with a simple question: 'tell me your story of being physically active in Malaysia'. The data collection focused specifically on the lived experiences of the athlete. The interview remained unstructured and audio taped for acquiring the desired information on the subjective experience in coping within the socio-cultural requirements. Whenever necessary, prompt questions were asked for further clarifications and more elaboration based on the context. For instance, the prompts were as follows: "Could you please elaborate on how the culture was restricting you?" When examples on experience were sought, the athlete was asked: "Would it be possible for you to share some of your lived experiences within this context?" The interview lasted for approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes which was later transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis:

The transcribed interview generated 20 single spaced pages. Foucauldian discourse analysis as explained by Carla Willig^[33] was adopted to analyze the interview transcript. Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA)^[33] was a notable work of Michel Foucault and it helped in exploring the relationship between language and subjectivity. The analysis started by looking at the different stories as a whole, identifying the object within the context and the different discursive constructions that makes up the object. This led to the unravelling discourse(s) in relation to the subject

position and subjective experience within the context.

FDA's six stage procedure explained by Carla Willig^[33] was the framework used in data analysis. In stage 1: I identified the different ways in which the object within a spoken topic was constructed (*Discursive constructions*). Stage 2 included locating the various discursive constructions of the object within wider discourses (*Discourses*). In the third stage of analysis, a closer examination of the discursive context was done to identify why the object is constructed in a particular way at a particular point in the text. Specifically, I looked at what its function is and its relation to other constructions produced in the surrounding text (*Action orientation*). Subject position is the location of the individual within the rights and duties that provide meaning to the object that is spoken about. Thus, I identified the subject position within the discursive construction and discourses (*Positioning*). Further, I looked at what can be said and done by the subjects positioned within the context. Particularly, this stage is concerned about the relationship between discourses and practices. It explores the ways in which discursive constructions and subject positions open or close down opportunities for action (*Practice*). In the final stage of analysis focused on the individual's feelings and emotions that could be experienced from the subject's position held within the context spoken. More specifically, I explored the relationship between discourse and subjectivity (the way of being in the world and the way of seeing the world). This is the stage wherein I find the *subjectivity* of the individual based on the context. Data credibility was strengthened with the discussion among the research associates until a consensus was reached. The categorization process was constantly reviewed by an expert researcher in qualitative research methods to make sure that the information that was collected was authentic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When ethnicity and cultural requirements intercept athleticism:

Niza's narrative provides a synopsis of the dynamics of

culture, ethnicity and athleticism. The results discussed in this paper use Foucauldian's lens of the Panopticon to explore Niza's personal experience as a woman and as an Olympian. This report also identifies the different barriers that Niza experienced as a Muslim woman when she was involved in a strength sport such as powerlifting.

Her narrative provides an example and explanation on how her first decision to pursue a career in sports, led to adverse reactions from her family.

Example: "when I initially expressed my decision to participate in powerlifting, the first question my father said was; "how can you go for that sport. It's not for women. Only a man can lift the weights and you are a woman"..... My relatives said "why do you want to go for such a sport."

These responses indicated a restriction for Niza to move forward with her decision. Although, Niza was dejected from the negative reactions from her family members, she has successfully overcome the barriers of the society's conservative attitude of exclusion towards Muslim women. The following statements provide the evidence of how Niza tried to cope with the barriers of the society's conservative attitude of exclusion towards Muslim women.

Example: "Everyone said something negative because I am a woman and I have this condition of disability. But I believed in myself and I had the support of my husband. So I proved myself in the trials and now I am in the team today and everybody is very happy and proud of me"

Analyzing from a Foucauldian point of view the above contexts indicates the cultural influence and power^[26] dynamics of conservative attitudes and knowledge that continues to prevail even today among the people within the Islamic state of Malaysia. This result of conservatism i.e. sport is masculine in nature was profoundly highlighted in the previous researches done by Birrell^[4] Bryson^[5] Murray and Matheson^[6] Willis^[7] Yuka^[8] and it is quoted as one of the reasons for a low participation of women in sports from Islamic communities. Deriving from the context I analyzed Niza to hold a subjective position of a woman who felt discouraged and unsupported initially because of the opinions she received from her father and her relatives. However she is also found to be an inspiring woman

who believed in her abilities and challenged society's misconception by being successful with her participation in Paralympic competitions. From the two subjective positions derived from the contexts mentioned above; it guided me to understand that Niza felt dejected, discouraged and unhappy by the way her father and her relatives responded to her decision initially. At the same time I was able to understand that her disagreement with the society's misconception which formed as a barrier, increased her determination to accomplish her aspiration to become a successful athlete.

With regard to coping, I analyzed Niza to have used psychological strategies to build her confidence when she was going through a difficult decision making process. Borrowing the concept of Greenglass ^[22], I inferred that Niza used anticipatory coping function because she had anticipated discouragement from her father and her relative's when she revealed her decision of her career. More specifically anticipatory coping includes the efforts undertaken by the individual to deal with those events which they perceive to occur in future. This anticipation may be due to the 'knowledge' ^[35] acquired from different social agents within the culture and society as she matured with age.

Example: "I knew that my father and my relatives will not be happy with my decision at first"

Niza's determination to participate in powerlifting enabled her to use proactive coping function to convince her relatives on her decision. This was evident in her narrative from the following statements.

Example: "Everyone said something negative because I am a woman and I have this condition of disability. But I believed in myself"

The above statement proves that Niza upholds strong positive belief in her capabilities which enabled her to build her confidence within herself and prove herself in this field. This is a type of general resources that she developed to achieve her goal and successfully overcome the barriers and represent the country.

In short, it was evident from Niza's narrative that she did not receive the required support and encouragement from her family members initially. This may be owing to her physical condition and the fact that she is a 'woman' belonging to the Islamic community. Nevertheless, anticipating such situations,

Niza seemed to have mentally prepared herself before she announced her willingness to pursue a career in powerlifting. Thus, mental preparation can be considered as a sign of proactive coping function ^[22] to develop resources to achieve personal growth and goals.

Female embodiment and athleticisms:

Another issue that Niza highlighted in her narrative was on female embodiment and ethnicity requirements for a Muslim woman. Niza further explained that powerlifting is a 'strength sport' which requires muscle developments which made her father to restrict her from pursuing a career in powerlifting. Development of muscles is stereotyped mostly for men than for women in most cultures. Therefore, if a woman were to develop muscles they would look more '*masculine*'. Niza was no exception to this. She competes in the heavy weight category of Paralympic powerlifting. Thus, her upper half of the body is more muscular than her lower half of her body. This has been explained in the example below.

Example: "The main reason why my father restricted me at first because for powerlifting we need to build muscles for lifting the weights. So muscles will make me look manly and as you see I am a woman."

In view of the fact that the sporting attire for powerlifting is body hugging, Niza used to initially feel uncomfortable and distracted quite often during her practice sessions and competition events because it used to reveal her body shape. The following statement from Niza's narrative explains this point.

Example: "I felt very shy to train because you see I have a big upper body that is suiting to the category I compete in. So when I wear the sportswear for powerlifting, it used to reveal my shape and I used to feel very shy."

Interpreting from a Foucauldian point of view the above contexts indicate the cultural influence and power ^[26] dynamics of female anatomy in association with a woman's perception of the environmental situation. This has a significant role in Niza's natural 'female' tendency to feel shy about her body image. Niza's self consciousness has worked as a panopticon ^[26] which made her to react in accordance to the

situation that she had perceived. Consequently, consciousness has led to distractions which affected her performance during the training sessions. In this context, I outline Niza to hold a subject position of femaleness. I approached this subjective position in relation to the way she sees the world and is in this world ^[33] Niza's narrative highlights self consciousness to her body type which had become a cause for her underperformance during lifts. From this subject position I analysed Niza to have expressed feelings of awkwardness, embarrassment and uncomfortable feelings with her body type.

Moving the focus to coping, Niza has clearly stated in her narrative that she sought assistance from a sport psychologist to disassociate from all distractions that were hampering her performance during training and competition phase.

Example: "I took the help of a sport psychologist and so I learned to ignore all unwanted distraction and I started to perform my lifts better."

This type of professional assistance of learning to ignore distractions is indicative of a general resource that was developed through a professional assistance which is distinctive of a proactive coping function ^[22] leading to better performance of the individual.

Risking ethnicity for performance enhancement:

Following the ethnic requirements for a Muslim woman, Niza adorns the head scarf (also called as tudung in Malaysia) in most occasions. The head scarf is a cultural requirement for every Muslim woman. Niza outlined that she used to adorn the tudung during the training sessions and during a few competitions at the beginning of her career. She, however, experienced discomfort because the head scarf often tends to move or detach itself from the head during the performance. Therefore, she decided to remove her head scarf during competitions, thus risking the ethnicity requirements.

Example: "Actually I am uncomfortable to wear the tudung and lift the weight because if it suddenly comes off, it will become a distraction for me and I will not win. So for competitions like Paralympic games, I decided that I will remove it and after my performance I will wear the head scarf again."

Interpreting the data using the Foucauldian lens, I implied that the power dynamics ^[31] of self

consciousness in relation to the environmental situation have a considerable effect on Niza's decisions to remove the head scarf during the competitions. This directed me to understand that Niza held a subjective position of a strong independent individual who takes decisions of her own. It is evident from her statement that she was very uncomfortable to lift the weights with the headscarf on. Although, Niza removes the head scarf while performing before the audience, she adorns them back after her event. This reflects her respect to uphold the cultural and religious value of her community.

From this context it is clear that Niza used preventative coping functions ^[22] to avoid the discomfort and to reduce anxiety of underperforming as she is found to remove her headscarf and perform the lifts. Although, this action is found to be a risk of ethnicity requirement yet it is undertaken for achieving athletic excellence. Niza's determination to achieve athletic excellence is evident from the following statements below:

Example: "For competitions like Paralympic games, I decided that I will remove it and after my performance I will wear the head scarf again."

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the present case study explores the lived experiences of an elite Paralympic powerlifting athlete with special focus on coping responses. The case study highlights how the athlete managed the daily hassles within the socio-cultural context for achieving athletic excellence. Her narrative reflects the barriers experienced and represents the synopsis of femininity, ethnicity, athleticism and coping functions adopted by her to overcome the barriers. Although, Niza faced many adversities, yet, her determination, volition and self-efficacy paved way to deal with physical and socio-cultural challenges, to become a National athlete representing at the Olympic level.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is grateful to the participant and sincerely thanks Tatiana V. Ryba, Taru Lintunen, Martti

Silvennoinen and Jolly Roy for their support and guidance. I would also like to thank the National Institute of Sports, Malaysia for the co-operation.

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