
PARALYMPIC GAMES: THE EXPERIENCE WITH “THE OTHER” THROUGH THE SCREENS

JOGOS PARALÍMPICOS: A EXPERIÊNCIA COM “O OUTRO” ATRAVÉS DAS TELAS

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RESUMO

O Comitê Paralímpico Internacional, órgãos reguladores do esporte paraolímpico, bem como alguns representantes de cidades/países sedes dos Jogos Paralímpicos, alegam que estes Jogos se constituem em uma importante plataforma para modificar as percepções da sociedade em relação às capacidades das pessoas com deficiência (PCD). Tendo em vista estas alegações, desenvolvemos uma pesquisa com o objetivo de verificar se indivíduos que tiveram contato com os Jogos Paralímpicos mudaram a sua percepção em relação às capacidades das PCD. O estudo foi de cunho qualitativo e exploratório. A coleta de dados foi baseada em entrevistas semiestruturadas desenvolvidas entre abril e julho de 2018. Entrevistamos 50 acadêmicos de diferentes cursos da Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR). Realizamos uma análise temática dos dados e utilizamos a Teoria de Contato entre Grupos (TCEG) como base para a discussão. Os resultados deste trabalho reafirmam a tese da TCEG que postula que tanto o contato direto quanto o indireto com grupos distintos pode servir como uma ferramenta para a diminuição de preconceitos.

Palavras-chave: Teoria do contato. Contato indireto. Jogos Paralímpicos. Deficiência.

ABSTRACT

The International Paralympic Committee, organization that regulates Paralympic sports, as well as some representatives of cities/countries that host the Paralympic Games claim that the latter are an important platform to change society's perceptions of the capabilities of people with disabilities (PWD). In view of these statements, we have developed a research to verify whether individuals who have had contact with the Paralympic Games have changed their perception of the capabilities of PWD. The study was qualitative and exploratory. Data collection was based on semi-structured interviews conducted between April and July 2018. We interviewed 50 undergraduate students attending different courses at the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR). We carried out a thematic data analysis and relied on the Intergroup Contact Theory (ICT) to support the discussion. The results of this work reinforce the ICT thesis, according to which both direct and indirect contact with different groups can serve as a tool to reduce prejudices.

Keywords: Contact theory. Indirect contact. Paralympic Games. Disability.

Introduction

There are many prejudices against people with disabilities (PWD), blacks, Indians, homosexuals, transvestites, transsexuals, members of exotic religious groups, etc., due to their supposed “differences”. These prejudices, built on and fed by distorted and negative thoughts towards these people, have led to their stigmatization¹.

Among several studies dedicated to fighting prejudice, some have suggested that prejudice against the other – be it caused by ethnic, racial, sexual issues, or a supposed lack of capacity on the part of certain individuals or groups of individuals – can be reduced through contact with the other, or with groups of others². This line of thought has given rise to what is now called “Intergroup Contact Theory” (ICT). According to this theory, contact can be direct or indirect. Direct contact occurs through personal interaction between individuals or groups of individuals. Indirect contact happens at a distance – for instance, through the intermediation of other people or via means of communication or social media. According to researchers on the subject, both types can help reduce prejudice between individuals and groups of people²⁻⁷.

The International Paralympic Committee (IPC), organization that regulates Paralympic sports worldwide, as well as some authors and organizations linked to Paralympic sports, claim that contact with the image and sporting achievements of Paralympic athletes can help in the sense of reducing prejudice against people with disabilities (PWD)⁸⁻¹³. Although the advertising of the Paralympic Games is still incipient compared to that of the Olympic Games, it is growing stronger, and more and more people have been watching the PG, boosting a possible effect of public contact – even if indirectly – with PWD. According to data published by the IPC, the Athens Paralympic Games, in 2004, had 1.8 billion (TV) viewers in 80 different countries, Beijing, in 2008, had 3.8 billion (TV) viewers in 80 different countries, London, in 2012, had 3.8 billion (TV) viewers from 115 different countries, while the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games had about 4.1 billion (TV) viewers in 154 different countries¹⁴. We do not have reliable data relating particularly to the extent of the PG coverage in Brazil. However, a study by Santos¹⁵ that checked Folha de São Paulo's coverage of the PG between 1992 and 2016 found a jump from 09 news published in 1992 to 114 news in 2016. This shows the potential that the coverage of this sports event has in Brazil. In this context, one tends to believe that:

“[...] the PG play [or could play, we would rather say] a prominent role in contributing to the transformation of stereotypes, paradigms and, mainly, prejudices as to the potential and possibilities of social participation of people with disabilities.”¹⁶

According to the IPC, athletes with disabilities “challenge stereotypes and transform attitudes, helping to increase inclusion by breaking down social barriers and discrimination towards people with an impairment”¹⁷. But can the fact that people have contact, even if indirectly, with PWD through the media help reduce prejudices towards them? Some authors are skeptical about this matter¹⁸⁻²¹. They claim that the focus of the news, most of the time, has been more on the athletes' disabilities and on their supposed sad life story than on their sporting achievements. This, consequently, ends up reinforcing the idea that PWD are fragile, “poor things” and worthy of pity. Some researchers^{19,22,23} also state that another media approach that treats athletes as supercrips/“superheroes” is also harmful, as it emphasizes the stories of them overcoming their impairments more than their sporting achievements. According to the aforementioned authors, among others, the media approach of Paralympic sports, as exemplified above, can further increase existing prejudices towards PWD. In other words, insofar as the media defines PWD based on their impairments rather than as human beings like any other person who seeks to achieve their goals, it can further stigmatize these people.

In light of the foregoing, the objective of this work was to verify whether individuals who have had contact with PWD through the PG have changed their perception of these people's abilities. This study is part of a broader project in which we explore the perspectives of different interlocutors on the theme (intellectuals, people with disabilities, activists who advocate for the rights of PWD, heads of sports institutions, Paralympic and school athletes). For the purposes of this research more specifically, we have focused only on the perspectives of undergraduate students from the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR) and used the Intergroup Contact Theory as a basis to discuss the data.

Methods

This research is a qualitative and exploratory study approved by the UFPR's Research Ethics Committee, CAAE: 55300216.5.0000.0102, opinion number 1.528.437. Data collection was based on semi-structured interviews conducted between April and July 2018.

Participants

For the purposes of this work, we have interviewed 50 UFPR students. We intend, in the future, to compare their perspectives with those of other groups that we are also interviewing. A total of 23 men (46%) and 27 women (54%) attending different courses were interviewed: Administration (10); Dentistry (4); Chemistry (3); Economics (3); Education (2); Nursing (3); Law (1); Occupational Therapy (3); Geology (3); Pharmacy (1); Civil Engineering (3); Physical Education (1); Wood Industrial Engineering (2); Cartographic Engineering (1); Production Engineering (1); Mechanical Engineering (2); Medicine (1); Chemical Engineering (1); Biology (3); Physiotherapy (1); Mathematics (1). Among the interviewees, 38 had never had contact with people with disabilities, and 12 of them had had contact with at least one person with a disability in their family, at work and/or in their circle of friends. Among those who watched the PG through the media or the internet, most watched something related to Swimming (17 students) and Track & Field (10 students). Some of them also watched modalities such as Bocce, Wheelchair Basketball, Sitting Volleyball, Rugby, Rowing, Goalball and 5-a-side Football.

Procedures

To conduct the interviews, we approached UFPR students we found sitting/lying on benches and on the grass, leaving restaurants and in department halls at three different campuses: Jardim Botânico, Polytechnic Center and Office of the Dean. First, we explained the purpose of the research and, then, we checked if they met the inclusion criteria, namely: 1) being a student at the UFPR; 2) having watched the PG broadcasts on the TV, and/or having watched videos of the modalities of the event through other media (e.g., YouTube, Facebook). If the answer was positive, we asked the individual for their permission to audio record the interview that would happen as of that moment.

We conducted semi-structured interviews, that is, we prepared, beforehand, a guide for the interview but, as the study participants answered the questions, we would ask other questions to deepen our understanding of their answers. This guide contained the following questions: (1) What is your name and course? (2) Have you watched anything about the Paralympic Games? (3) What have you watched? (4) For how long? (5) Has the fact that you have watched this event changed anything in the way you perceive people with disabilities? How so? Could you give an example? (6) Have the Paralympic Games inspired you in any way? How so? (7) Have you ever had direct contact with a person with a disability? How so? (8) Has the way you interact with people with disabilities changed after watching the games? How so? (9) What do you think about people with disabilities in general after watching the Paralympic Games? How was your perception before?

Analysis

We performed a thematic data analysis²⁴, having as basis the recurring themes in the interviewees' statements that applied to the objective of this study. To guarantee the anonymity of the participants, we used pseudonyms to present the results. For data analysis, we relied on the ICT. To better contextualize our discussion, we will present below some of the main assumptions of this theory.

Results and Discussion

Intergroup Contact Theory

The ICT emerged between 1930 and 1940 in the social psychology field. It deals with relationships between different groups and people in a social context². According to Pettigrew²⁵, the ICT was conceived in 1947, after World War II, by Watson and Williams, and

gained strength with the work of Allport²⁶, *The Nature of Prejudice*. This work has been fostering several studies that relate contact between groups to reduced prejudice from the members of one group against the other. Pettigrew², for instance, carried out a meta-analysis of 515 studies, which, altogether, involved more than 250,000 participants. They concluded that contact between groups tends to reduce prejudice. According to them, 94% of the studies analyzed found positive effects as to contact between groups minimizing disagreements between them, whether caused by ethnic, racial, sexual biases, or by deeming the other incapable due to any of their physical, mental or intellectual characteristics. These authors also observed that some conditions pointed out by Allport²⁶ facilitate the effects of the ICT: (1) similar statuses between groups in the context; (2) common goals; (3) cooperation between groups; (4) support from authorities or laws. According to Tropp and Pettigrew²⁷, the positive effects of the ICT are significantly greater among members of groups with majority status than among members of minority groups. Status, according to the authors, is defined by the power and history of the group, and by how the subjects that belong to it are perceived before society.

Some studies have also emphasized the importance of a certain form of contact between groups in minimizing prejudices: indirect contact²⁻⁷. This type of contact can occur in different ways:

“**Imagined contact**”: It happens through some sort of mental simulation of positive intergroup interactions between subjects^{3,6};

“**Friends in common**”: It occurs when one has a friend who interacts with people from another group, rendering the people in this other group more acceptable²;

“**Secondary transfer**”: It happens when contact with a first group of people reduces prejudice against secondary groups related to it and that have not participated directly in the contact made⁴⁻⁵.

Paolini³ argues that, in some cases, indirect contact, momentarily, can even be more effective than direct contact, since it occurs in a more controlled environment. It decreases the risks of what authors Stephan and Stephan²⁸, Wright²⁹, Plant and Devine³⁰ refer to as “intergroup anxiety”, which, in its turn, is the main cause of a possible negative contact between groups. This type of anxiety has negative behavioral, cognitive and affective implications due to prejudices that generate a feeling of threat.

Perceiving the Other: The Unknown Capability

The statements of most of the interviewees revealed that they used to have low expectations about the capabilities of people with disabilities, showing a strong tendency to perceive them as “poor things” and/or to be surprised by the achievements of Paralympic athletes. See, for instance, the passages below:

“*Oh, we think that these people who have disabilities are not capable of doing anything [...] Before, if I saw a disabled person, I'd feel sorry for them, I'd think "Poor thing, just imagine how their life is!"* (ENRICO, CHEMISTRY)

“*You don't expect a person with a disability to be capable of doing all that. It's surprising! [...] It seems that all the ideas I had about them have changed [...]. They are more capable than we think! We have the idea that blind people, without limbs, who use a wheelchair, are dependent. That they can't do anything on their own. But the Games show that they are more capable!*” (ELIANA, ECONOMY)

Figueiredo¹⁸, Hardin and Hardin¹⁹, Marques²⁰, Schell and Duncan²¹ warn that speeches that evoke feelings of pity and compassion towards people with disabilities have been historically reproduced by the media, boosting prejudices and stigmas around these individuals. Some social movements, organizations and intellectuals have been fighting this discourse and encouraging the media to emphasize the potentials and sporting achievements of athletes more than their impairments and supposed limitations. An example of efforts in this direction were the guides for the media that were produced by the British Paralympic Association⁸, the International Paralympic Committee¹¹, and Pappous and Souza¹³.

We see, from the reports of our interviewees, that there has been a change in the way they perceive PWD after watching the PG, mainly when it comes to the capabilities of these people. This is in line with the assumption of other authors who study the contact theory and, more specifically, the role of indirect contact, arguing that there may be a reduction in prejudice on the part of the members of a group against members of another group, even if contact does not happen “face-to-face”^{2,6,7}.

“Then, when you watch the [PG] videos, you find it really nice what they can do! You realize that they can do a lot more, and better than you thought!” (ENRICO, CHEMISTRY)

In the examples below, we can again identify the effect of the impact of PG-related news on the interviewees. While watching the athletes’ sporting achievements, they began to perceive abilities that they had never thought to be possible in PWD.

“It was impressive! [...] They doing all that! I didn’t think they could do all that! I was impressed! They are incredible!” (KARINE, BIOLOGY)

“Awesome! You don’t expect that from them, you know? You see them and your jaw drops with what they are doing! You have no idea what these disabled people can do! It’s phenomenal!” (FAGNER, ADMINISTRATION)

The examples above show that Paralympic athletes and their achievements were key factors in changing the perception of our interviewees about PWD. In these cases, there was an indirect contact, via “secondary transfer”⁴⁻⁵, since the interviewees refer directly to the athletes with disabilities and their achievements and, even so, showed a different perception concerning other non-athlete PWD.

Two research participants who already knew about the Games and knew people with disabilities did not show prejudices towards PWD. For them, the fact that someone has a disability does not make them less capable.

“I had watched the past Paralympics too, before this one. So I think it [their ability] is normal. Despite their physical limitations, I don’t see that much difference. Having a physical limitation doesn’t mean that the person is not capable of doing things that people without physical limitation can.” (ANDRÉ, MECHANICAL ENGINEERING)

*“Oh, actually, I think I’ve always had a perception since the Pan American Paralympic in Rio. I always saw that Brazil was doing super well! And, having met some people with disabilities, I always knew what they are capable of, because my mother was a teacher, and a former student of hers was a medalist and was blind, and had a hearing impairment. So I always had this view that they were capable [...]. I think that, many times, people see people with disabilities as people who are, like, ‘poor thing!’, or who can’t do anything, but they’re, like, ‘F**k it’, they do things, live a normal life, you know?” (THIAGO, CIVIL ENGINEERING)*

The way in which the interlocutors above used to see PWD had already been changed in a previous indirect contact with PWD through the Paralympics and the Parapan American Games. From this contact, they started to perceive these people as capable. Similar changes were observed in a study by Carew, Noor and Burns³¹. These researchers checked the impact of the 2012 London PG as to changing the perception of the research participants about PWD and the former's behaviors while interacting with the latter. In the end, they concluded that the experience with the PG was able to change the research participants' perception of PWD's competences (e.g., intelligence, capability, efficiency, skills, confidence). These authors also identified an increase in empathy and a decrease in anxiety about PWD on the part of their interviewees, which helped reduce their prejudice towards PWD.

Interacting with the Other: The strength of Direct Contact

Thirteen of the 50 students we interviewed did not significantly change the way they perceive PWD after their experience with the PG. They said that they had already had contact with PWD, either in their family, at work or in their leisure context. The fact that they directly knew someone with a disability apparently lessened possible prejudices against PWD:

"I always knew about the abilities he [brother] had, where he could go. He has determination, he works hard, and he's really good! If he wants so, he can make it to the Paralympics too! The Games are important for people who don't know about disabilities. They show that people, despite their impairments, can participate in a competition and are not dependent because of their limitations." (ANA JULIA, DENTISTRY, HAS A BROTHER WITH A DISABILITY)

"People are prejudiced against those who have some type of disability, because they don't meet a standard that society imposes, as to bodies, as to what is normal. But they are normal, they can do everything! My father, he had an accident a while ago, he amputated his leg, and I know all he can do! He can do anything!" (FÁBIA, NURSING, LIVING WITH A FATHER WHO HAS A DISABILITY)

Direct contact between thirteen of our interviewees and a person with a disability gave the former a perspective of more empathy and confidence in the capabilities of PWD. They proved to know that a disability does not necessarily limit the potential and the intellectual and/or physical performance of PWD.

Some longitudinal studies based on the ICT show that groups of people considered "normal" coexisting with stigmatized people tends to improve how one group treats the other over time. Sidanius, Levin, Van Laar and Sears³², for instance, conducted a research in which they followed up students from the University of California, Los Angeles, for four years. They found that, as students interacted with colleagues from other ethnic groups (white, Asian, Latin and African-American people), many became friends. The greater the number of inter-ethnic friendships that were gradually formed, the greater the chances of one befriending people of other ethnicities. According to the authors, having friends of different ethnicities helped the students reduce existing prejudices related to the ethnic origin of their colleagues. Eller and Abrams³³ analyzed direct contact between two different groups (Mexicans and Americans) in the work environment and found changes in attitude and behavior between these groups over two years. In the end, they concluded that contact between groups, without significant interactions, did not generate expressive longitudinal effects on the way the groups perceived and treated each other. However, in cases in which there was a more personal contact, reduction was found in social distance and, potentially, in prejudice.

Other participants who have had direct contact with PWD for knowing someone who had a family member with a disability also proved to have less prejudice. This can be observed, for instance, in the speech below.

“I have a friend whose brother has an atrophied arm and swims. I’ve seen him compete. He’s much better than me [pause]. And, seeing him, I realize that people who have disabilities, like, it’s not because of their disability that they can’t do the things they want to do.” (VIVIAN, DENTISTRY, HAS A FRIEND WHOSE BROTHER HAS A DISABILITY).

Pettigrew² states that knowing someone close to a person with a disability can make the latter more acceptable. This type of contact would prepare the individual for direct contact, since it can promote an increase in empathy and a decrease in anxiety about the other. All this can lead to a decrease in prejudice and a more positive contact with other people and their supposed differences.

Conclusions

Most of the students interviewed changed their perception of PWD as a consequence of the PG. This experience provided them with a contact, though indirect, with their abilities. This, in turn, lessened their prejudice against these people, mainly in the case of students who had not had direct contact with them before the Games. As for the interviewees who used to interact or still interact with PWD, contact with athletes who have disabilities through the media has not caused significant changes in their perception of PWD. They apparently already had a less prejudiced view of them.

The results of this study reinforce the ICT thesis that both direct and indirect contact with different groups can serve as a means to reduce prejudice. We know, however, that contact alone is not enough to end prejudice and discrimination. As we have discussed earlier, contact, depending on how it happens, can even reinforce prejudice and segregation. For this reason, if possible, contact should be associated with educational actions that can bring about positive results from it. In this way, it can serve as an important tool for transforming the perceptions of the general population concerning these people.

The present exploratory investigation reflects the findings of the research we have conducted with 50 university students. The latter, in their turn, compose a group of people with a profile different from that of the general population. Therefore, the conclusions herein presented cannot be generalized. However, as we have stated earlier, we are conducting interviews with other groups of interlocutors. We intend, in the future, to compare the perceptions of all different groups researched so that we can develop a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of all different points of view involved in the topic of our research. Finally, we stress that further studies are necessary in order to verify whether the supposed changes in perception that have occurred and/or will occur can sustain themselves in the long run.

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