

**CLASSIFICATION IN PARA SPORT: EXPLORING ATHLETES' AND  
CLASSIFIERS' EXPERIENCES WITH AND UNDERSTANDING OF  
CLASSIFICATION**

by

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## **Abstract**

Classification is a defining feature of Para sport; however, little empirical evidence describes the experience of classification and how it can be improved. To date, the primary focus of research related to classification has been on the development of evidence-based classification procedures. Meanwhile, the limited literature which has focused on experiential aspects of classification has shown classification to be a potentially negative experience for athletes. As well, classifiers have been identified as important social actors within the Para sport context, yet no research has simultaneously examined athletes' and classifiers' experiences with classification. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to elucidate athletes' and classifiers' experiences with classification in Para sport. Semi-structured interviews exploring the experience of classification were conducted with 18 internationally classified Canadian athletes and an international sample of eight internationally certified classifiers. Hermeneutic phenomenological analysis was used to conceptualize athletes' and classifiers' classification experience. The results of this thesis show that athletes and classifiers experience classification in one of three ways: as a neutral experience, a negative experience, or a positive experience. Positive experiences were seen only in contrast to negative experiences. In the absence of a negative experience, athletes and classifiers experience classification neutrally. Athletes and classifiers construct their understandings of classification by reflecting on themselves (The Self), their interactions with one another (The Athlete-Classifier Interaction), and the classification system itself (The Classification System). Together, these findings provide novel insight into athletes' and classifiers' experiences with, and understanding of, classification and may inform for future interventions aimed at improving the experiences of athletes and classifiers.

## **Co-Authorship**

This thesis presents the original work of Janet Lawson in collaboration with her supervisor, Dr. Amy Latimer-Cheung and collaborator, Dr. Toni Williams. Janet Lawson was responsible for developing the research question, conducting the background research, designing the study, conducting interviews, leading the analyses of data collected through those interviews, and writing the thesis. Dr. Latimer-Cheung assisted with the development of the research question and the design of the study. Drs. Latimer-Cheung and Williams assisted with the data analysis and the written findings of the thesis.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

**IPC:** International Paralympic Committee

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Classification, or the process through which athletes' functional ability is evaluated and athletes are organized into groups for competition, is a defining feature of Para sport (Sherrill, 1999). It serves as a critical determinant of athletes' participation and quality of experience in Para sport (Evans et al., 2018; Patatas et al., 2019). Despite the central importance of classification, little empirical evidence describes the experience of classification and how it can be improved. To date, the primary focus of research related to classification has been on the development of evidence-based classification procedures. Although necessary for the continued development of Para sport, as noted by Tweedy et al. (2018), this focus on evidence-based classification has resulted in a paucity of research relating to experiential aspects of classification.

Extant literature focused on the experience of classification has revealed classification to be a potentially negative experience for athletes, marked by feelings of surveillance and a hyper-focus on impairment (Howe, 2008; Peers, 2012). Meanwhile, no research has explicitly focused on classifiers' experiences with classification. A limited body of work has examined classifiers' roles in classification and showed that classifiers use authoritative and allocative resources to establish and maintain authority over athletes during classification (Wu et al., 1999), yet no further works have examined the effects of classifiers' position of authority on athletes' experiences. Similarly, while research has highlighted the obscurity of the classification system, with athletes and classifiers reporting differing levels of knowledge regarding classification (Molik et al., 2017), the reasons for this differential, and athlete and classifier education pertaining to classification more generally, have not yet been studied.

## **1.2 Thesis Objectives**

The purpose of this thesis was to elucidate athletes' and classifiers' experiences with classification in Para sport. More specifically, I sought to describe how participation in classification is typically experienced by athletes and classifiers as well as how members of each group construct their understandings of classification. Hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with internationally classified athletes and internationally certified classifiers from a broad range of Para sports was used to develop the conceptualization of classification presented herein.

## **1.3 Thesis Organization**

This thesis has been written in conformation with Queen's University's School of Graduate Studies' 'General Forms of Theses' and School of Kinesiology and Health Studies' 'Traditional Style Thesis Requirement' guidelines. The following chapters comprise a review of relevant literature (Chapter 2), a description of this study's methods (Chapter 3) and results (Chapter 4), and a discussion of key findings as well as implications and limitations of this research, and future directions (Chapter 5).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2.1 General Introduction to Para Sport**

Nearly one in five Canadians aged 15 years and over has one or more disabilities (Morris et al., 2018). Much like physical activity for able-bodied individuals, physical activity, and accordingly Para sport, or sport for athletes with an impairment (IPC Style Guide, 2017), provides individuals with disabilities with a variety of psychosocial and physical benefits (Martin, 2013). Participation rates in Para sport, however, are consistently reported to be lower than participation rates of able-bodied individuals in sport (e.g., Scottish Government, 2015; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Meanwhile, the Paralympic Games, which are contested quadrennially and are easily the most recognizable form of Para sport, have seen continued growth since their inception. Originating in the 1940's as a rehabilitative treatment for veterans with spinal cord injuries at Stoke Mandeville Hospital in England (Guttmann, 1976), the Paralympics have become the second largest multi-sport event in the world with over 4 000 athletes competing in the most recent summer Games (Rio 2016 in Numbers, n.d.). Importantly, the legacy of the Paralympic Games may influence participation rates in Para sport (Brittain & Beacom, 2016), and so, examining factors which influence Para athlete's participation in Paralympic sport is a worthy means of potentially increasing wide-spread participation in Para sport.

As a part of the growth of the Paralympic Games, participation now extends beyond just those with spinal cord injuries. Today, Para sport includes athletes with a range of impairments including: ataxia, athetosis, hypertonia, impaired muscle power or passive range of motion, intellectual impairment, limb deficiencies, leg length differences, short stature, and/or visual impairment. A critical element of Para sport is classification, a system whereby athletes'

eligibility to compete in Para sport is confirmed and athletes are grouped into Sport Classes according to the impact of their impairment on activities fundamental to the sport in which they compete (IPC Athlete Classification Code, 2015).

## **2.2 Introduction to Classification**

While systems of categorizing athletes play a role within sport for able-bodied athletes (e.g., weight classes in boxing, age-group competitions, and men's and women's competitions), classification is a defining feature of Para sport (Howe, 2011; IPC Athlete Classification Code, 2015; Sherrill, 1999). Prerequisites for classification are that athletes must have one of the ten aforementioned eligible impairments that result in a permanent and verifiable activity limitation and meet their sport's minimum disability criteria (IPC Classification Code and International Standards, 2007). Minimum disability criteria are standards for the severity of an athlete's impairment that aim to guarantee that the impairment impacts sport performance.

The actual in-person classification assessment is relatively brief. However, there can be months of lead up to being classified. Prior to classification, athlete eligibility is confirmed by the international federation which governs the athlete's sport. Eligibility is confirmed through the submission of documentation of the athlete's impairment which may include, but is not limited to, medical reports, visual impairment assessments, and X-rays (IPC Athlete Classification Code and International Standards, 2007). For some athletes, the collection of these documents may take months to complete. If athletes meet the first two criteria, they may then undergo a combination of physical and technical assessments and observations in order to determine their Sport Class which represents the extent that their impairment impacts their ability to perform sport-specific tasks. The physical and technical assessments take approximately 60 minutes to complete in most sports and the entire classification process is always conducted in English. Classifiers are therefore required to speak business level English; however, athletes are able to bring a translator with them to the assessment if needed. See Table 1 for an overview of eligible impairment types

and assessments used to determine athletes' eligibility to compete (Explanatory Guide to Paralympic classification, 2015).

**Table 1**

*Eligible Impairment Types and Assessments Used to Determine Eligibility to Compete*

<b>Eligible Impairment</b>	<b>Impairment Description</b>	<b>Technical Assessments Used to Verify Impairments</b>
Ataxia	Lack of co-ordination of muscle movements due to a neurological condition, such as cerebral palsy, brain injury or multiple sclerosis.	- Coordination Testing - Modified Ashworth Scores - MRI - EMG
Athetosis	Generally characterized by unbalanced, involuntary movements and a difficulty in maintaining a symmetrical posture, due to a neurological condition, such as cerebral palsy, brain injury or multiple sclerosis.	- Same as Above
Hypertonia	Abnormal increase in muscle tension and a reduced ability of a muscle to stretch, due to a neurological condition, such as cerebral palsy, brain injury or multiple sclerosis.	- Coordination Testing - Modified Ashworth Scores - Brain MRI - EMG
Impaired Muscle Power	Reduced force generated by muscles or muscle groups, such as muscles of one limb or the lower half of the body, as caused, for example, by spinal cord injuries, spina bifida or polio.	- Manual Muscle Tests - EMG - Biopsy
Impaired Passive Range of Movement	Range of movement in one or more joints is reduced permanently, for example due to arthrogryposis. Hypermobility of joints, joint	- Goniometric Measurements - X-rays of Affected

	instability, and acute conditions, such as arthritis, are not considered eligible impairments.	Limb/Joint
Intellectual Impairment	A limitation in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour as expressed in conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills, originating before the age of 18.	
Leg Length Difference	Bone shortening in one leg due to congenital deficiency or trauma.	- Lower Limb Length Measurement
Limb Deficiency	Total or partial absence of bones or joints as a consequence of trauma (e.g. car accident), illness (e.g. bone cancer) or congenital limb deficiency (e.g. dysmelia).	- Photograph or X-Ray of Affected Limb/Joint
Short Stature	Reduced standing height due to abnormal dimensions of bones of upper and lower limbs or trunk, for example due to achondroplasia or growth hormone dysfunction.	- Body Height Measurement
Visual Impairment	Vision is impacted by either an impairment of the eye structure, optical nerves or optical pathways, or the visual cortex.	- Visual Impairment Assessments

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As each sport requires athletes to perform different activities, and thus the impact of a particular impairment on performance varies between sports, athlete evaluations and outcomes are sport specific. This is to say that classification in one sport is neither the same as nor transferable to another sport. For example, within the track-based disciplines of Para athletics, athletes with limb deficiency, leg length difference, impaired muscle power, or impaired passive range of movement may compete in one of eight classes (T 51-54 and 61-64) which encompass



wheelchair racing, running, and jumping, whereas athletes with the same impairments may be assigned one of four classes within Para Nordic skiing (LW 2-4 and 12).

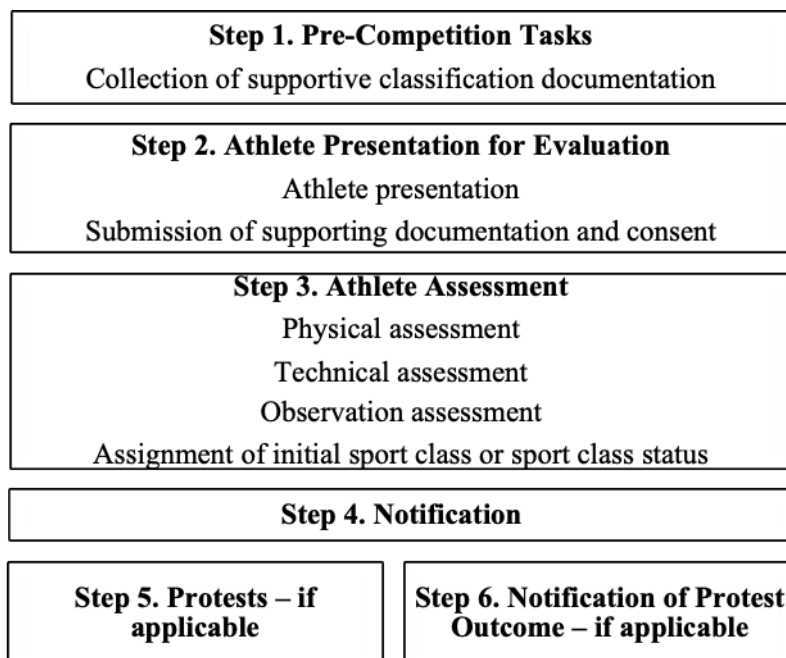
Additionally, the composition of the Classification Panel and the breadth of classes that can be assigned differs between sports. The IPC grants international sport federations the responsibility to establish classifier certification processes but requires that training includes processes to train and assess classifiers, handle sub-standard performances, re-certify classifiers, and address non-active classifiers (International Standard for Classifier Personnel and Training, 2016). The IPC's Classification Code and International Standards (2007) further stipulates that international classification panels must comprise a minimum of two classifiers; however, international federations have the discretion to require additional members of the classification panel. Additionally, the IPC recommends that classifiers be either medical or health related professionals (e.g., physiatrists), or persons with sport specific technical knowledge and/or expertise (e.g., sport scientists, coaches), but each international sport federation is left to decide the composition of their international classification panels. Resultingly, wheelchair basketball, for example, requires three technical classifiers and no medical classifiers while Para athletics requires two classifiers, one of whom must have a medical background.

Moreover, international sport federations define Sport Classes which can be assigned broadly or more specifically (IPC Athlete Classification Code, 2015). For example, World Rowing assigns athletes to one of three broad categories encompassing: (1) individuals with physical and visual impairments who row using their legs, trunk, and arms; (2) individuals with physical impairments who row using only their trunk and arms; (3) and individuals who row using only their arms and shoulders (World Rowing, n.d.). Meanwhile, World Para Swimming assigns athletes with physical impairments one of ten classifications, athletes with visual impairments one of three classifications, and athletes with intellectual impairments a separate classification (Classification in Para Swimming, n.d.).

Across sports, athletes are assigned a Sport Class Status in addition to their Sport Class (IPC Classification Code and International Standards, 2007). Athletes who have not yet been evaluated by an international classification panel (even if they have been classified domestically) will be assigned the status of new (N). Prior to participating in international competition, all athletes with a Sport Class Status N must be classified by an international classification panel. Following this, and so long as the classification panel believes their condition to be stable, the athlete's status will change to confirmed (C). If the international classification panel is unsure of the stability of an athlete's classification (e.g., youth who have not met physical maturation, fluctuating or progressive impairments), they may indicate that the athlete's classification is up for review (R). For some athletes, this means that classification may occur many times throughout their career. Additionally, if an athlete does not meet the minimal impairment requirements for a sport they will be classed as Ineligible to Compete (known colloquially as being 'classed out'). The classification pathway is illustrated in Figure 1 (IPC Classification Code and International Standards, 2007).

**Figure 1**

*Athlete Evaluation Pathway*



### **2.3 Evidence-Based Classification**

Altogether, the aim of classification is to define who is eligible to compete in Para sport and to group athletes into sport classes which ensure that each participant has an equal chance to accumulate physical capital and that, as far as possible, victory is achieved through athletic performance alone (Howe, 2011; Jones & Howe, 2005; Tweedy et al., 2018). To this end, calls have been made for the establishment of scientific evidence enabling the accurate measurement, analysis, and prediction of performance (Tweedy et al., 2018). Current studies of classification have therefore focused on topics such as the development of evidence for the association between impairment and sport-specific activities evaluated during classification (e.g., trunk muscle strength and 1m acceleration and sprint momentum in wheelchair rugby; Altmann et al., 2018; Vanlandewijc et al., 2011), establishing statistical validity of classification tests (Altmann et al., 2016; Hogarth et al., 2019), and developing novel methods of classification in order to improve the objectivity and transparency of decision-making in Para sport classification (Hogarth et al., 2018). Together, these works have advanced classification practices, ensuring that Para sports are meeting their obligation to pursue the development of evidence-based systems of classification, as required by the IPC's Classification Code and International Standards (2007).

### **2.4 Classification and the Models of Disability**

In order to fully understand the context in which classification occurs, it is first important to review the predominant models of disability through which disability itself is conceptualized in contemporary society. Here, three models of disability – the medical, social, and social-relational model – are described. While not an exhaustive list, these three models of disability are particularly relevant given their historical influence on classification or potential to inform future analyses of classification.

**2.4.1 The Medical Model of Disability.** Contemporary literature's focus on developing evidence-based classification procedures aligns with the historical dominance of medicalized knowledge within Para sport. As a product of medical rehabilitation, Para sport classification has been shaped by the Medical Model of Disability (Legg & Steadward, 2011). This model assumes that those who live with disability are deviants from the biomedical norm and that it is their responsibility to fit within a predominantly non-disabled society (Grenier, 2007; Oliver, 1990; Thomas & Smith, 2009). Inherent to this model is the prioritization of the able body and the valuing of those who champion it. This is represented by the Medical Model of Disability's tasking of medical professionals with identifying and correcting functional defects of the bodies of the disabled (Thomas & Smith, 2009). The prevalence of the Medical Model of Disability in classification becomes apparent when classifiers' typical participation in medical and paramedical professions, and their positioning as experts on the human body with the ability to define disability (i.e., their positioning as cognitive authorities; Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Wu et al., 2000) are considered. Put another way, an emphasis on evidence-based classification procedures, along with classifiers' power to identify, include and exclude impairments within Para sport, exemplifies the Medical Model of Disability.

The Medical Model of Disability has been criticized for creating a normal/abnormal dichotomy (Townsend et al., 2016). Within classification, this dichotomy can be seen explicitly through the absolute inclusion/exclusion of athletes based upon how their impairment fits within classification norms (e.g., having the right impairment or level of impairment for a particular Sport Class). Strict adherence to classification norms, however, disallows classifiers from considering other factors that may affect an athlete's abilities. For example, Jones and Howe (2005) call attention to the fact that within functional classification systems training effects, such as increased physical skill or ability developed through practice, are not considered. Peers (2012) highlights that individuals with intangible impairments that are difficult to point to and measure,

such as pain, are excluded from Para sport as a result of classification. Furthermore, and reflective of its basis in the Medical Model of Disability, classification does not consider psychological, social, or behavioral elements of disability. Although discussing the merits of including such elements within Athlete Evaluations is outside the scope of this work, it is worth considering how classification can be understood through models of disability that do consider such factors.

**2.4.2 The Social Model of Disability.** Developed by disability activists in response to the Medical Model of Disability, the Social Model of Disability conceptualizes disability as an entirely social construct rather than an inborn trait resulting from physical, sensory, or intellectual impairment (Thomas, 2014). Accordingly, the Social Model of Disability posits that people become disabled through social barriers present across life situations (e.g., attitudinal prejudice, financial disadvantages, inaccessible physical environments). In direct contrast to the Medical Model of Disability, this relocates disability outside of the individual and places the onus of disability onto society (Smith & Perrier, 2014).

Despite the development and strengthening of the disabled peoples' movement resulting from the reimagining of disability as a social construct (Oliver, 2013), the Social Model of Disability has been critiqued for ignoring the physical implications of impairment, consequently ignoring the material reality of disfunction, illness or pain for many people (Martin, 2013). It is likely for this reason too that the Social Model has not yet been used to conceptualize disability within the context of classification. Classification's focus on identifying and categorizing an athlete's impairment and its impact on performance contradicts the Social Model of Disability's positioning of disability as being outside of the individual. For this very reason though, viewing classification through the lens of the Social Model of Disability may be useful in problematizing classification. Specifically, adopting an understanding of disability informed by the Social Model of Disability provokes theoretical questions pertaining to classification's role in disabling Para athletes through its fundamental exclusion of individuals on the basis of impairment. However,

Smith and Bundon (2018) call for both a social understanding of disability and a focus on disabled bodies accompanied by engagement with the well-documented tensions between the two. For this reason, Smith and Bundon (2018) suggest instead that the Social-Relational Model of Disability be used to address these contradictions.

**2.4.3 The Social-Relational Model of Disability.** The Social-Relational Model engages with both social structures and social agency to explain disability as a bodily reality and a manifestation of social relationships (Thomas, 2007; Townsend et al., 2016). In other words, it recognizes the effects of impairment (e.g., reduced function) along with restrictions produced through structural and attitudinal barriers (Goodley, 2013). With this understanding, disability is said to be a result of impairment and “given meaning through the relational practices that shape how people experience the world” (Townsend et al., 2016, p. 7). Through this, individuals’ subjective experiences of living with impairment are emphasized (Smith & Perrier, 2014).

Although yet to be explored in the context of classification, Townsend et al. (2016) illustrated the benefits of using the Social-Relational Model of Disability to analyze Para sport coaching. In this case, social relations that contribute to disability were considered alongside impairment and the lived experience of disability and ableism within the context of sport. Building upon this, Allan et al. (2019) illustrated how a social-relational understanding of Para sport coaches’ influence on athletes’ experiences can provide insight into coach-athlete interactions. Similarly, the Social-Relational Model of Disability may allow us to better understand how medicalized classification procedures (e.g., the submission of medical documents) and social aspects of classification (e.g., athlete-classifier interactions) co-create a complex classification experience. Furthermore, how classification contributes to or influences the development of interpersonal relationships and the maintenance of disability stereotypes and norms may be highlighted through the juxtaposition of medicalized and social understandings of disability within the Social-Relational Model of Disability. By accounting for both physical and

social aspects of disability, this model provides a unique base from which to holistically examine the classification experience.

In sum, understanding the Medical Model of Disability is crucial to understanding the historical context within which classification developed. While no longer based in medical diagnoses, the legacy of the Medical Model prevails through the continued value associated with medical knowledge and classifiers' status as cognitive authorities. Although a potentially useful means of problematizing classification, the Social Model of Disability fails to consider embodied aspects of disability which limit the ways it can be used to understand classification. Conversely, the Social-Relational Model of Disability uniquely considers both biological and social elements of disability. Because of this, the Social-Relational Model of Disability presents the most auspicious means of understanding classification within its historical context while still allowing for classification to be examined critically.

## **2.5 Experiential Aspects of Classification as a Topic Worthy of Investigation**

It is paramount that athletes' and classifiers' experience of classification be examined because of the critical role classification plays in Para sport (Howe, 2011; Sherrill, 1999). Not only is classification a central organizing feature of Para sport (IPC Athlete Classification Code, 2007), but it may be a key determinant of athletes' participation. This was illustrated by Patatas et al. (2019) who, through semi-structured interviews with 32 stakeholders from five Para sports within the Brazilian sport system, identified classification as a Para sport specific factor that influences the development of athletes' careers throughout their entirety. What is more, for those athletes who do participate in Para sport, classification may have a direct impact on how they experience Para sport. Specifically, classification may place participants in appropriately challenging situations or at a competitive disadvantage, the latter of which may result in feelings of isolation amongst Para sport participants (Evans et al., 2018). In order to better understand

athletes' experiences with classification, one must first examine the role of classifiers in shaping the classification experience.

## **2.6 Classifiers' Roles and Experiences**

Academic understanding of the role of classifiers in classification is regrettably limited. Wu et al. (2000) provide us with the most robust description of classifiers' roles in their seminal research on classifiers as agents of social control in Para swimming. In this study, participant observations at National, Zonal, and World Championships informed the development of a questionnaire which was subsequently completed by 18 of 21 eligible classifiers. Here, the role of classifiers is described as being to classify fairly and in a detached manner (i.e., not impose personal values during classification), not to act in self-interest, and to apply a high degree of knowledge and skill to classify. This role depends upon classifiers being given the right to evaluate athletes, decide upon Sport Classes, and exercise professional authority. This role is established and maintained through the use of authoritative and allocative resources; however, classifiers are shown to rely on authoritative resources (e.g., knowledge, skill, and experience) more so than allocative resources (e.g., material resources). Through this use of authoritative resources classification socially produces and reproduces the subordination of those being classified, yet the relationship between athletes and classifiers which enables this subordination is not explored further. Wu et al. (2000) do, however, explain that classifiers learn to classify and exert authority through an ongoing process of socialization wherein classification norms and values are internalized. Successful socialization results in classifiers' pursuit of personal interests that support the interests of the classification system as a whole (e.g., classifiers discarding deviant values, or those not aligned with classification norms). Contrarily, a classifier's failure to internalize classification norms may be met with sanctions, such as no longer being authorized to classify.



While a dearth of research has explored the roles of classifiers in classification, little more has centred classifiers voices or sought to explicate their experiences. What limited work has considered classifiers provides insight into classifiers' perceptions of the International Wheelchair Basketball Federation's functional classification system (Molik et al., 2017) and describes basic demographic information of classifiers from Ontario, Canada and their perceptions of their capability, opportunity, and motivation to work with athletes with disabilities (Canadian Disability Participation Project & Ontario Parasport Collective, 2018). Although this work details classifiers' feelings of enjoyment, mental stimulation, and accomplishment based in their classification experiences, classifiers' experiences with classification were not the primary focus of this study. Altogether, the scarcity of research pertaining to classifiers, along with that which engages classifiers, limits our understanding of classification as an embodied experience.

## **2.7 Para Athletes' Experiences**

Although limited, it is important to consider what is known of classifiers when considering towards athletes' experiences with classification. Primarily, it is essential to consider classifiers' position as cognitive authorities along with the embedded importance of medicalized knowledge within classification when reflecting on how athletes know and experience classification. Herein, the importance of medicalized knowledge should be considered to influence the small number of studies which provide preliminary evidence for the development of classification systems using an athlete-centred approach (see, Altmann et al., 2013; Molik et al., 2017). Furthermore, classifiers' position of importance within classification is evidenced through both first-person accounts of classification (e.g., Howe, 2008; Peers, 2012) and studies which have centralized athletes' experiences with classification in Para sport (e.g., Bundon et al., 2018; Powis & Macbeth, 2019; Van Dornick & Spencer, 2019).

**2.7.1 Athlete-Centred approaches to classification.** As the first step in developing an athlete-centred approach to classification, Altmann et al. (2013) sought athletes' perspectives on

classification as a means of identifying priority issues within the classification of wheelchair rugby. The authors consulted representatives of 19 of the International Wheelchair Rugby Federation's 26 member nations in order to generate a list of dichotomous questions before distributing this survey to 302 representatives in person at the 2009 Zonal Championships and online following the event. Additionally, open-ended questions were included which allowed athletes and other stakeholders to provide context to their answers. Notably, when discussing the results of the survey, the authors warned that athletes' personal interest in the game and classification may have biased the results. The assumption that athletes' responses speak to bias rather than personal insight into the way that classification is enacted on the court may represent an ongoing prioritization of medical knowledge. That said, athletes' personal biases were further explained as being of secondary interest to the effects of classification on team lineups (i.e., athletes' perceptions of classification were more heavily influenced by the potential impact of changes to their team than the ways in which it would directly affect them). Importantly, respondents were said to value the opportunity to be involved in developing the classification system. This indicates that, although personal bias may need to be addressed, athlete-centred approaches should be considered in the future.

In a similar study soliciting feedback from athletes and classifiers on the state of the functional classification system used in wheelchair basketball, Molik et al. (2017) surveyed participants' assessments of the classification system, current classification procedures, and the perceived skill of national and international-level classifiers. Here, a discrepancy between athletes' and classifiers' individual knowledge of classification and perceptions of the objectiveness of classification was reported. The majority of classifiers indicated they had 'good' or 'very good' knowledge of classification procedures while only one in four athletes found their own knowledge of classification to be 'good' or 'very good'. Furthermore, less than half of respondent athletes rated the decisions of national- or international-level classifiers as 'objective'.

Meanwhile, most classifiers found classification to be ‘objective’. Notably, it was reported that 28% of athletes included in the study ( $n=79$ ) had their classification changed over the course of their sport career. Granted Molik et al.’s (2017) findings are specific to wheelchair basketball, through naturalistic generalizability we may infer that athletes in various Para sports perceive classification to be subjective and experience changes to their Sport Class over the course of their careers. Until a data-driven classification system is adopted across all Para sports, as has been called for by Tweedy and colleagues (2018), perceptions that classification is subjective may persist. In light of this, it is worth examining athletes’ experiences of classification in order to explain how these perceptions develop.

**2.7.2 Accounts of athletes’ experiences.** Two of the most salient accounts of classification available at present are the autoethnographic works of Howe (2008) and Peers (2012). In Howe (2008), the author’s own experience being classified immediately prior to the 1988 Paralympic Games is used to critically examine the process and application of classification regulations within Para athletics. In this example, the acceptability of certain impairments, represented by classification and determined by the Paralympic community and mainstream society, are shown to shape social hierarchies and the potential for each athlete to acquire capital. Importantly, this analysis is achieved through vivid descriptions of the classifiers present (e.g., “The team of classifiers look like they have been working all night long...” p. 4), and how they are perceived by the athlete (e.g., “The classifiers see me as a difficult character,” p. 4). In total, this account styles classification as a medicalized procedure which pays little regard for the athlete participant. As Howe says, “My body has been processed – classified – as an object of medical science where my disembodied identity does not seem to matter.” (p. 4).

Similarly, Peers (2012) uses personal narrative to explain how classification constructs Para sport, and how explaining classification as a component of Para sport also serves to structure classification norms. By explicating how narratives of classification educate athletes about their

bodies and (dis)abilities, classification is shown to teach athletes to police their own classification and identify themselves as Para athletes (specifically Paralympians). This is accomplished through sharing recollections of being surveilled during classification (e.g., “I feel awkward, almost naked, under her gaze...” p. 178) until that surveillance became internalized, an ever-present companion throughout participation in Para sport (e.g., “If I *can* walk without crutches, then I *should not* really use them, should I?” p. 182). Taken together, the accounts of Howe (2008) and Peers (2012) provide insight into classification and the social and intrapersonal outcomes resulting from classification. Still, further exploration of classification is required in order to elucidate the relationship between athletes and classifiers that enables the medicalized surveillance of Para athletes described here.

In addition to these two first-person accounts of classification, there is a small body of research which has retrospectively explored Para athletes’ experiences with classification. First, through semi-structured interviews with nine Canadian Para swimmers who had been classified provincially or higher, Van Dornick and Spencer (2019) found Para swimmers’ experiences to be strongly influenced by athletes’ interactions with classifiers. Specifically, classifiers who were perceived as being professional and capable increased athlete comfort during classification, while those whose objectivity came into question led athletes to feel mistrustful. Relatedly, Para swimmers recognized feelings of anxiety associated with classifiers holding control over future swimming opportunities. Feelings of observation and judgement, similar to those expressed by Peers (2012), were also expressed by athletes, and were said to become more salient as classification became more impactful to (i.e., as athletes reached higher levels of competition). Altogether, these feelings resulted in a hesitancy amongst athletes to ask classifiers questions or to request more information, thus reinforcing an “air of mystery” that surrounds classification (p. 11). In spite of this, positive outcomes were also associated with classification. Positive outcomes included athletes’ admission to competition, performance at levels athletes felt were

representative of their ability and learning new things about their bodies and their abilities. Taken together, this work identifies potential outcomes of classification and evidences the influence of classifiers on athletes' experiences with classification.

Second, Powis and Macbeth (2019) provide insight into how classification is experienced in partially sighted football and visually impaired cricket. Here, participant observations, coupled with semi-structured interviews, allowed for the elaboration of classification's role in establishing social identities and hierarchies within Para sport. For example, classification was shown to provide athletes and classifiers alike with the language needed to construct Para athlete identities as both groups use classification to identify athletes (i.e., athletes are referred to by their classification rather than their name or position on the pitch). Furthermore, 'acceptable' bodies and impairments were shown to be negotiated and socially constructed by athletes. This is a result, in part, of the discussion of classification being a dominant practice within visually impaired sport. For instance, debate over whether partially sighted athletes 'should' be able to drive was a prevalent topic of conversation amongst athletes, regardless of their own level of vision. Through these examples, we can see that classification as an organizing feature of Para sport extends beyond the logistics of competition. Accordingly, this highlights the value of extending classification research to further explore the impact of classification on social identity, particularly among team sport athletes where athletes with varying classifications compete alongside one another.

Third, Bundon et al. (2018), in an analysis of how the current organization and delivery of Paralympic sport informs athlete retirement, noted a lack of understanding of the classification system, and how or why an athlete might be re-classified, amongst athletes. Surveys and interviews with retired athletes then linked this shallow comprehension of classification to traumatic and unsettled transitions out of sport for athletes who had been re-classified to a non-competitive sport class (i.e., classed out of sport) or those whose impairment had changed without

a complimentary change in their Sport Class. In both situations, a lack of support provided by the athlete's national sport organization compounded their negative feelings towards classification. Altogether, this work demonstrates that increasing athletes' understanding of classification, and the capacity of national sport organizations to support athletes' transitions out of sport resulting from classification, is a priority.

## **2.8 Summary of the Literature and Purpose of the Study**

Altogether, the body of research related to experiential aspects of classification, while growing, is limited. Notably, contemporary knowledge of the roles and experiences of classifiers is nearly non-existent. Furthermore, a substantial portion of research relating to athletes is provided through first-person narratives (see Howe, 2008; Peers, 2012) which, although the source of robust descriptions of classification, are outdated given the current context of Para sport and shift towards evidence-based classification. The remaining research on the topic shows that classification can result in both positive and negative outcomes for athletes and that these outcomes may be mediated by athlete-classifier interactions (Van Dornick & Spencer, 2019). What is more, classification has been shown to influence interpersonal relationships developed within the context of Para sport. Specifically, the construction of athlete identities and social hierarchies is impacted by classification (Powis & Macbeth, 2019). However, both of these works are also limited in their application because of the sport-specific contexts in which they occur. As well, neither study sought the opinion of classifiers and so results solely represent athletes' perspectives. Lastly, despite the far-reaching importance of classification in Para sport, athletes' understanding of classification was also shown to be limited (Bundon et al., 2018). This has potentially significant implications for athletes' perceptions of their experience with classification, especially in cases where classification results in an athlete's departure from Para sport.

Given the substantial limitations of the aforementioned literature, and the demonstrated importance of classification in athletes' participation in Para sport, continued investigation into experiential aspects of classification is warranted. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to elucidate athletes' and classifiers' experiences with classification in Para sport. Furthermore, I sought to describe how athletes and classifiers construct their understanding of classification in Para sport. To do this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with internationally classified athletes and internationally certified classifiers from a broad range of Para sports.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Method**

#### **3.1 Context of the Study**

Through this study, I originally intended to explore the experience of classification in near-real time. My aim was to solicit athletes' thoughts and feelings about classification prior to international classification then interview them shortly thereafter to further explore how they experienced classification. Similar to the final form of this study, I also planned to interview classifiers who could speak broadly of their experiences with international classification. However, at the onset of recruitment COVID-19 exploded from a distant headline to global pandemic. As I transitioned to working from home and began to grapple with the new 'normal' it became clear that sporting events would be limited throughout the coming summer season. This was emphasized as rumors started to circulate that the 2020 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games would be postponed. At the recommendation of Dr. Latimer-Cheung, I proactively amended my study design, moving interviews completely online and expanding inclusion criteria to include any athletes who have previously been classified internationally. This eliminated the need for athletes to be classified during the course of this study.

Evidently, the 2020 Summer Paralympics were postponed, as were most other competitions, with a formal announcement being made in mid-March. Despite the dramatic effects of the pandemic across contexts (e.g., financial and sociocultural impacts), athletes and classifiers were keen to participate in this study and scheduling interviews proved relatively easy while most people remained close to home. Additionally, while some athletes were removed from their most recent classification (e.g., one athlete was last classified in 2012) due to the amended study design, they were still able to recall and provide rich descriptions of their experiences.



Some reflections on classification, particularly by those athletes set to compete in the upcoming Games and whose classification status could change over the course of the coming year, may have been impacted by the postponement of the Games. To account for this, interview questions were tailored to target athletes' experience of classification rather than their perception of their Sport Class at present. Altogether, although the path to completion was different from what I had initially imagined, I feel I was able to stay true to my research interest and elucidate athletes' and classifiers' experiences with classification through this study.

### **3.2 Positionality**

The following paragraphs are an account of my position as a student researcher in relation to the subject of classification and the participants of this thesis project. Recognizing my positionality is important to the hermeneutic phenomenological analysis undertaken for this study (described in section 3.8; Lavery, 2003), and further serves to illustrate the reflective practices I used to mark the methodological rigor of this study (see section 3.9.1 for further details on methodological rigor).

As an educated, able-bodied, White female I recognize the position of privilege that I hold; I benefit from ableism in my everyday life. Defined as prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors toward persons with a disability, ableism stems from individuals, communities, and institutions as well as from physical and social environments (Albrecht, 2006). To understand ableism, one must first understand what is considered to be normal ability and what rights and benefits are afforded to those who are deemed normal. It is through reflecting on the rights and benefits that I enjoy that I have been able to recognize the impact of ableism within my own life. Examples of my privilege are evident in the ease of access to higher education that I experience and my freedom to choose to participate in Para sport (as opposed to it being the only option available to me).

My freedom to navigate the Para sport system as an able-bodied individual has allowed me to take on many diverse roles within Para sport, often simultaneously. This includes the role of a participant (I am a former able-bodied wheelchair basketball player), administrator (I have previously worked for a number of sport organizations) and academic interested in Para sport. As an able-bodied person in these roles, I have often held implicit and explicit authority over individuals with disabilities. For example, as an assistant in various adapted strength and conditioning programs I have been tasked with providing physical assistance to participants (e.g., moving weights, setting up equipment, supporting wheelchair transfers). In these situations, my educational background and certification as a personal trainer offers me implicit authority – I am trusted to navigate this situation safely and am looked to for advice on how to do so – while my physical ability to navigate spaces and complete movements that the participants either cannot or would not be able to do without assistance allows me explicit authority.

In approaching this work, I sought to recognize my privilege and use my experience working with people with disabilities in order to further the research. To do this, I relied upon my ability to navigate Para sport as both a researcher and a former athlete/administrator, employing ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ identities as needed in order to recruit participants and develop rapport (Adler & Adler, 1994). For example, recruitment took place through both informal communications with acquaintances from my time playing wheelchair basketball (activating my insider, athlete identity) and formal correspondence with national sport organizations (leveraging my position as an outsider and researcher). In another example, participants who knew of my status as a former player used sport-specific language without prompting, indicating an assumption of my implicit understanding and allowing for further discussion of more complex or niche concepts. In other interviews, with participants who were unaware of my background or who participated in sports with which I have limited experience, I used my status as an outsider to prompt more detailed responses (e.g., “I’m unfamiliar with that, could you explain?”).

As much as my ability to navigate diverse social spaces was used throughout this research, the nature of my able-bodiedness also prevents me from fully understanding the lived experiences of individuals with disability in Para sport. Similarly, I do not have the same training or experience as international classifiers and can only speak to my interpretation of their experiences as they were shared with me. That said, drawing upon my own history as an able-bodied athlete who has participated in Para sport helped me to contextualize my reflections on and interpretation of the data. For example, reflecting on my own experience being classified exposed the origin of my belief that athletes are ill-prepared for classification. Understanding participants' views and experiences through the context of my own background is reflected in my use of an interpretivist paradigm.

### **3.3 Philosophical Assumptions**

An interpretivist paradigm underpinned by ontological relativism and epistemological constructionism was adopted for this study. Through this paradigm, I understood reality to be multiple and subjective (i.e., unique to the individual and their experience) and accepted that knowledge is subjective and socially constructed (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Adopting this perspective necessitated that I viewed each participant's description of their experience(s) with classification as unique. This required me to reflexively consider biases and preconceived notions that I may have been reading into the data as I completed my analysis. Meanwhile, I also sought to interpret participants' responses as a gestalt of interconnected meanings by identifying patterns or themes within and between responses. In doing so, data were interpreted through the lens of my personal experiences in and with Para sport. Ultimately, the experience of classification presented herein represents my construction of the many realities shared with me by participants of Para sport classification.

### **3.4 Design**

This research design was developed in accordance with hermeneutic phenomenological methodologies. That is, the research design reflects an attempt to understand what it is to participate in Para sport classification (e.g., the structures and dynamics) with a focus on articulating how athletes and classifiers come to understand and explain this experience. Following this tradition of Heidegger (1962), this methodology maintains that understanding the lived experience is inherently an interpretive process. Accordingly, data analysis (detailed in section 3.8) followed an iterative process of reflection and interpretation.

In order to first gain insight into Para athlete classification, retrospective, semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone ( $n = 2$ ) and Zoom version 5.0.4 ( $n = 24$ ; Zoom Video Communications Inc., San Jose, CA, 2020) with athletes and classifiers. Telephone-based interviews have been shown to enable rich data collection and the novel Voice over Internet Protocol technology, Zoom, has been shown to be preferred by participants and interviewees alike (Archibald et al., 2019; Cachia & Milward, 2011). While I found both mechanisms yielded productive conversations, my preference was for conducting interviews via Zoom. Although minor technical difficulties occurred (e.g., one participant's screen froze, and they had to quit and rejoin the call), I found myself able to engage more deeply with the participant and their stories when I could see them and read their facial expressions. Of note, this level of engagement was limited to my real-time interactions with participants; no video was recorded during the interviews so further reflections were based solely on audio recordings and my recollection.

### **3.5 Sampling and Participants**

Participants for this study were recruited using a mix of purposive and snowball sampling strategies (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). As such, a wide range of perspectives were sought through the recruitment of participants from a variety of individual and team, as well as summer and winter sports. However, all those who met the inclusion criteria were included in this study. As

participants were asked to refer other potential participants this resulted in a cluster of participants representing certain sports (e.g., Para Athletics). The emphasis on recruiting participants with insight and understanding of the research topic is appropriate for this work which seeks to establish naturalistic generalizability, as described by Smith (2018), from the results. Inclusion criteria are detailed in sections 3.5.1 and 3.5.2.

Similarly, rather than seeking the optimal number of participants from which to make inferences about the total population, sample size was determined by contextual and pragmatic considerations (Braun & Clarke, 2019). For example, classifiers are a relatively small group (e.g., there are only 22 FISA Para Rowing classifiers; World Rowing, 2019) and therefore represent a limited group from which to recruit. Conversely, many athletes expressed an interest in participating and, given the scope of the project, recruitment had to be capped in order to ensure the project remained manageable. Undoubtedly, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic affected people's availability and interest in participating. Some participants likely found they had additional time to spare for participation while remaining at home, away from training and work, while others may have experienced additional constraints to participation such as increased care-giving responsibilities.

**3.5.1 Athletes.** Athletes had to be 18 years of age or older and have been classified internationally for a Paralympic sport on the basis of a physical impairment. Only those with physical impairments were included as the classification pathways for those with intellectual and visual impairments differ significantly (IPC Athlete Classification Code, 2017). In total, 18 Canadian athletes (44% female) between the ages of 20 and 43 participated in this study. All athlete participants had been classified between 2012 and 2019. Eight of the 25 summer and winter Paralympic sports contested by athletes with physical impairments were represented in this sample (summer sports,  $n = 7$ ; winter sports,  $n = 1$ ; See Table 2) and 18 unique Sport Classes included. This sample is most representative of high-performing Para athletes, as there were a

number of World Championships participants ( $n = 7$ ) and Paralympians ( $n = 6$ )<sup>1</sup> included in this group. All athletes recruited were interviewed following the postponement of the 2020 Paralympic Games.

**Table 2**

*Representative list of sports*

Sport Classified	<i>n</i>
Boccia	1
Nordic Skiing	2
Para Athletics	4
Rowing	2
Swimming	5
Triathlon	1
Wheelchair Basketball	1
Wheelchair Rugby	2

**3.5.2 Classifiers.** Classifiers had to be 18 years of age or older and actively classifying internationally. An international sample of eight medical and technical classifiers participated in this study (62% medical classifiers). Six Paralympic sports were represented as the primary sports classified, however, some classifiers reported classifying an additional sport. Years spent classifying ranged from five to over 40 years ( $M = 18.4$ ;  $SD = 11.1$ ). Given the relatively small number of internationally certified classifiers worldwide, additional demographic information (e.g., specific sports classified, classifiers' home countries, and classifiers' sex) has been withheld in order to protect the anonymity of participants. Most interviews (75%) were conducted prior to the postponement of the 2020 Paralympic Games.

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<sup>1</sup> Two participants are Paralympic Games qualifiers; however, with the postponement of the 2020 Summer Paralympic Games, they have yet to compete at the Games.

### 3.6 Procedure

Once ethics approval was obtained (see Appendix A), potential participants were contacted in the following ways and invited to participate in the study (see Appendices B and C for the study's letter of information and a communications template). Partway through recruitment, my initial thesis proposal was amended. These changes are reflected in Appendix D.

- Using publicly available contact information (e.g., e-mail addresses published on the IPC's website), I contacted individuals via email.
- Individuals were contacted through private communications in cases where I was acquainted with the potential participant (e.g., via private message to athletes who I had previously met when participating in Para sport as an athlete).
- I contacted stakeholders in Para sport (e.g., coaches and administrators), again using publicly available contact information, and asked them to forward a letter of information about the study to athletes and classifiers who met the inclusion criteria. Similarly, all athletes and classifiers who were invited to participate were asked to share study information with others. Interested athletes and classifiers were asked to contact me directly.

Next, retrospective, semi-structured interviews with eligible and interested participants were scheduled and subsequently conducted via telephone or Zoom. Interviews with athletes and classifiers were conducted during the same general time frame. By happenstance, the majority of classifier interviews were conducted prior to beginning the athlete interviews. Upon request, the interview guide was shared with interviewees in advance of their interview ( $n = 2$ , both classifiers). At the start of each interview participants were asked to provide verbal consent to participate, for an audio recording of the interviews to be made (using QuickTime Player version 10.5; Apple Inc., Cupertino, CA, 2020), and for quotes to be included in written materials resulting from the study (see Appendix E for record of consent template). All participants

consented to all the aforementioned aspects of participation. Initially, a brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendix F) was sent to participants prior to their participation in an interview; however, low response rates presented a barrier to subsequently scheduling interviews with the participants. To account for this, the demographic questionnaire was instead incorporated into the semi-structured interview guide. Participants were free to opt out of answering any questions they chose; however, no participants declined to answer any questions. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

### **3.7 Interview Guide**

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study for their flexibility. As noted by Sparkes and Smith (2014), semi-structured interviews give participants greater control over the interview, allowing them to direct the interview to topics which are meaningful to their experience. The flexibility of this interview style was first demonstrated prior to data collection, when the athlete interview guide was piloted with an athlete who has undergone national-level classification. This pilot served to ensure that questions were clear and concise. Feedback from the pilot interview resulted in minor changes to both interview guides aimed at improving the overall flow of the conversation. For example, the prompt “Please describe how you learned the outcomes of your classification (e.g., who delivered the news of your Sport Class to you?)” was added to the athlete interview guide after the pilot interview and classifiers were asked to explain how they deliver results to athletes.

The interview guides for athletes and classifiers (see Appendix G) were developed in tandem and organized as follows. Each interview began with demographic and introductory questions (e.g., “Tell me a little bit about your first experience with classification.”). These questions served as an icebreaker through which the first author began to develop rapport with the participant. Following this, questions were initially organized into four sections. The first focused on environmental aspects of classification (e.g., “What is ideal about the physical setting



classification takes place in?”). The second focused on relationships within the classification setting (e.g., “How did classifiers demonstrate respect for you during classification?” or “How do you demonstrate respect for athletes during classification?”). The third focused on participants’ sense of engagement in classification (e.g., “Describe the ways you were involved in your classification. For example, passively responding to classifier requests or actively providing classifiers with information.” or “Describe the ways you are typically involved in classification. For example, is your main role that of note taker?”). The fourth focused on outcomes resulting from classification (e.g., “If you were to write an article about the ideal outcomes of classification, what would you write?”). As data collection progressed, an additional set of questions explicitly targeting athlete preparedness for classification (e.g., “What role did your teammate(s) or coach(es) have in helping you prepare for classification?” or “What indicates to you that an athlete is well prepared for classification?”) was added to both guides. Finally, closing questions (e.g., “What have we not discussed today that you think is important to mention when talking about classification?”) provided participants the opportunity to share additional thoughts or experiences that were not previously discussed.

While the aforementioned sections served as a template for the conversation, the order of questions was not restricted, rather, conversation was free to flow between topics. As well, additional questions were added where required to probe participants to expand upon their response or provide more detail in order for me to develop a deeper understanding of their perspective (e.g., “You mentioned that your coach was present during your classification, can you tell me more about what their role was during your classification?”). Throughout the interviews, questions were phrased so as to develop rapport with participants. In particular, illustrative example questions (e.g., “Some athletes have said that they discuss others’ classifications with their training partners or teammates quite a bit, while others have said that it never comes up. In your experience, how often does it come up?”) were used as these types of questions have been

said to establish neutrality on behalf of the interviewer and encourage interviewees to provide open and honest responses (Patton, 2015).

### **3.8 Analysis**

In accordance with hermeneutic phenomenological methodologies, my analysis followed an iterative process of reading transcripts, reflective writing, and interpretation or analysis. To begin, all interview recordings were replayed and transcribed verbatim. Throughout the transcription process I took note of dialogue that included striking detail and evoked powerful imagery. Following this, each transcript was reviewed individually, and athlete and classifier transcripts were reviewed concurrently so as to prompt reflection across the data. By looking at the data as a whole, rather than athlete and classifier data separately, I was encouraged to consider how emergent themes fit within both groups. This ensured coherence of themes and prompted me to consider alternative explanations for previously identified aspects of the phenomenon. For example, the development of themes relating to athletes' and classifiers' experience type (neutral, negative, or positive) occurred when considering participants' responses which explicitly described their experiences. Through this analysis, I developed the idea that positive experiences were only seen in response to negative experiences after realizing that classifiers only spoke of overtly positive classification experiences in relation to classifying athletes who had previously had obviously negative classification experiences. After this, I began to question what factors preceded positive and negative classification experiences from the perspective of the athlete and refined the idea through subsequent selective analysis of statements and phrases from both athlete and classifier transcripts.

Throughout my review of each transcript, two distinct forms of reflection were emphasized. The first required me to reflect on my own experience and claim the ways in which my position and experience relate to classification (Laverly, 2003). In doing so, I sought not to bracket or reduce my preconceptions. Instead, I subscribed to Heidegger's (1962) belief that

comprehending the lived experience is an interpretive process and so I sought to explicitly identify my background in order to elucidate my contextual interpretation. These reflections are captured in my statement on my positionality in section 3.2. The second form of reflection, phenomenological reflection, was aimed at grasping the meaning of something (van Manen, 1990), in this case classification. This type of reflection required me to be sensitive to language and the ways in which language was used to construct classification. As written by van Manen (1990, p. 111), “the phenomenological method consists of the ability, or rather the art of being sensitive – sensitive to the subtle undertones of language, in the way language speaks when it allows the thing themselves to speak”. This emphasis on language facilitated the development of the themes related to athletes’ and classifier’s ways of constructing their understanding of classification and the notes taken during this reflective process were added to my initial list of salient comments and themes relating to experience type. These macro- and micro-level notes (i.e., taken when looking at the text as a whole and through line-by-line examination of select parts) detailed parallels between transcripts, unique concepts, and questions that were raised through my readings. At various points (e.g., when I noted a potential parallel between transcripts) previously analyzed transcripts were revisited and additional notes were made, reflecting the iterative nature of hermeneutic phenomenological analysis.

Finally, broad, conceptual themes were used to organize my notes (e.g., notes related to experience type were collated). Following this, each theme related to athletes’ and classifiers’ ways of constructing their understanding of classification was reviewed individually, and notes were expanded or collapsed based on further reflection of their fit within the theme (e.g., athletes’ perception that they should not question classifiers, and classifiers perceptions that they themselves are well meaning were combined into the theme ‘The Self’). Subsequently, descriptions of participants’ experiences and the conditions or contexts in which these experiences took place were drafted from my notes, resulting in the themes relating to experience

type. An emphasis on language persisted throughout this process of data analysis as the writing process itself (along with the use of imagination and the hermeneutic circle) is viewed as essential to hermeneutic phenomenological analyses (Laverty, 2003).

### **3.9 Methodological Rigor**

Qualitative research can be assessed in many ways with qualitative values changing to reflect local contexts and current conventions (Tracy, 2010). As such, the following section is not intended to be an exhaustive list of possible methods of evaluating the rigor and quality of this work. Rather, this section is intended to be a guide for the reader, outlining the primary methods I used to ensure methodological rigor and alignment with my philosophical approach. This includes my use of reflective practices, transparency in my methodological process, and an intentional communication style.

**3.9.1 Reflective practices.** As recommended by Laverty (2003), I kept a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis which served a dual purpose. First, in keeping with hermeneutic phenomenological methodologies, the reflexive journal was used as a tool for phenomenological reflection and interpretation. Second, keeping a reflexive journal allowed me to identify the different ways in which I approached and oriented myself within the subject of classification. More specifically, this served as a transparent record of my use of an interpretivist paradigm. For example, at the beginning of this project I outlined my previous experience with Para sport, including my experience as an athlete who was classified nationally. Through this, I was able to identify various preconceptions I held about classification (e.g., that athletes don't have a deep understanding of classification) and question their origin and validity as I set out to engage with others' experiences. In questioning my own understanding of classification and my history with it I was able to identify how my own experience (that of going through classification relatively unprepared and with limited knowledge of the process) affected the way in which I was seeking to interpret others' experiences. Specifically, my orientation towards questioning why

and how classification is or is not discussed stems from my experience as an athlete questioning the classification experience.

**3.9.2 Transparency.** Transparency as a marker for the rigor of this research extends beyond being clear about how I have engaged in my paradigmatic approach. As hermeneutic phenomenology “avoids method for method’s sake and does not have step by step method or analytic requirement” (Kafle, 2011, pg 191), I found it important to clearly explain my chosen methods so as to avoid contributing further to the confusion that exists around this methodology (Lavery, 2003). As an example, Tufford and Newman (2010) discuss the litany of methods of bracketing, or distancing oneself from their preconceptions, within phenomenological research and call for researchers to explicitly address their position on bracketing. While the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition is marked by a departure from phenomenological reduction, without clearly explaining my decision to forgo bracketing (see section 3.9.1), the intentionality behind this methodological choice may not have been apparent.

**3.9.3 Communication style.** Similar to providing clear descriptions of my methodology to increase transparency, thick descriptions, contextual details, and illustrative stories were included in my writing to enhance the credibility of this research. As Rashotte and Jensen (2007) explain, particular ways of being are embedded within stories and it is only through stories, with their rich modes of human expression, and their exchange that we learn to understand ourselves and life. Therefore, my communication style was intended to foreground the voices of participants, evoke a feeling of being in-the-moment within the reader, and demonstrate coherence in my interpretation of classification.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

Reflecting the methodological approach taken for this study, the following sections include a description of fundamental classification experiences (thus addressing the phenomenological aspect of this study) and an explanation of how athletes and classifiers constructed their understandings of classification (thus addressing the hermeneutic feature of this study). Although analysis of athletes' and classifiers' responses was done concurrently, the results presented herein are separated by group to improve clarity and allow for the inclusion of context-specific examples. In the first section (4.1), classification experiences are explained as being essentially neutral, however, negative experiences are shown to result from deviations from classification norms associated with neutral experiences, and positive experiences are delineated as a distinct interpretation of neutral experiences. Positive experiences are further explained as being present only in response to negative experiences. In the second section (4.2), the way athletes and classifiers constructed their understanding of classification is described as occurring in the context of The Self, The Athlete-Classifier Interaction, and The Classification System.

#### **4.1 Typical Experience Types**

Athletes and classifiers interpreted their experiences with classification as one of three experience types, those being: neutral, negative or positive experiences. Neutral experiences were such because they embodied athletes' and classifiers' adherence to classification norms. When athletes and classifiers were well-prepared for classification, fulfilled the expectations of one another, and when the classification system was fit for purpose, neutral experiences arose. Oppositely, negative experiences resulted from athletes and/or classifiers deviating from classification norms or working within an environment not facilitative of neutral experiences.

Finally, positive experiences, when viewed in isolation, closely mirrored neutral experiences. It was only in contrast to negative experience that these otherwise neutral experiences were interpreted as overtly positive and thus resulted in a distinct experience type. Theoretically, these three experience types occurred independently of classification outcomes (i.e., were not dependent on an athlete receiving a favorable Sport Class allocation). In the following sections, descriptions of each experience type are provided from the perspective of athletes and classifiers.

#### **4.1.1 Neutral experiences.**

*The athlete.* Through neutral classification experiences and the ensuing assignment of a Sport Class, many athletes gained confirmation of the level of impact their impairment had on their sport performance. While this was an important step in the progression of these athletes' sporting careers, it was viewed as one of many benchmarks athletes must meet in order to progress through the sport system. As David said, "Like, my classifications experience in [sport removed] was never like uh an experience that was like a major major experience or turning point or major decision point, it was just part of the process along the way." Through this example it is clear that rather than being viewed as a significant milestone, classification was seen as a natural, almost administrative, part of participating in Para sport, similar to participating in doping-control practices.

Prior to classification, it was common for athletes to have questions or be uncertain about particular aspects of their assessment. A distinguishing feature of neutral experiences, however, is that these questions were met with clear explanations by coaches, sport administrators (e.g., High Performance Directors), and/or classifiers. Similarly, it was standard for athletes to feel mild levels of anxiety or stress before classification, especially around what to expect and potential Sport Class outcomes. Importantly, coaches or other support persons were able to provide athletes with a robust description of what to expect and to reassure them of both the normalcy of classification and the athletes' role in sport regardless of their classification outcome (i.e., it was

important that athletes did not feel their participation in sport – e.g., playing time – would be affected by classification). Through these exchanges with support persons, athletes developed a thorough understanding of the Sport Classes they could potentially be classed into. Combined with a well-developed understanding of their impairment, this prepared athletes for classification.

The space in which classification took place facilitated neutral experiences when it was close to the competition venue, private, and protected from the elements. Notably, although the classification space should have been equipped with appropriate equipment, athletes were not put-off by equipment substitutions so long as they themselves were allowed accommodations to navigate these substitutions and protect their safety throughout classification. For example, in Jenna’s classification, the classifiers were unable to adjust the height of the table they required her to transfer onto from her wheelchair; however, she “was not really too worried about it” because she had support transferring onto the higher surface.

During classification, the presence of a support person was beneficial to athletes in different ways, depending on who athletes chose to bring. Coaches that athletes were familiar with were reassuring because they were well-acquainted with the athlete and their impairment and were thus able to vouch for what athletes said and demonstrated throughout classification. Furthermore, this level of familiarity prepared these support persons to draw classifiers’ attention to aspects of the athlete’s impairment that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. Conversely, many athletes brought a representative from their national sport organization (e.g., head coach) with them to classification. While athletes were sometimes less familiar with these individuals, the benefit was seen in the support person’s understanding of and familiarity with classification generally. This allowed the support person to converse with classifiers in a different way than the athlete or their home coach would have been able to. As Breanne said, the national sport organization’s representative that accompanied her to classification was there, “in case there was



any questions (sic) that I couldn't answer on more of a medical side of things." Regardless of who athletes chose to bring with them as a support person, their presence was reassuring.

For their part, classifiers contributed to athletes' perception of classification as a neutral experience when they explained classification in a clear and concise manner and displayed professionalism through the language they used (e.g., person-first language, positive body language). Furthermore, assessments happening in a predictable or replicable order (e.g., similar to previous assessments athletes had undergone; following a clear pattern of assessing dominant and then non-dominant function) communicated to athletes that the assessment was being completed with a high degree of consistency. Consistency in classification instilled athletes with confidence that the procedure was being done fairly and objectively. Classifiers offering athletes the opportunity to ask questions was also perceived positively; however, the presence or absence of a question period did not determine how an athlete perceived their experience. This was likely because athletes typically did not have substantial questions following neutral classification experiences.

*The classifier.* For classifiers, neutral classification experiences occurred when working with a range of athletes. Although athletes with more complex impairments were said to be more challenging to classify, this element of challenge was also cited as a favorable aspect of involvement with classification. Therefore, 'easier' classifications (i.e., those with impairments that aligned obviously with a particular Sport Class) were not considered synonymous with neutral classifications. Rather, easier and more challenging classifications were both viewed as neutral so long as the physical space in which classification occurred, the time allotted for classification, and the preparation of the classifiers and athletes was adequate.

Classification spaces facilitated neutral experiences for classifiers when they provide adequate privacy, space to complete the assessments freely (i.e., without feeling cramped), and were proximal to the competition venue. Privacy was of the utmost importance as sensitive

matters were discussed during classification and between classifiers following or in between classifications. Furthermore, confidential paperwork needed to be stored during the course of classification. Free movement was essential for classifiers to be able to assess athletes accurately. Finally, proximity to the competition venue was important for reducing travel between the areas designated for medical and technical assessments and ensuring that classifications were done efficiently. This was particularly important in cases where the classifiers needed to review or redo aspects of the medical assessment following completion of the technical assessment as this required additional time.

Having an adequate amount of time to complete the classification and a balanced schedule ensured that each assessment could be done well and that aspects of the assessment could be repeated if further information was needed to determine an athlete's Sport Class. Agnes described a balanced schedule as one that mixed "let's say 'easy' to classify athletes, like amputees, versus the athletes with hypertonia... who generally take much longer." Additionally, this type of scheduling allowed classifiers to maintain the energy and focus required to classify accurately throughout the day. Benefits to having scheduled lunch breaks and the opportunity to eat dinner with other classifiers, or otherwise socialize at the end of the day, were twofold. In addition to maintaining classifiers energy levels, these breaks allowed classifiers time to develop relationships with one another. Classifiers' relationships with one another were an important consideration as strong relationships between classifiers were said to strengthen the capacity of classification panels (e.g., through improved communication) as well as increase individual classifier's motivation to classify. Logan highlighted the importance of social interactions between classifiers when they said,

I think the social piece is important too. So, at an event and going out to dinner after or connecting somehow, you know, not just showing up, doing your thing, and then leaving, is nice for developing those personal relationships too. Cause

sometimes you only see [other classifiers] once a year so you kind of look forward to getting together that way too.

Finally, classifiers considered themselves to be prepared when they were familiar with the impairment being presented to them, had previous classification experience they could reflect on to determine which Sport Class the athlete being classified would fit into relative to other athletes, and were working alongside classifiers whose skills complemented their own. Barb reflected on the importance of familiarity with the sport and relevant impairments when describing how challenging it could be for new classifiers to classify certain impairments,

For players with upper extremity involvement there is not an easy way to figure those players out. To see how much of a deduction you would take for their hand involvement. That's difficult and it's extremely difficult as a new classifier, because a lot of it is based on athlete's you've seen before and comparing them and knowing that, 'Ok well does this seem fair?'

Similarly, athletes reporting to classification with a concrete understanding of classification and a realistic expectation of their Sport Class contributed to classifiers perceiving their classification experience as neutral. Athletes could disagree with classifiers' decisions regarding their Sport Class, however, and the experience could remain neutral. So long as athletes treated classifiers respectfully (e.g., rather than arguing with the classifier, the athlete pursued an official appeal), classifiers remained unbothered.

#### **4.1.2 Negative experiences.**

*The athlete.* Distinguishing features of classifications that were perceived as negative by athletes were athlete-classifier interactions and the impact of classification on athletes' identity. Specifically, when athletes had trouble communicating with classifiers or perceived the classifiers to be incompetent or inconsistently applying classification procedures, they were likely to

perceive the experience negatively. As well, negative affirmation of an athlete's disability identity was linked with negative classification experiences.

To the first point, there were two distinct ways that communication between athletes and classifiers could impact athletes' impression of classification. First, when English was the second language of either the athlete or classifier, language could become a barrier. In these situations, athletes sometimes wondered if they misunderstood instructions and questions during their classification. This was compounded by the second way communication affected classification which was through classifiers' use of medical terminology.

When classifiers relied upon medicalized language to describe classification procedures or results, the classifier's position of authority over the athlete may have been reaffirmed and athletes may have felt alienated by the conversation. The negative effect of classifiers' use of medicalized language was further described by Hannah who said,

It was quite a scary process in that point in time because you didn't know what they were talking about and in some levels, it felt a bit sometimes like the 'guilty until proven innocent' piece of it where, it was sort of like, "You have to prove you have a disability and then you fit in here."

Altogether, poor communication may have led athletes to feel as if they were viewed as distrustful by classifiers and that their character was being called into question.

Another marker of poor communication associated with negative experiences was classifiers' failure to consider or take seriously the complaints of athletes during classification. While this was done under the guise of maintaining the rigorous standards of classification (e.g., through requiring all athletes to demonstrate full range of motion), this was accomplished at the expense of some athletes' health and well-being. Most notably, Karam reported leaving classification with an injury related to being manipulated into positions that exceeded his natural

range of motion. Others, such as Scotty, described how classifiers were quick to ignore the pain caused by achieving a full range of motion. As Scotty said, after he explained to the classifiers that sitting up and extending his arms overhead caused him significant pain, the classifiers brushed this off and told him, “If you’re in a gold medal game, you’re gonna do it anyway.” This dismissal of athletes’ objections to classification procedures made athletes feel as if they were thought to be cheating, rather than voicing legitimate concerns. Relatedly, athletes often felt as if they could not ask questions during classification, especially concerning how decisions were made. For example, Karam explained that although he understood the process of classification the results were unclear and he had no opportunity to gain a better understanding of the results. As he said, “I completely understand the process – the process is super easy to understand, but how they judge it is harder to... you can’t ask them, ‘Why did you give me a five here?’”

In regard to the second point, athletes were likely to perceive their classification experience negatively when they saw the classifiers as unskilled. Markers of so-called incompetence included classifiers referring to the classification manual (e.g., “They would like, keep looking at the book and assess [then] they’d be like okay what’s the next exercise?” – Jayda), asking each other questions, or questioning one another’s decisions in front of the athlete, and failing to make determinative decisions. For example, even though Luke was classed up, he was allowed to keep competing in his original Sport Class, which led him to believe the classifiers were unsure of their decision.

Luke: The interesting part with the whole thing was, and the reason we knew [the classifiers] were not really sure is because they were going to let me finish the competition as a [Sport Class removed].

JL: Whereas the protocol is to bump someone up if they weren't properly classified?

Luke: Yes, so if you're saying I'm a [Sport Class removed] then theoretically you should be telling me I'm competing as one, so obviously there was something missing there.

Highlighted in athletes' perceptions of classifiers as unskilled was the inconsistent application of classification procedures (i.e., there are clear protocols, yet these were not followed), or deviation from the established norms of classification. Similarly, athletes may have perceived classifiers' general interactions with athletes as inconsistent. For example, Peter recounted observing one classifier who was "super friendly to Canadians and Americans and then it appeared anyone who was non, [whose] native language wasn't English, [the classifier was] just intolerant." These inconsistencies in classification led athletes to question its objectivity.

Altogether, athletes viewed their classification experiences negatively when communication with classifiers was poor or when classifiers demonstrated a lack of skill or inconsistencies in their application of classification procedures or interactions with athletes. More specifically, these actions and behaviors left athletes feeling less than the classifiers, the subject of distrustful inquiry by classifiers, and that classification was subjective and dependent on the classifier.

Finally, classifications that were viewed negatively often resulted in the negative affirmation of athletes' disability identity. Rather than simply confirming athletes' Sport Classes, these types of classifications resulted in athletes feeling that their impairment and disability had been unduly emphasized. This may have happened through the classification process itself as described here by Karam,

It's so hard to explain the feeling and the situation because like, it's not like you're hoping that your disability is worse. You're just wanting it to be described the best way. Cause I knew it got worse and that was already hard for me to see myself getting worse and worse.

In other cases, athletes' impairments may have been highlighted by non-competitive performances resulting from the Sport Class athletes are placed in following classification. This was illustrated by Miranda who said,

When I was competing as a [class removed] but I was actually a [class removed], it was like I was racing well and doing my best and still making good times, but in my classification, I didn't feel like I fit. Same thing when I started developing further and my disability kind of got worse, I may have felt the same thing. I was racing, doing my best, and still making good times, but slowly my times were kind of decreasing so I wasn't beating [personal bests] or records and that was really frustrating for me.

***The classifier.*** Classifiers viewed classification negatively when the event at which they were classifying was disorganized or otherwise unsuited to best support athletes achieving a fair classification. These situations arose from the many logistical challenges presented by classification: athletes and classifiers travelled from all over the world to an event where time was limited to complete assessments and there was a seemingly infinite number of athletes that needed to be classified. As Agnes said, "It can be pretty hectic. There are also the pressures of athletes who are hanging around who are not on the classification schedule, but who want to get classified." Furthermore, the timeline for completing and submitting classification paperwork was often short. For example, when reflecting on an event she had recently been at Marie said,

I was extremely stressed and annoyed because my panel had, there was a rule that someone made up that I was in total disagreement with that the panel needed to leave at the end of the [qualifying rounds] and it was because 'Oh classifiers are done,' and yeah, classifiers are done *most* of the job, but we still have work to do.

Here, it is evident that classifiers' work was considered to be finished well-before classifiers were prepared to end their activity. Because of this, Marie, as head classifier, had to drive the classification team "super hard" even though she could see the team was exhausted. In addition to voicing concern for the classification team, Marie expressed that her concern over the demanding schedule lay in its impact on athletes when she asked, "And then if a classifier can't actually concentrate, what happens to the athlete that's being classified?"

Oftentimes, challenges related to the organization of an event resulted in classifiers feeling that they, and classification generally, were undervalued by the Para sport community. Examples cited by classifiers to illustrate being overlooked or undervalued included classifying in venues where access to clean drinking water was limited and classifying in rooms that doubled as the break room for tournament officials. In addition to affecting classifiers' experiences, these oversights had negative implications for athlete-classifier relations. As Richard said,

We're kind of overlooked. We're vital. We're important. But we're not always integrated and presented with the importance that I think we need, and we deserve for the sports to think so. Some of our evaluation and classification spaces have been very poor.

Here, Richard linked an organizing committee's respect for classifiers to athletes' (referred to here as "the sports") respect for classifiers. Once again, this emphasized that classifier's concern for their own treatment was based in its impact on athletes. Altogether, these examples illustrated that administrative demands, such as tight schedules, and a lack of concern for classifiers needs added pressure to classifiers. This pressure resulted in feelings of frustration and concern for athlete well-being. In whole, these conditions contributed to classifiers experiencing classification negatively.

Lastly, confrontational exchanges between athletes and classifiers resulted in classifiers holding negative perceptions of their classification experience. Primarily,



classifiers attributed these exchanges to an athlete's Sport Class being moved up (e.g., they were classified as having higher function than they previously had been), or the classification occurring as a result of an opposing team having requested an athlete's re-classification.

#### **4.1.3 Positive experiences.**

*The athlete.* Athletes experienced classification as an overtly positive experience only when contrasted against their own previous negative experiences or perceptions. When athletes had previously had a negative classification experience or been exposed to the potential for a negative experience through negatively framed classification narratives (e.g., hearing a teammate discuss their own negative experience) and subsequently underwent a classification marked by clear communication with classifiers and wherein the classifiers' displayed skill and consistency in classifying, athletes' impression of the classification was positive. Here, rather than experiencing classification as being just a part of the process of sport participation, athletes experienced positive emotions such as relief. Furthermore, while athletes' disability identity could be confirmed through neutral experiences or questioned during negative experiences, positive experiences often resulted in the athlete's disability identity being affirmed. Here, identifying the impact of the athlete's impairment on their performance provided athletes with a sense of validation. This was summarized by Brandon when he said, "Yeah, like being confirmed you know you're legitimately in the class you're supposed to be in umm so there is that. I guess like validation that you're in the right category."

*The classifier.* Similar to athletes, classifiers' positive impressions of classification are rooted in neutral experiences that are contrasted by their previous negative experiences. An important differentiation between athletes and classifiers, however, is that classifiers may have experienced classification positively even when they themselves had not experienced it negatively previously. Rather, classifiers reflected positively on classifications where they had

contributed to athletes' positive perceptions of classification. This is to say that when athletes who had previously had a negative experience presented themselves for classification and found that classification to be positive, the classifiers shared in that positive perception. Dallas described this when sharing the story of an athlete who waited on the edge of their chair to hear their classification result. Upon hearing the result, the athlete "jumped up and ran out into the hall [saying] 'I'm this, I'm this!'" After seeing the athlete's relief and celebration, Dallas called the situation "wonderful" and described getting swept up by the athlete's joy.

## **4.2 How the Experience of Classification is Constructed**

Athletes and classifiers alike come to understand classification by interpreting their experiences with classification through the context of themselves (The Self), their perceptions of other actors (e.g., classifiers' perceptions of athletes and vice versa; The Athlete-Classifier Interaction), and through the classification system itself (The Classification System). In the following sections, each way of knowing will be described in detail with examples given to represent how each way of knowing is constructed by athletes and classifiers respectively.

**4.2.1 The Self.** Understanding The Self is critical to athletes and classifiers forming and articulating their understandings of classification as a lived experience. In particular, knowing one's own body, (dis)ability, and/or skill in relation to classification, and identifying one's own position in relation to other actors involved in classification are ways that athletes and classifiers learn about normative roles during classification and establish or maintain social positioning. While these ways of knowing predominantly enable athletes and classifiers to communicate their experiences, participating in classification also teaches some athletes and classifiers about themselves, revealing aspects of their identity otherwise unimagined. Herein, athletes' and classifiers' individual ways of knowing will be presented separately.

*Knowledge of one's own body, (dis)ability, and/or skill – athletes.* Athletes' understanding of their ability as it relates to classification, is influenced by a variety of sources. In

one case, David attributed much of his understanding of classification to having had a coach who had experience in Para sport as both as a coach and an athlete, and who had a strong understanding of different functional levels of spinal cord injuries. More commonly, athletes did not have access to reliable sources of information from which to develop an idea of their potential classification. In these cases, athletes looked to non-formal sources of knowledge to develop an idea of how they should be classified. For example, Jeremy said that prior to being classified domestically he “basically just looked up Wikipedia” because it was one of the only things he could find at the time. Watching YouTube videos of past Paralympics and World Championships supplemented this search and allowed Jeremy to look at the seating position of the athletes and recognize “Hey, that’s the position I’m in. My arms look exactly like these guys.” In addition, observing other athletes occurs in person too. Athletes frequently referenced observing others in competition and comparing other athletes’ function to their own as one of the most important means of understanding their own classification. As Scotty explained,

Looking at other players, I didn’t know like at this point that like, [the classifiers] don’t compare other players... so I’m like ‘oh, this guy is a [Sport Class removed], this guy is a [Sport Class removed], I’m probably in between there, I’m probably a [Sport Class removed]. And that’s what [coaches] said too.

Although observing other athletes is a group activity, or one that cannot be done in isolation, this type of observation was done not to pass judgement on other athletes, but rather as a reflective practice through which athletes learned more about their own bodies.

Importantly, athletes used their knowledge of their body and how it functions to not only construct ideas about what classification they may or should be, but to explain their classification or potential classification. For example, David said,

By that point, understanding my level of function, I was pretty confident in it in being a [class removed], and I wasn't too concerned in regard to classification. It's like, I'm either a [class removed] or I get classed out and I don't think that makes sense for the sport just because extra leg function doesn't contribute to a benefit, it's more of a hindrance.

In this example, David explicitly linked his proposed classification to his innate knowledge of his impairment and function when he used the phrase “understanding my level of function.” He then demonstrated rationale for his proposed class by citing the impact of his impairment on performance. In another example, Jenna, who was classed up from what she and her coach thought she would be, used her understanding of her body, developed through between-athlete comparisons, to highlight inconsistencies in her classification.

Everybody else that's in the [class removed] can walk, and I can't. Like, I'm, I have a lower motor neuron injury, so I am the definition of complete [spinal cord injury] so there's not really any grey area... like even muscle stim[ulation] doesn't make my muscles fire so it's very easy to tell where I land.

This use of between-athlete comparisons to explain function was especially prevalent in cases where athletes disagreed with their classification.

While an athlete's knowledge of their body was fundamental to their construction of classification, having superior knowledge of their body could be seen as a detriment to achieving an accurate classification. Juanita highlighted this when explaining that one of the reasons she was nervous prior to her first classification was because of her previous experience as an athlete and duration of time post-injury. As she said, “I felt like I figured out how to work within my realm of injury pretty well.” She feared that her high level of skill moving in a wheelchair relative to her functional ability would be difficult for the classifiers to discern and that this would result in her being classified higher than she felt was representative of her functional ability.

*Knowledge of one's own body, (dis)ability, and/or skill – classifiers.* Classifiers explained that their understanding of classification and their approach to it was developed through formal training and emphasized through experience. For those who worked regularly in a clinical environment (e.g., physiatrists), many assessments used in classification mirrored those used in their day-to-day jobs. While this added to their expertise in executing these assessments, classifiers also recognized the limitations of their skills. Classifiers' recognition of the limitation of their skills was illustrated by cases where two classifiers had different backgrounds, such as a panel comprised of a medical and technical classifier, and each classifier's role on the panel was decided based on their expertise. Marie described this division of labor as follows,

And the ideal panel is where there is a medical classifier and a technical one and then the technical one then takes the lead in administering the technical tests and then both classifiers do the observation in competition. So that works beautifully. If there are only two medical classifiers per panel it is possible that one of them will have more technical knowledge. For example, might have been a coach, or has been an athlete themselves and so it usually works itself out in that way.

When classifiers recognized the limits of their own expertise, it allowed for an exchange of ideas that promoted their understanding of classification and added credibility to the classification itself. For example, when Richard, a physiotherapist by profession, spoke of working alongside physiatrists and kinesiologists on classification panels he said,

They all bring some very unique skills and contributions... it's very beneficial, the training that they've all had in some instances is a little bit different and comes from a little bit different perspective and if you go in with the attitude, the paradigm, of incorporating those things that can clarify an evaluation, that can make it more precise, more accurate, more beneficial to the athlete that's participating it makes for a very enriching experience...

The necessity of entertaining different perspectives on classification was echoed by Marie who, when speaking of training a new classifier, said, “I need her to sort of argue with me, not just go along because then there is no point in having you there.” Altogether, classifiers situated their own skills as classifiers, and knowledge of classification, in relation to their formal training and the expertise of other classifiers. This was done in order to form ideas about which classification any given athlete should receive; however, the accuracy of these classifications was also dependent on the classifiers’ experience with classification itself.

When making judgements about athletes’ impairments and the suitability of a particular classification, classifiers knowledge base extended beyond formal training and what was written in their given sport’s classification code. In fact, decisions made were contingent on understanding impairment in the context of sport. Here, Marie described how strictly observing athletes during play was insufficient to determine an accurate Sport Class unless the classifier has a broad knowledge base of other athletes from which comparisons could be made.

But you need so much experience! You need a database of all the [Sport Class removed] out there, not just the ones that are [competing at that time], just as a whole. So, you are very dependent on the degree of experience of your classifier, so it becomes very very challenging, we’re all over the place.

Relatedly, if a classifier lacked the opportunity to classify on a regular basis their ability to classify effectively may have been diminished and their approach to classification may have changed. This was illustrated by Tracey who said,

If they haven’t been classifying like domestically either they’re kind of, they need to kind of refresh themselves on the process... if they haven’t done it for a while, they’re kind of like a little bit nervous and they’re trying to make sure that they’re doing the right thing and again, they’re just trying to be thorough in what they’re doing and making sure that they’re doing things correctly...

*Athlete-classifier interactions – athletes’ perspectives.* An athlete’s understanding of their position within the social environment of classification directly influenced how they acted or the role they took on during classification. For most athletes, classifiers were perceived as having near-complete power over the progression of their sporting career and so classifiers were revered. Classifiers’ position of power over athletes stemmed from their authority to determine an athlete’s Sport Class, and more broadly, their eligibility to compete. For a novice athlete, this may have to be communicated to them as it was explained to Jessica,

[The coaches] kind of explained to me how you have to prove your disability and you need to go through classification locally, that’s pretty general, in order to be involved in the sport and compete. If you want to move on to a higher level or internationally you have to be internationally classified and that’s when your classification would be confirmed.

Once classifiers’ position of authority was accepted as the norm and internalized by athletes, they may have monitored their behavior accordingly in order to placate classifiers. This included self-regulating tone when interacting with classifiers and refraining from asking questions that the athlete fears may provoke the classifiers. In extreme cases, when athletes felt their classification has been completed unfairly, this resulted in significant internal conflict, described here by Scotty,

I’m getting angry and I’m trying to contain it because like she’s the lead and she like holds my future in her hands so I’m like alright like just shut up and go through it, shut up and go through it.

Conversely, athletes who perceived classifiers as having less control over their sporting careers, may have felt more confident in questioning classifiers or speaking out against injustice. For example, Hannah served as an athlete representative for her national sport organization and

when discussing advocating for fair classifications in that capacity, said, “I’d never be in a position where [speaking up about classification] would affect my classification.” This allowed her to speak freely in that role in order to better achieve her aims as an advocate for other athletes.

Altogether, the way that athletes were positioned within the social environment of classification dictated the social norms, or roles, that they took on during classification. The biggest determinant of athletes’ position within the social environment was the level of power that athletes perceive classifiers to have over their progression in sport. Furthermore, the roles athletes took on dictated how they explained their experience with classification (e.g., that they themselves were the subject of classification, that classification was a tool for performance).

*Athlete-classifier interactions – classifiers’ perspectives.* The self-described role of classifiers was to give athletes a fair, yet advantageous classification outcome. As summarized by Richard,

What we want to do, and it’s a consumption of time, energy, and thought that can be quite profound, is we want to get it right so that person is in the correct sport class, because once that’s achieved the impact and influence of their impairment is minimized.

Through this, it is clear that classifiers viewed themselves as helping athletes; however, the language used by classifiers to describe their role varied between classifiers. In some cases, classifiers spoke more to allowing athletes’ participation than supporting it. For example, when discussing how she describes classification assessments to athletes, Dallas slipped into language more appropriate for the medical setting, saying “I think I did a better job this time than I have ever done, and that is explaining to the *patient*- uhh athlete that I have to make them fail the test.” She further noted that when classification outcomes were relayed to athletes there was a code of ethics to follow – issued by the international sport federation – that was good because “all the



folks that use our services understand that we are in the position of making a decision that can't be questioned.”

In other cases, classifiers were aware that the finality of their decisions represented the position of power that they held over athletes. For the classifiers who recognized this power imbalance, ensuring that athletes felt respected and that they were receiving a fair classification was paramount. For example, Marie explained that she is personally committed to ensuring that classifiers are equal in numbers to the athlete and support person when relaying classification results, sitting so that all involved were at eye level with one another, and explaining the results in a way that was respectful to the athlete and their comprehension of the classification system (e.g., not too complex or oversimplified).

*Identity – athletes.* In cases where athletes' classification aligns with their expectation, classification can be a validating experience. Ashley spoke to this when she said,

Yeah, I expected I'd be the same classification as Jenn, being a [Sport Class removed], I didn't really see any reason why I wouldn't be, so I kind of went in assuming I would be. Yeah, I was just waiting for confirmation after they did their classification.

In other circumstances, athletes' view of themselves can be changed dramatically through classification. Specifically, athletes' identification with their body and (dis)ability could be changed. For Hannah a disability identity did not manifest itself until she went through classification even though she had been living with her impairment for years at that point. In her case, living with Multiple Sclerosis was viewed as living with an illness up until she was classified. This may have been, in part, because of the relative invisibility of her disability as she said, “other classification categories are a little bit more visual and noticeable than the one I'm in.” Following classification, however, she had a “physical thing to hold onto.” What is more, her impairment became a tangible reality through classification.

Coming out I was just like... I just sat there and I'm driving like this for an hour and neither one of us [me or my coach] said anything cause it was like all of a sudden I was like 'Holy shit. I'm disabled.' And I never actually had a metric like, I've never seen anything that was tangible enough to tie that to, right?

**Identity – classifiers.** For classifiers, engaging in Para sport is not solely an extension of their professional identity. Classification offers entrance to a unique community of Para medical and sport professionals who share an interest in disability. What is more, the travel and long hours associated with classification creates strong bonds between classifiers. Shared meals and post-classification socializing were commonly cited as important interpersonal reasons for maintaining involvement in classification. Altogether, classifiers' role within Para sport and the associated relationships culminated in a distinct identity type – a classification identity – that reaffirmed classifiers' involvement. When speaking of her involvement, Marie described this phenomenon as,

Yeah, it's like I really feel like I belong, I think, personally. To be a different kind of person professionally, you know I work in a hospital so I'm this kind of person, and when I go to the gym to train, for another sport, I'm another kind of person but when I go to [classify] I feel like I'm really me. I have colleagues that will say the same thing it's really odd.

In sum, athletes' and classifiers' technical comprehension of classification was developed through vastly different resources. While athletes were reliant on coaches and non-formal knowledge sources found online, classifiers received formal training often times paired with extensive medical knowledge developed through previous education. In either case, once this knowledge base had been established, athletes and classifiers made sense of classification through reflections on their own skill and ability, interactions with one another, and the impact of classification on their identity.

**4.2.2 The Athlete-Classifier Interaction.** In addition to reflecting on their own knowledge, social position, and identity to make sense of classification, athletes and classifiers each reflected on the influence of The Athlete-Classifier Interaction (i.e., athletes reflected on the influence of classifiers and vice versa) when they constructed their understanding of classification. Athletes demonstrated this through discussions wherein classifiers' actions were described as being well intentioned yet sometimes harmful. Meanwhile, classifiers portrayed athletes as needing classifiers and classification, largely because of their perception that athletes were generally unprepared for classification and sought to gain a competitive advantage through their classification.

*Classifiers' influence on athletes' understanding of classification.* While athletes largely described classifiers as being well-intentioned, athletes also recognized the significant position of power that classifiers held. Similar to how athletes' impressions of The Self were influenced by classifiers' power (see section 4.2.1: athlete-classifier interactions – athletes' perspectives), athletes' perception of classifiers as powerful was reaffirmed by classifiers' stern approach and use of medicalized language throughout athlete-classifier interactions. Altogether, this cumulated in an impression amongst athletes that classifiers were the Gatekeepers of Para sport. Classifiers' general command over athletes was best described by Jenna, who said, "They're very stern ... How they talk to you, like in a way that's like 'what I say is the word.'"

The ways in which classifiers used medical language to exert control were complex. For some, like Karam, speaking English as a second language compounded the difficulty of comprehending medical jargon. As he said, "You come to like a medical field - with already some terms you don't understand and not in your mother's language, it's a bit harder. It's a bit more stressful." For others like Scotty, a clear line was drawn between classifiers' skills and his own and when that line was crossed through the use of medical language that reaffirmed the classifier's position, he felt put down. As he said,

They're all smarter than I am. I'm just here to look cute and [compete]! That's my job in life! So, there's [multiple] smart people, reminding you that they're smarter than you, putting you down, being a little arrogant, that's not fun... That aspect is always going to be there, there is you know [multiple] doctors or physios, fairly smart in there, right? So, there is obviously going to be an inferiority feeling.

With this, we can see that athletes may have viewed classifiers as harmful actors when classifiers' position of authority was reaffirmed through the use of medical language. This impression was reinforced when classifiers failed to consider the requests of athletes. For example, Jenna shared that when asking classifiers to reconsider aspects of her classification, she was put in the position of needing to highlight her impairment above and beyond what she had anticipated was necessary for classification. In speaking of this, Jenna said "[I] found it to be embarrassing to explain how disabled I was like I didn't want to do that." Combined, advanced medical knowledge and decision-making power resulted in an air of authority amongst classifiers that could leave athletes feeling inferior. When acted upon, this dynamic resulted in a perception amongst athletes that classifiers were not to be questioned and that their decisions were final which led athletes to perceive classifiers as the Gatekeepers of Para sport.

*Athletes' influence on classifiers' understanding of classification.* Classifiers predominant view of athletes was that without classification athletes would not be able to participate in sport. This was born of the Para sport system itself and the fundamental role classification plays in organizing Para sport. It is reflected in how classifiers constructed narratives of athletes during classification. In particular, classifiers readily described athletes in ways that highlighted their impairments over their ability. For example, Dallas focused on athletes overcoming adversity when they said,

And I'm also I am really moved by the resilience and they uh the incredible whatever, hutzpah, of folks with disabilities who uh train at an international level. You know, there were stories this past time [classifying] of really bad accidents, like stuff that will... people who might survive but they certainly won't come back and do much afterwards and over and again you just get blown away by the incredible power of these human beings who can get up and go again.

Although this example highlighted the strengths of athletes, it did so by centralizing a supercrip narrative wherein athletes were lauded for participating in normative behaviors (e.g., for doing *anything* post-injury when the expectation was that they will not “do much”). Similarly, rather than simply stating that they were privileged to be a part of high-performance Para sport, Dallas further explained that their admiration for athletes stemmed from witnessing the challenges that athletes face every day. Likewise, Marie's motivation to classify was partially based in a sense of obligation to serve athletes. As she said, “I'm totally dedicated to every athlete getting their best class they can possibly get without being a hinderance to anybody. We owe it to them, especially when they have like disabilities and what not...”

Classifiers' impression that athletes needed classifiers in order to participate may have been perpetuated by a lack of preparedness displayed by athletes during classification. To classifiers, athletes' preparedness for classification resulted from a thorough understanding of their own impairment, their coaches' knowledge of classification, and support from their national sport organization. However, this knowledge was not equally distributed. Marie described this variance when she said, “[Some athletes] actually are almost illiterate with respect to the system and they really, they have no idea whatsoever. And others have very excellent, really good, really elaborate ideas of what the system is like.” Potential reasons for this inequity were described by Barb, who elaborated that new and young players were typically timid and shied away from

asking questions, while older or more experienced athletes (especially those who had had their Sport Class change previously) were more likely to ask questions. In this context, classifiers necessity was validated as classifiers provided athletes with information about their impairment and its impact on performance.

At the same time, other classifiers attributed a lack of preparedness (e.g., failure to bring the right equipment, clothing or medical documentation necessary for classification) among athletes to cultural differences and language barriers. A strong domestic classification program which prepared athletes for what to expect and how to present themselves internationally reduced the likelihood of athletes arriving to classification ill prepared; however, these preparatory systems were not always in place. When discussing such cases, classifiers' commonly cited athletes from countries in the Global South as examples and indicated that limited resources impacted the development of domestic classification programs in these countries. In situations where athletes from the Global South presented as unprepared, these classifiers also spoke of being more likely to take a hands-on approach to classification and provide additional feedback to the athletes. This could, for example, include providing athletes with additional information on wheelchair set up in order to maximize their performance.

Finally, classifiers believed that athletes were constantly seeking a performance edge and that classification is considered one means of achieving this edge. This is to say that classifiers were aware that athletes may have tried to intentionally misrepresent their ability (known as intentional misrepresentation; IPC Classification Code and International Standards, 2007) in order to achieve a lower, more beneficial sport class. Constant attention was required in order to catch intentional misrepresentation, yet classifiers recognized that identifying it was a very subjective process. This reiterated how classifiers 'knowledge' extended beyond technical skills developed through formal training and included a classifier's interpretation of an athlete's ability and effort. Dallas explained,

We have to be ready for that [intentional misrepresentation] at all times, and I tell them also, I tell them why I'm doing it [pushing them to failure] ... and I look them straight in the eye and say you have to give me your maximum effort and I do it very seriously and it comes down to judgement. Are they actually giving me their maximum effort or not? I won't know. I will have a belief and that's all I can go with.

Intentional misrepresentation was characterized by athletes not giving the same effort across tests and inconsistent test results. The primary motivators behind intentional misrepresentation, according to classifiers, were finances, performance, pressure from coaches, and social position (e.g., glory or fanfare associated with Sport Class-dependent performance). These factors were underscored as being particularly relevant for athletes from the Global South; however, it is worth noting that all athletes may see an increase in social and physical capital as a result of positive sport performance. Accordingly, intentional misrepresentation should not be considered a phenomenon unique to athletes from the Global South. In all cases, intentional misrepresentation was felt to be best combatted by each sports' international federation and associated national sport organization. As Richard said,

Ultimately, it's how the international federation educates, prepares and informs the country and its national federation as to the importance of classification and how it can make the sport better for those that participate if it is, if it's embraced and if it's accepted and if it's looked at as a positive tool for growth and development of the athlete.

Altogether, classifiers understood athletes as needing classifiers and classification.

This was exacerbated by athletes who arrived unprepared to classification and perpetuated the idea amongst classifiers that without classifiers, athletes would not have the means to compete in equitable competition. Furthermore, classifiers viewed athletes as seeking to gain an edge in

competition through classification. Resultingly, classifiers closely watched for intentional misrepresentation during classification, and used predominantly subjective measures to judge whether or not athletes are intentionally misrepresenting themselves.

**4.2.3 The Classification System.** The experience of classification was understood by athletes and classifiers alike *through* The Classification System itself. This is to say that athletes and classifiers understood the experience as a whole to be a result of the agency of classification which governs athletes' and classifiers' participation in Para sport. The central importance of classification was exemplified through the ways in which athletes and classifiers used The Classification System to explain processes and outcomes associated with classification and vice versa.

*The agency of classification – athletes.* The Classification System exerted extensive agency over athletes and classifiers both within and outside of the explicit confines of classification. For example, classification was often the impetus for athletes to detail the extent of their impairment through medical documentation. In these cases, athletes cited pressure from their national sport organization to develop a far greater understanding of their impairment than was necessary for regular functioning in daily life. As Miranda said,

Yeah, I think it was also frustrating and took a toll on my personal life because I was going from doctor to doctor trying to figure out and get an official diagnosis and it didn't really seem like it was about my health anymore – it was about getting this official diagnosis so that I could be re-classed. So, the ultimate goal wasn't trying to find treatment or make me better it was just to get a note.

In other cases, the influence of The Classification System was seen through athletes' attitudes towards participation in Para sport. Classification was cited, contradictorily, as both a motivator to pursue specific sports and an aspect of sport participation that should be overcome. To the first point, some athletes may have chosen to participate in a particular sport



because they perceived their classification in that sport to be competitive or facilitatory to their goals of performing at the highest level. For example, David chose to pursue an individual sport over a team sport, despite team sport being his initial preference, because his high classification in [sport removed] meant that he was not getting scouted by the National Team while he was quickly invited to National Team training camps with the individual sport.

To the second point, athletes frequently referred to needing to overcome disadvantageous classifications in order to excel in Para sport as a standard aspect of participation. Athletes may have seen classification as a factor to overcome if they have the lowest function within a given Sport Class or were competing against athletes who were perceived as having more function than was appropriate for their Sport Class (i.e., athletes who were perceived as being misclassified). In these cases, The Classification System was the root of a narrative that drove hard work in order to thwart the influence of The Classification System. As Brad said when discussing racing against an athlete who he believed to have more function than his classification reflects, “He’s beatable, eventually. You just gotta chip away...”

Altogether, classification as an organizing feature of Para sport was viewed by athletes as a fixed entity – one that was outside of athletes’ control and that had to be worked around or with, but that is ultimately immovable. In this sense, athletes’ experiences in Para sport could be interpreted through their feelings of being bound to The Classification System.

***The agency of classification – classifiers.*** For classifiers, the agency of classification was clear – there were a series of steps and guidelines to follow laid out for classifiers in their respective sports’ classification code. With this, it is easy to see how classifiers looked to the code to guide decision making throughout classification. As an example, Agnes said, “And the rules, of course, state that if the athlete’s presentation could be very close to two sport classes we are directed to go to the less impaired class.” In other ways, however, The Classification System

lacked agency over classifiers. Marie spoke of implementing guidelines to improve athlete-classifier interactions within her region despite this creating tension between herself and her sport's international federation because she was not adhering to their international classification protocols.

We don't see eye to eye on this subject, so [the person in charge of classification] is not happy about me implementing these changes. So, I won't stop, even though [they don't] want me to do them. [They haven't] actually told me that I have to stop, but [they've] told me flat out that [they're] not about to have them done internationally and that [they] would like everybody to follow the same process.

Similarly, other classifiers spoke of taking additional time to complete classifications and adding athletes onto the classification schedule as time allowed despite being informed that this was not to be done. Regardless of the ways in which classifiers resisted the agency of The Classification System, the motivation for doing so was to put the athlete first. As Marie elaborated when discussing why she felt it was important to include athletes in classification discussions regardless of what her sports' international federation said, "And we're talking about the athlete's body, and their career, and I find it totally condescending not to involve the athletes."

*The classification system as an explanation and outcome – athletes.* In addition to governing the actions of athletes, The Classification System was constructed as an important feature of Para sport through the ways in which athletes used it to explain their experiences. For example, in rationalizing the awkward language used by classifiers, Jenna said,

I think its super hard for [classifiers] too cause they don't know you and have no idea what's going to fly with you and at the end of the day they're just trying to do their jobs and to not be offensive.

In this example, Jenna demonstrated that the actions of the classifiers made sense in the context of The Classification System.

Conversely, athletes also used their own experiences to explain The Classification System. For example, while discussing other athletes' (suspect) classifications, Hannah explained the significant role that athletes had in upholding the system. Here, she said, "It's not ours to judge right, like that's where you have to have some trust in the system I guess or decide not to be a part of that system." By suggesting that an athlete's decision to trust in The Classification System was fundamental to their participation, she highlighted that to distrust it and to discontinue participation would have negative consequences for The Classification System (i.e., the loss of athletes to uphold it).

*The classification system as an explanation – classifiers.* Similar to athletes, classifiers used The Classification System to explain classification. For example, in relaying classification results to athletes, classifiers commonly created a narrative that the assignment of Sport Classes was outside the classifiers' and the athletes' control, that it was actually a result of The Classification System. By leaning on The Classification System to explain classification, classifiers were able to mitigate debate about classification outcomes amongst athletes. In doing so, classifiers were able to explain classification as the fulfillment of a pre-determined fact rather than a subjective decision and classifiers perceived this as positively affecting athletes' perceptions of their classification experience and outcomes. Agnes described this intentional positioning as follows:

I personally keep the discussion to a minimum. If one goes in too much detail the classifier tends to dig themselves into a hole which is difficult to get out of. So, I've learned, just over the years, to explain it in very basic terms. I refer to the rules and regulations. I will refer to the appropriate rule in the manual. I can show it to them. And will explain why it's this, rather than that. and from the

physical assessment or the technical assessment. I will always make the point that we really have to see the athlete in competition as well to make a final decision. So that's a little bit of an open door.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to elucidate athletes' and classifiers' experiences of Para sport classification. Through hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of semi-structured interviews and their transcripts, three essential experience types – neutral, negative, and positive – were conceptualized. Furthermore, the ways in which athletes and classifiers construct their understanding of classification were explained as occurring in relation to reflections on The Self, The Athlete-Classifier Interaction, and The Classification System. Lastly, the Medical Model of Disability was shown to broadly influence athletes' and classifiers' experiences with classification. In this chapter, I will describe how these key findings are situated within current literature before outlining this work's strengths and limitations, as well as practical and theoretical implications, and future directions.

#### **5.1 Typical Experience Types**

Athletes and classifiers discussed three types of classification experiences – positive, negative, and neutral. Of these three experience types, it would intuitively seem desirable to aim to foster positive classification experiences. However, the athlete and classifier narratives suggest otherwise. Positive classification experiences are described as closely resembling neutral experiences with one exception. Positive experiences are preceded by a negative experience wherein the classification experience deviates from neutral. As a correction of this deviation from neutral, positive experiences have the characteristics of neutral experiences, but are perceived positively relative to the past negative experiences. Accordingly, this indicates that positive experiences should not be idealized, but rather neutral experiences should be considered the standard experience type that is sought by classification participants.

These findings offer novel insight into the classification experience as they present a more nuanced conceptualization of the classification experience than has been previously included in literature. Although previous works (e.g., Howe, 2008; Peers, 2012) provide insightful accounts of individual athletes' classifications, these works are limited by their singular focus. For example, negative feelings of being surveilled during classification were reported by both Howe (2008) and Peers (2012) whereas this study showed such feelings to be a characteristic of negative experiences only, and absent from neutral and positive experiences. Similarly, while Van Dornick and Spencer (2019) associated Para swimmers learning about their body and its capacity with positive experiences, the results presented here demonstrate that learning about the body can result in both negative experiences (e.g., when learning occurs as a result of impairments being highlighted) and neutral or positive experiences (e.g., when learning results in an athlete feeling their functional ability and place in sport has been validated) depending on the context of each athlete's classification.

Altogether, Van Dornick and Spencer's (2019) finding that athletes with lower levels of knowledge regarding classification were less likely to ask classifiers questions was supported by this study. However, in a departure from contemporary literature, this study found athletes may perceive classifiers' skill and knowledge pertaining to classification to be low, and classifiers' application of assessment procedures to be inconsistent. This combination results in athletes experiencing classification negatively. As this study constitutes the sole account of classifiers' experiences with classification, their impressions of athlete preparedness for classification cannot yet be contrasted against current literature; however, this should be considered a priority area for future research.

## **5.2 How the Experience of Classification is Constructed**

The three ways that athletes and classifiers construct their understanding of classification presented within this thesis (i.e., through The Self, The Athlete-Classifier Interaction, and The

Classification System) provide novel insight into the ways in which athletes and classifiers learn about and conceptualize classification. As an example, athletes were shown to reflect on The Self in order to identify potential Sport Classes within which they may be classed, an important part of preparing for classification. Similarly, classifiers described reflecting on The Self as a means of identifying gaps in their classification skills. No previous literature has identified or analyzed athletes' and classifiers' usage of their own knowledge of their (dis)ability or skill and its implications for their preparation for or participation in classification. In regard to The Athlete-Classifier Interaction, athletes and classifiers alike interpret their interactions with one another as a marker and determinant of the success of the classification. For athletes, classification is negatively impacted by poor interactions with classifiers. Meanwhile, athlete-classifier interactions reaffirm classifiers' role in classification. This is notable as athlete-classifier interactions may have a greater influence on classification participation than has previously been reported. Finally, The Classification System was shown to direct the actions of athletes and classifiers and was used by both to explain classification outcomes. This is notable as it indicates that, in practice, the purpose of the classification system extends beyond that of organizing sporting competitions.

In total, the conceptualization of the three ways that athletes' and classifiers' construct their experiences with classification presented within this thesis builds upon the limited literature pertaining to classification which centralizes the voices of these actors. Specifically, by explaining the possible mechanisms used by athletes and classifiers to learn about classification this thesis provides further insight into the variance between athletes' and classifiers' level of knowledge regarding classification identified by Molik et al. (2017). What is more, this conceptualization provides empirical evidence that, despite the shift away from medical classification with the introduction of the functional classification system, medical, and indeed

ableist, discourses based in the Medical Model of Disability still influence the classification experience.

**5.2.1 Athletes.** The influence of medical discourses on athletes' construction of their experiences is exemplified by the way athletes develop their understanding of their body in comparison to other athletes. Similar to Powis and Macbeth (2019), who found that visually impaired athletes competing in cricket and football commonly surveil other athletes, on and off the pitch, to make judgements about the correctness of their sport class based on their perceptions of the other athletes' movements, results of this study showed athletes' surveillance of other athletes to be a dominant social practice. In this thesis, however, athletes' surveillance of other athletes was characterized by evaluations of perceived function as a means of understanding the athlete's own body more so than (dis)proving the efficacy of the classification system. This highlights athletes' focus on material representations of bodily function when seeking to understand their own embodied experience of disability.

Likewise, athletes' reference to the necessity of understanding medical discourses when conversing with classifiers demonstrates the prevalence of medical knowledge within classification. Specifically, athletes noted that barriers to communication with classifiers (most often resulting from the use of medical terminology) negatively impact their experiences. Furthermore, and analogous to Peers' (2012) experience pursuing a diagnosis for their impairment in order to be classified, the dominance of medical rhetoric was exemplified by athletes' efforts to secure medical documentation of their impairment in order to validate their disability in the context of Para sport and achieve classification. In total, this demonstrates that medical discourses are prevalent within Para sport, both directly, through their influence on athletes' interactions with classifiers and the medical system, and indirectly, through the ways that athletes perceive other athletes' (dis)abilities and fit within the classification system.



**5.2.2 Classifiers.** When examining classifiers' experiences with classification, the prevalence of medical discourses is seen in the way many classifiers rely on their medical backgrounds in order to classify effectively (i.e., they rely on knowledge developed through their professional practice). In addition, the medical model of disability informs classifiers' understandings of normative function and serve as a reference point throughout classification, regardless of the classifier in question's medical background. Relatedly, ableist ideals are perpetuated through classification's focus on reducing the physical deficit of each athlete within a Sport Class despite the fact that a focus on deficit reduction has been said to ignore the social, psychological and behavioural elements of illness or disability and to limit what individuals with physical impairments may become (Grenier, 2007; Watermeyer, 2012).

Medicalized discourses are further illustrated by classifiers' positioning within classification. Specifically, the ways in which classifiers describe themselves as helpers and athletes as needy within narratives of classification echo Wu, Williams, and Sherrill's (1999) findings that classifiers use authoritative control (e.g., medical knowledge) in order to maintain their position of authority. Here this was described as classifiers positioning of themselves as Gatekeepers to Para sport and illustrates that classifiers view themselves as benefactors of athletes, further representing the prevalence of charitable and medical discourses.

### **5.3 Strengths of This Thesis**

The flexibility of conducting semi-structured interviews online proved beneficial to this study in light of the unforeseen circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. This method of data collection allowed for the inclusion of participants from diverse geographic locations. As well, the open-ended nature of the interview questions allowed participants to guide conversations towards topics related to classification that were important to them. Sparkes and Smith (2014) indicate that allowing participants to direct aspects of interviews may result in richer data collection. Furthermore, given the limited research on this topic and exploratory nature of this

study, this approach was an effective means of developing a broad understanding of the classification experience from multiple participants' perspectives. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has many far-reaching impacts, the focus of this thesis was on athletes' and classifiers' past experiences with classification; therefore, questions were tailored to prompt reflection upon participants' experiences as they were and should not have been impacted by the pandemic.

To my knowledge, this study is the first to explore athletes' and classifiers' experiences with classification simultaneously using qualitative methods. This makes an important contribution to the literature as contrasting the perspectives of athletes and classifiers provides a fuller picture of classification and using qualitative methods to do so allows us to gain insights not available through quantitative methods. What is more, this is the first study to consider the experiences of classifiers at all, providing valuable insight into these important actors within the Para sport context (Wu et al., 1999). Furthermore, much of the existing literature has examined classification in the context of a single sport, although the need for further research to explore the experiences of athletes within diverse impairment groups has been identified (Powis & Macbeth, 2019). By including athletes and classifiers representing a broad range of sports and Sport Classes, this study addresses this concern and provides novel evidence for the centrality of the classification experience within Para sport.

#### **5.4 Limitations of This Thesis**

Although classification has been shown to influence athletes' participation in Para sport across athletes' athletic career pathways (Patatas et al., 2019), this study's singular focus on internationally classified athletes and internationally certified classifiers necessarily excluded grassroots and developing athletes as well as domestic classifiers. Relatedly, while coaches are important social agents within sport (Horn, 2008), their role within the context of classification is, as of yet, unexplored. Accordingly, the results most accurately represent the experiences of high performing Para sport athletes and veteran classifiers. Therefore, future research should explore

classification in different contexts (e.g., grassroots). Similarly, this study sought naturalistic generalizability, or for the results to resonate with the readers' personal experiences (Smith, 2018); however, naturalistic generalizability of these findings may be limited by the relative racial homogeneity of participants. In future, examining the intersection of race, gender, and disability within the context of classification may further develop our understanding of classification. Finally, the work does not address the lack of literature focused on the experiences of athletes who compete in Para sports not featured in the Paralympic program, such as Para dance sport, an area previously identified as a research topic of priority by Powis and Macbeth (2019).

### **5.5 Empirical Contributions**

By typifying athletes' and classifiers' experiences with classification, this study advances our understanding of classification as a lived experience. This contributes to a growing, but limited body of research focused on experiential aspects of classification and provides evidence for the influence of various factors, such as classifiers' knowledge of classification, on participants' experiences. Additionally, the novel conceptualizations of classification presented in this thesis represent the first description of how athletes and classifiers construct classification.

### **5.6 Practical Contributions**

Practically, this thesis may inform future interventions aimed at improving the classification experiences of athletes and classifiers. Specifically, athlete-classifier interactions were highlighted as a key determinant of athletes' perceptions of their classification experience and these interactions were shown to be influenced by the consistency with which classifiers follow classification procedures and the ways classifiers communicate with athletes. These findings indicate that improving athlete-classifier interactions should be considered a critical means of improving athletes' overall experience with classification and provide direction for the

types of interventions which may influence these interactions (e.g, those aimed at improving communication). Relatedly, logistical factors (e.g., space, time allotted for classification) were shown to impact classifiers' perceptions of their experience, suggesting that addressing issues related to poor organization of classification events would positively effect classifiers' experiences.

Additional practical insights generated by this thesis include the recommendation to increase the number of domestic classification opportunities available. These opportunities help to prepare athletes for classification as well as to provide classifiers with the experience necessary to develop and maintain their skill. As such, increasing the frequency of such events may positively impact athletes' and classifiers' experiences internationally. As well, classifiers with technical knowledge (e.g., former athletes) were said to increase the legitimacy of classification panels and improve communication between athletes and classifiers. Therefore, provided a given sport's classification system allows for technical classifiers, recruiting individuals with technical expertise, such as athletes, to become classifiers may benefit the classification system. Further suggestions for improving athletes' and classifiers' knowledge relating to classification include developing a classifier mentorship program and videos or other online training programs to teach athletes about classification (e.g., what to expect, how to prepare).

## **5.7 Knowledge Mobilization Plan**

To maximize the impact of the results of this thesis, the results will be shared with Para sport stakeholders and researchers alike. First, knowledge briefs summarizing important practical contributions of this work will be drafted and shared with stakeholders, including participants and members of the Canadian Paralympic Committee and Ontario Parasport Collective who may be share these briefs with a larger audience (e.g., National Sport Organizations, Provincial Sport Organizations). The dissemination of these knowledge briefs may happen imminently and should contribute to a larger, ongoing conversation between myself and members of the Canadian

Paralympic Committee and Ontario Parasport Collective regarding classification. Specifically, these briefs may be used to highlight aspects of classification which may be addressed by each organization. Second, the results of this thesis will be shared with researchers through traditional academic outlets, including the publication of a manuscript version of this thesis and conference presentations when available (i.e., COVID-19 permitting).

## **5.8 Future Directions**

This thesis highlights the need for research addressing a number of experiential aspects of Para sport classification. First, within this study, athletes spoke of classification as both a determinant of Para sport participation and an aspect of participation to be overcome; however, previous works (e.g., Patatas et al., 2019) have exclusively indicated that classification is a determinant of participation. Given these contradictory findings, future research should clarify the extent and ways classification influences athletes' participation.

Second, classifiers in this study spoke of adopting a specific Classification Identity, of which little is known. This is worth investigating as this may promote further understanding of classifiers' motivation to classify and inform the recruitment of classifiers. Interestingly, athletes did not recognize such an identity. However, athletes and classifiers alike refer to athletes by their sport class. For example, athletes may speak of 'guarding a 4 pointer' or refer to themselves by saying 'I'm a T54' rather than 'I have been classified as a T54'. Future research should consider examining athletes' identification with their Sport Class and the effects of classification on Para athletes' identity generally in order to clarify the cause (e.g., Is it purely a practical use of sport-specific terminology?) and impact (e.g., Does the use of such terminology reinforce Para athletes' identification with their Sport Class?) of such Para sport-specific identification.

Third, as noted by Powis and Macbeth (2019) the need remains for future research to examine experiential aspects of classification in a range of Para sport contexts, including at the grassroots and developmental levels of athlete participation. Similarly, examining the experiences

of domestic classifiers may provide unique insight into classifiers' participation pathway in Para sport. Another avenue of research which may provide novel insight into the classification experience is studying dyads (e.g., athletes and classifiers in tandem). By examining a singular classification experience from the perspective of all primary actors, novel insights may be generated into the nuances of this unique aspect of Para sport.

## **5.9 Conclusion**

While classification plays a central role in Para sport (Sherrill, 1999), sparse attention has been paid to experiential aspects of classification. As the first study to simultaneously examine athletes and classifiers' experiences with classification, this thesis offers novel insights into Para sport classification as a lived experience. Specifically, this work advances our understanding of the essential experience of classification through its articulation of classification as a neutral, negative, or positive experience. Furthermore, this thesis explains how athletes and classifiers construct their understanding of classification through reflections on The Self, The Athlete-Classifier Interaction, and The Classification System. Taken together, the results of this study may direct future research related to experiential aspects of classification and influence athletes' and classifiers' experiences through the identification of practical recommendations to improve the experience of classification.

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# Appendix A

## Research Ethics Board Approval

There were no significant changes from the original ethics approval (January 2020).



January 07, 2020

Dr. Amy Latimer-Cheung  
Associate Professor  
School of Kinesiology and Health Studies  
Queen's University  
KHS Building  
28 Division Street  
Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

GREB Ref #: GSKHS-339-19; TRAQ # 6028464  
Title: "GSKHS-339-19 Classification in Para sport: The experiences of athletes and other stakeholders"

Dear Dr. Latimer-Cheung:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GSKHS-339-19 Classification in Para sport: The experiences of athletes and other stakeholders" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2 (2014)) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405.001), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html>; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is 'completed' so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one-year period (access this form at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html>; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form"). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html>; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies." Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Ms. Gail Irving, at University Research Services for further review and clearance by the GREB or Chair, GREB.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dean A. Tripp".

Chair, General Research Ethics Board (GREB)  
Professor Dean A. Tripp, PhD  
Departments of Psychology, Anesthesiology & Urology Queen's University

c: Isabelle Birchall and Janet Lawson, Co-investigators  
Dr. Jennifer Turnidge, Collaborator  
Dr. Elaine Power, Chair, Unit REB  
Josie Birchall, Dept. Admin.



**Appendix B**  
**Letter of Information**



SKHS Building  
28 Division Street  
Queen's University  
Kingston, Ontario, Canada K7L 3N6  
[www.queensu.ca/skhs](http://www.queensu.ca/skhs)

**LETTER OF INFORMATION**

**Classification in Para sport: A look at the experiences and roles of athletes, coaches, and classifiers**

**Primary Investigator:**

Amy E. Latimer-Cheung, PhD  
Assistant Professor  
School of Kinesiology and Health Studies  
Queen's University  
[amy.latimer@queensu.ca](mailto:amy.latimer@queensu.ca)

**Student Investigator(s):**

Janet A. Lawson, BSFL  
MSc Candidate  
School of Kinesiology and Health Studies  
Queen's University  
[janet.lawson@queensu.ca](mailto:janet.lawson@queensu.ca)

Isabelle M. Birchall  
Undergraduate Student  
School of Kinesiology and Health Studies  
Queen's University  
[15imb1@queensu.ca](mailto:15imb1@queensu.ca)

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to learn about the experience of classification in Para sport.

### **Study Components**

If you would like to take part in the study, you will be asked to complete two activities

1. Provide demographic information through a brief questionnaire.
2. Discuss your experience with classification during an interview with the student investigator.

Interviews will take approximately one hour to complete.

By agreeing to participate in the study, you allow your responses to be compared to those of other participants.

### **Potential Benefits**

While there are no direct benefits to your participation, this study will contribute to our understanding of classification in the Para sport context. Insights gained may inform future policies and procedures relating to classification in Para sport, thus having an impact on future Para sport participants.

### **Potential Harms, Risks, or Discomforts**

There are minor risks associated with participating in this study as you will be asked to reflect on your personal experience with classification. You may be asked to reflect upon experiences that you view negatively, and this may cause you to experience negative emotions (e.g., anger). Know that participation is voluntary; you will not have to reflect on any experiences or answer any questions that you do not want to, and do not have to tell the researcher why.

### **Confidentiality**

Any personal information, such as your name or phone number, will be kept private and never be revealed. Any potentially identifiable information disclosed during interviews (e.g., sport, type of impairment) will be coded during the transcription process and will not be revealed through the publication of the results of this study. Your information will be kept securely in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen's University. The only people who will have access to the data are the investigators named above. Data will be stored securely for five years following publication. After this time, data will be securely destroyed.

The Queen's General Research Ethics Board (GREB) may request access to study data to ensure that the researcher(s) have or are meeting their ethical obligations in conducting this research. *NOTE: GREB is bound by confidentiality and will not disclose any personal information.*

### **Participation and Withdrawal**

You do not waive any legal rights by consenting to participate in this study

You may choose to withdraw from the study at any point prior to the publication of the results. Withdrawing from the study has no consequence. If you chose to withdraw from the study all data collected up until the point of withdrawal can be destroyed and all identifying information of the withdrawing participant can be removed from the data. There is no penalty or loss of benefits associated with withdrawal from this study.

If you would like to stop participating in the study during the interview, please voice your intent and the interview will end immediately. If you would like to withdraw from the study following the completion of the audio diaries and/or interview, please contact the student investigator via email ([janet.lawson@queensu.ca](mailto:janet.lawson@queensu.ca)) or telephone (613-533-6000x78564).

**Publication of Results:**

Results of this study will be submitted for publication. Study participants will not be identified through the publication of study results.

**Payment for Participation:**

For taking part in this research, you will be compensated \$5 upon the submission of each audio diary (up to three) and \$20 following completion of the interview. You will be asked to provide an email address through which the money will be transferred to you.

**Study Funding:**

Funding for this study is provided by the Canadian Disability Participation Project (<https://cdpp.ca/>) and the Ontario Parasport Collective.

**Questions about the Study**

If you have any questions about the study, please send an email to the student investigator, Janet Lawson, at [janet.lawson@queensu.ca](mailto:janet.lawson@queensu.ca) or the study supervisor, Dr. Amy Latimer-Cheung, at [amy.latimer@queensu.ca](mailto:amy.latimer@queensu.ca) or 613-533-6000 x78773. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at [chair.GREB@queensu.ca](mailto:chair.GREB@queensu.ca) or 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free). We encourage you to keep a copy of this form.

## **Appendix C**

### **Recruitment Materials**

Recruitment Email Script (**Athletes**):

Good Morning/Afternoon,

My name is Janet Lawson and I am a master's student under the supervision of Dr. Amy Latimer-Cheung in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen's University. I obtained your contact information through (YOUR SPORT ORGANIZATIONS WEBSITE/LIST CONTACT) and I am writing to see if you would be able to assist me with in an upcoming project.

I am currently conducting interviews with Para sport athletes regarding their experiences with Para sport classification. A (AN ATHLETE/A STAKEHOLDER) in Para sport I am hoping that you will help me by (CONSIDERING PARTICIPATING/CIRCULATING THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION TO ATHLETES WHO MAY BE WILLING TO PARTICIPATE).

- Seeking participants who will be undergoing national or international classification in the coming eight months
- Participants will be interviewed about their experiences with classification by the student researcher
- Participants will be compensated \$20 for participation in an interview

**A complete letter of information, as well as further instructions on how to participate, is available here.**

Any questions about study participation may be directed to myself by phone at 613-533-6000 x78564 or by email at [janet.lawson@queensu.ca](mailto:janet.lawson@queensu.ca), or to the primary investigator, Dr. Amy Latimer-Cheung by phone (613)533-6000 ext. 78773 or email [amy.latimer@queensu.ca](mailto:amy.latimer@queensu.ca).

Thank you for your consideration,

Janet

Recruitment Email Script (**Classifiers**):

Good Morning/Afternoon,

My name is Janet Lawson and I am a master's student under the supervision of Dr. Amy Latimer-Cheung in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen's University. I obtained your contact information through your (YOUR SPORT ORGANIZATIONS WEBSITE/LIST CONTACT) and I am writing to see if you would be able to assist me with in an upcoming project.

I am currently conducting interviews with Para sport classifiers regarding their experiences with Para sport classification. As a (CLASSIFIER/STAKEHOLDER) in Para sport I am hoping that you will help me by (CONSIDERING PARTICIPATING/CIRCULATING THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION TO CLASSIFIERS WHO MAY BE WILLING TO PARTICIPATE).

- Seeking participants who classify Para sport athletes at the national or international level
- Participants will be interviewed about their experiences with classification by the student researcher
- Participants will be compensated \$20 for participation in an interview

**A complete letter of information, as well as further instructions on how to participate, is available here.**

Any questions about study participation may be directed to myself by phone at 613-533-6000 x78564 or by email at [janet.lawson@queensu.ca](mailto:janet.lawson@queensu.ca), or to the primary investigator, Dr. Amy Latimer-Cheung by phone (613)533-6000 ext. 78773 or email [amy.latimer@queensu.ca](mailto:amy.latimer@queensu.ca).

Thank you for your consideration,

Janet

Tweets:

[@Paralympics](#) – Looking for athletes & classifiers to interview about their experience with classification in Para sport. Email [janet.lawson@queensu.ca](mailto:janet.lawson@queensu.ca) if interested! [#parasport](#) [@CNDparalympics](#) [@Tokyo2020](#) [#tokyo2020](#)

Para athletes –Getting classified in advance of [#Tokyo2020](#)? Think the experience will be positive? Negative? Keen to share your thoughts? Help inform future classification policies & [#parasport](#) participation by talking about it. Get involved @ [janet.lawson@queensu.ca](mailto:janet.lawson@queensu.ca) [@paralympics](#)

Para sport coaches – Have your athletes been classified in the lead up to [#Tokyo2020](#)? Care to talk about the experience? Looking to learn about the role of coaches during athlete classification. Email [janet.lawson@queensu.ca](mailto:janet.lawson@queensu.ca) if you want to learn more/participate. [@paralympics](#)

# Appendix D

## Thesis Proposal Amendment Approval

Amendments to the original thesis proposal were approved by all members of the committee (March 2020).

### Graduate Program



### Thesis Advisory Committee Meeting /

### Thesis Proposal Amendment Form

Date of Revision: March 23, 2020 Student Name: Janet Lawson  
Supervisor Name: Dr. Latimer-Cheung Student ID#: 20136422  
Committee Member Filling out Form: \_\_\_\_\_  
Other Committee Members: Dr. Luc Martin Dr. Melanie Gregg \_\_\_\_\_  
Amendment #: 1 \_\_\_\_\_

#### Summary of approved thesis proposal (Abstract – up to 250 words):

Janet will conduct interviews with approximately 10 classifiers. Additionally, approximately 10 athletes will be asked to record a brief audio-journal about their feeling-state prior to and following an international classification. Following this, Janet will conduct semi-structured interviews with those 10 athletes about their classification experience.

#### Summary of Proposed Changes (list and provide rationale):

Due to the cancellation of in-person gatherings (e.g., sporting events) it is not possible to recruit athletes who will be undergoing classification in the coming months. Therefore, the inclusion criteria for this study will be amended (i.e., to include athletes who have previously been classified, not just those scheduled to be classified) and participants will not be asked to record an audio-journal before or after being classified. Instead, semi-structured interviews will take place with athletes, similar to the interviews with classifiers included in the original proposal.

No changes to interviews with classifiers have been proposed.

Amendment Approved (tick one): Yes  No \_\_\_\_\_

If No: Meeting Required (tick one): Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

Dr. Amy Latimer-Cheung's and Dr. Melanie Gregg's signature of approval.

**Committee Member Comments:** (if amendment not approved use this area to detail desired changes/issues and if a meeting is requested briefly outline what the candidate should be prepared to discuss)

"Thank you for the update and nice to see that you've been able to make adjustments during this hectic time. I've read your revised text and am totally on board with it. No revisions requested from me." - Dr. Martin

"The revised proposal seems very logical and I support this change." - Dr. Gregg



Committee Member #1 - Name/Signature/Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Member #2 - Name/Signature/Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Member #3 - Name/Signature/Date: **Melanie Gregg** Digitally signed by Melanie Gregg  
Date: 2020.05.21 10:18:44 -05'00'

Student – Signature/Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
member: ED46F426-333-41C4-966D-6AC096230494  
FE5A8B4E-9A61-428F-95CC-90FADC9F93C5  
Digitally signed by me when  
18:09:29 +10:00 on 2020.05.21 10:18:44  
18:09:29 +10:00 on 2020.05.21 10:18:44

**If meeting required:** Complete a new Thesis Advisory Committee/Thesis Proposal Amendment Form. Circle "additional meeting" at the meeting of the Committee.

Any significant changes to an approved proposal must be approved by the original committee by having each committee member complete and sign this Thesis Advisory Committee / Thesis Proposal Amendment Form (via email and electronic signatures acceptable) **as soon as possible following submission by the candidate.** The candidate to submit final completed Form to the graduate assistant to retain on file with the original approved proposal document.

In your thesis you must include a statement identifying that all significant changes from the originally proposed work were approved by your Thesis Advisory Committee. You are also required to include all thesis amendment forms as appendices in your thesis as per the SKHS thesis formatting guidelines. You may choose to include a description and discussion of changes from the original proposal in the general discussion chapter of your thesis in order to provide context for your thesis examining committee, who may not be members of your Thesis Advisory Committee. This may be useful, for example, if changes were made due to unforeseen difficulties or circumstances (e.g. equipment failure, substantial difficulty in recruitment despite diligent efforts).



Dr. Luc Martin's signature of approval.

**Committee Member Comments:** (if amendment not approved use this area to detail desired changes/issues and if a meeting is requested briefly outline what the candidate should be prepared to discuss)

"Thank you for the update and nice to see that you've been able to make adjustments during this hectic time. I've read your revised text and am totally on board with it. No revisions requested from me." - Dr. Martin

"The revised proposal seems very logical and I support this change." - Dr. Gregg



Committee Member #1 - Name/Signature/Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Member #2 - Name/Signature/Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Member #3 - Name/Signature/Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student – Signature/Date: \_\_\_\_\_

member: EE4F426-7533-41C4-988D-8AC298230484  
FEEA2E4E-8A61-42EF-85CC-8DFADCF9F3C5

Digital signed by member:  
L24E426-7533-41C4-988D-8AC298230484  
FEEA2E4E-8A61-42EF-85CC-8DFADCF9F3C5  
Date: 2020.09.19 09:48:21 -0500

**If meeting required:** Complete a new Thesis Advisory Committee/Thesis Proposal Amendment Form. Circle "additional meeting" at the meeting of the Committee.

Any significant changes to an approved proposal must be approved by the original committee by having each committee member complete and sign this Thesis Advisory Committee/ Thesis Proposal Amendment Form (via email and electronic signatures acceptable) **as soon as possible following submission by the candidate.** The candidate to submit final completed Form to the graduate assistant to retain on file with the original approved proposal document.

In your thesis you must include a statement identifying that all significant changes from the originally proposed work were approved by your Thesis Advisory Committee. You are also required to include all thesis amendment forms as appendices in your thesis as per the SKHS thesis formatting guidelines. You may choose to include a description and discussion of changes from the original proposal in the general discussion chapter of your thesis in order to provide context for your thesis examining committee, who may not be members of your Thesis Advisory Committee. This may be useful, for example, if changes were made due to unforeseen difficulties or circumstances (e.g. equipment failure, substantial difficulty in recruitment despite diligent efforts).

## Appendix E

### Informed Consent

I have read the letter of information for the research study entitled ‘**Classification in Para sport: The experiences of athletes and other stakeholders**’ by Dr. Amy Latimer-Cheung, Janet Lawson, and Isabelle Birchall of Queen’s University.

Any questions that I had were answered. I understand that if I agree to take part in this study, I may stop participation at any time. I also understand that the information that I provide will not be used in any other ways except this study. By completing the record of consent form, I choose to participate in the study.

Please keep one copy of the Record of Consent for your records and return one copy to the Researcher, Janet Lawson.

By signing below, I am verifying that: I have read the Letter of Information and I choose to participate in the study.

- Yes, you have my permission to use quotes/audio record (*circle action if only 1 option is permissible*)
- No, you do not have my permission to use quotes/audio record (*circle action if only 1 option is NOT permissible*)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
PRINTED NAME

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_ Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Conducting  
the Consent Discussion

\_\_\_\_\_  
PRINTED NAME

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix F

### Demographic Questionnaires

Athletes' Demographic Questionnaire:

Please answer the following questions/check the most appropriate option where indicated.

1. Sex
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Transgender
  - d. Other
  - e. Do not wish to specify
  
2. Age \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. For what impairment are you eligible for classification?
  
4. What sport do you compete in?
  
5. How long have you competed in this sport?
  
6. Have you previously been classified for this sport? If yes, when was your last classification?
  
7. Have you been classified in any other sports? If yes, which sport(s) have you been classified for?
  
8. Country of residence \_\_\_\_\_

Classifiers' Demographic Questionnaire:

Please answer the following questions/check the most appropriate option where indicated.

1. Sex
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Transgender
  - d. Other
  - e. Do not wish to specify
  
2. Do you identify as having a disability?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

If you answered yes to question 2, please answer questions 3-7

3. Please specify the type of impairment you have \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. Have you previously participated in Para sport as an athlete?
  
5. If yes, which sport(s) have you competed in?
  
6. Have you undergone classification?
  
7. If yes, for which sport(s) have you been classified?
  
8. Country of residence \_\_\_\_\_
  
9. Languages Spoken:
  - a. One
  - b. Two
  - c. Three or more
  
10. Highest level of formal education
  - a. High school diploma
  - b. College diploma
  - c. Bachelor's degree
  - d. Master's degree (e.g., occupational or physical therapy)
  - e. Doctorate (e.g., MD or PhD)
  
11. Occupation \_\_\_\_\_
  
12. Estimate of the number of athletes you have classified
  - a. 0-49
  - b. 50-99
  - c. 100-199
  - d. 200-499
  - e. +500
  
13. What sport(s) do you currently classify?

14. What level are you certified to classify at?

15. For how long have you been a classifier?

## **Appendix G**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Guides**

#### **Athletes' Interview Guide:**

Before we begin, I would like to reconfirm your consent to participate and to have this interview audio recorded.

As well, I would like to remind you that you are able to stop participating in the interview at any point, and do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable with. You do not have to provide any reason for declining to answer a question.

In order to analyze the interview, we will audio record the interview, so it can be later be transcribed. Do you consent to being interviewed today? Do you consent to being audio-recorded?

Today, we will be speaking about both your most recent experience with classification, and what you imagine an ideal classification to be. To begin, please tell me how you would define an ideal classification experience. Next, please describe your recent experience with classification.

#### **Environment**

- Tell me what an ideal classification environment would look like.
  - o Probes:
    - What would the physical environment look like?
    - What about the social environment?
    - What role would your coach(es) play in creating this ideal social environment?
    - How would your coach(es) support you throughout the classification process?
- Thinking back on the classification you recently participated in:
  - o How did the environment compare to an ideal environment?
  - o What was ideal about the social environment?
    - In what ways did your coach(es) contribute to this?
  - o What was ideal about the physical environment?
  - o What was missing to make it ideal?
    - How could your coach(es) contribute to this?
  - o In an ideal world, what changes would you make to improve the environment for athletes getting classified?
    - What would you have your coach(es) do differently?

#### **Relationships**

- How would you describe an ideal relationship between an athlete and a classifier?
- Please describe the interactions you had with the classifiers during your classification.
  - o How did your relationship with the classifier(s) develop throughout the classification?
  - o How did your interactions compare to the ideal?
    - Tell me a story about a positive interaction that stands out to you from your classification.
  - o What was positive about your interactions with the classifier(s)?

- On the flip side, tell me a story about a negative interaction that stands out to you from your classification.
  - What was negative about this interaction?
- What were the main challenges you faced to having positive interactions with the classifier(s)?
  - In an ideal world, what changes would you make to improve interactions with classifiers?

### Engagement

- Please describe your ideal involvement in classification.
  - Potential types of involvements: (i.e. passively participating, asking questions or explaining your impairment to the classifier(s))
- Tell me about the level of involvement you experienced during classification.
  - How did you develop this level of involvement? (e.g., were you told what to do, did you advocate for your involvement?)
  - How does it compare to the ideal?
  - What challenges did you face to participating in your preferred way?
  - Tell me a story about an aspect of classification where you did not feel engaged.
    - What stands out about that interaction?
  - Describe a time when you felt involved and engaged in the classification?
    - Why?
    - By Whom?
  - How did your engagement impact your overall impression of your classification?
  - In an ideal world, what changes would you make to improve involvement?
    - How does the classification process change?
    - How do classifiers modify the process to improve involvement?

### Outcomes

- Let's consider the short-term outcomes of classification. Considering the outcomes, you've experienced since your classification:
  - If you were to write an article about the ideal outcomes of classification, what would you write?
  - Thinking about your classification, what were the short-term outcomes? (e.g., outcomes you've experienced until now or will experience in the next 2-3 months)
  - How do these outcomes compare to your ideal outcomes?
  - What challenges do these outcomes present for your immediate participation in Para sport?
  - In an ideal world, what changes would you make to improve upon these outcomes?
- Let's consider the long-term outcomes of classification. Considering the outcomes, you've experienced since your classification:
  - If you were to write an article about the ideal outcomes of classification, what would you write?
  - Thinking about your classification, what will the long-term outcomes be? (e.g., outcomes you will experience in the future)
  - How do these outcomes compare to your ideal outcomes?
  - What challenges do these outcomes present for your future participation in Para sport?

- In an ideal world, what changes would you make to improve upon these outcomes?

#### Safe Sport

- What is your definition of safe sport?
- How does classification fit within safe sport?
- What and/or who makes you feel safe in sport?

#### Closing Questions

- Let's imagine you are given the opportunity to build an ideal classification experience with no limitations on what you could do. Please describe it to me.
  - What do you wish you would have known classification that you would tell a new athlete who is going to be classified now?
  - Are there any elements of classification that have not been covered in our interviews?
  - Is there anything touched upon that you would like to further discuss?
- Thank you for your time and patience today. Do you have anything you would like to add or any questions that I can address?

Once participant has concluded any comments: As a reminder, you have the right to withdraw until publication of the findings



### Classifiers' Interview Guide:

Before we begin, I would like to reconfirm your consent to participate and to have this interview audio recorded.

As well, I would like to remind you that you are able to stop participating in the interview at any point, and do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable with. You do not have to provide any reason for declining to answer a question.

In order to analyze the interview, we will audio record the interview, so it can be later be transcribed. Do you consent to being interviewed today? Do you consent to being audio-recorded?

To start with, can you please tell me generally about your experience with classification? Next, tell me how you would define an ideal classification experience.

### Environment

- Tell me what an ideal classification environment would look like.
  - o What does the physical environment would look like?
  - o What about the social environment?
- Tell me about the environment of the classification that you most recently participated in.
  - o How did the environment compare to an ideal environment?
  - o What was ideal about it?
  - o What was missing to make it ideal?
  - o In an ideal world, what changes would you make to improve the environment for athletes getting classified?

### Relationships

- How would you describe an ideal relationship between an athlete and a classifier?
- Please describe the interactions you typically have with athletes during classification.
  - o How does your relationship with the athlete develop throughout the classification?
  - o How do your interactions with athletes compare to the ideal?
    - Tell me a story about a positive interaction you have had with an athlete during classification that stands out to you.
  - o What is positive about your interactions with athletes?
    - On the flip side, tell me a story about a negative interaction that stands out to you.
    - What was negative about this interaction?
  - o What are the main challenges you face to having positive interactions with athletes?
    - In an ideal world, what changes would you make to improve interactions with athletes?

### Engagement

- Please describe your ideal involvement in classification.
  - o Potential types of involvements: (i.e. directing, asking questions of the athletes, performing assessments, observing)

- Tell me about the level of involvement you experience during classification.
- How do you develop this level of involvement? (e.g., are you told what to do, did you learn your role through training)
  - How does it compare to the ideal?
  - What challenges do you face to participating in your preferred way?
  - In an ideal world, what changes would you make to improve involvement?
    - How does the classification process change?
    - How do athletes modify their involvement to improve yours?
  - Tell me a story about an aspect of classification in which you do not feel engaged.
  - If you could change an aspect of classification, what would you change?
  - Please describe a time when you felt involved and engaged in classification?
  - How has your engagement impacted your overall impression of classification?

#### Outcomes

- Let's consider your general experience with classification. Considering the outcomes that you've experienced or observed:
  - If you were to write an article about the ideal outcomes of classification, what would you write?
  - What are the short-term outcomes of classification?
    - For yourself
    - For the athlete
  - What are the long-term outcomes of classification?
    - For yourself
    - For the athlete
  - How do these outcomes compare to your ideal outcomes?
  - What challenges do these outcomes present for your immediate participation in Para sport?
    - What about for the athlete?
  - In an ideal world, what changes would you make to improve upon these outcomes?

#### Safe Sport

- What is your definition of safe sport?
- How does classification fit within safe sport?
- How do you think classifiers contribute to safe sport?
  - What role do classifiers play in making athletes feel safe in sport?

#### Closing Questions

- Let's imagine you are given the opportunity to build an ideal classification experience with no limitations on what you could do. Please describe it to me.
  - Are there any elements of classification that have not been covered in our interviews?
  - Is there anything touched upon that you would like to further discuss?
- Thank you for your time and patience today. Do you have anything you would like to add or any questions that I can address?

Once participant has concluded any comments: As a reminder, you have the right to withdraw until publication of the findings